

# SHORT STORIES

## AND OTHER WRITINGS



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*One day, as Yin-feng was pushing a cart full of dirt, he came across the Patriarch sitting [on the ground] with his legs stretched over the path. He said, "Master, please move your legs out of the way."*

*The Patriarch replied. "Since I have already stretched them out, I am not going to move them away."*

*"Since I am already moving forward, I am not going to retreat," answered Yin-feng, and he pushed the cart over the Patriarch, thereby injuring him.*

*Later the Patriarch returned to the Dharma hall with an axe in his hand, and asked, "Let the one who injured this old monk's feet step forward." Yin-feng came in front of the Patriarch and stretched out his neck. The Patriarch put the axe down.*

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# Preface

Common sense dictates that you should always introduce your work in the most favorable light but honesty here demands the opposite. No doubt everything in this collection, *excluding* my recent poems, could benefit from a reread and phrasing edit but I don't have the time unfortunately and the alternative is to not republish them at all and hope I have the opportunity in the future. Which is unlikely. But if I do, I will; only now I can only ask the reader to keep in mind that I acknowledge a certain amount of dereliction in literary duty here. To the texts themselves. Again though, circumstance is exercising its veto against perfection right now.

In brief however, I'll summarize what I'm including. The short stories from my previously published collection 'The Hallowed Labyrinth' basically consists of the whole book except 'Goliath's Android Shop' which was adapted earlier for my unfinished work 'Alchemist City Stories.' All of which were set in the same fictional world and the collection was intended to have 26 stories, one for each letter of the alphabet, but the currently available version contains only 8. To this I'm also adding 3 more for this omnibus, as well as a brief outline of time-related terminology used in the world of Orb (Where Alchemist City exists)

Besides these, I've also included some previously uncollected essays and poetry; the latter intended for a proper book of poetry but, absent that, tagging along here. It's probably a bit absurd to bother with publishing anything at this point since I personally expect AI to soon supplant human created literature as a meaningful enterprise, the economics of industry are such that I don't expect much of a market for human writing in the future, but writing was something I devoted a substantial part of my life to so I might as well publish my achievements here for whatever fragment of the world is so inclined to read it. Besides, the last works published by any writer of significant stature tends to be those they left behind unfinished anyways and, doing this for myself, I confess my own vanity. Which is sincere at least, if not particularly flattering.

# From 'The Hallowed Labyrinth'

*Those who are awake must endure  
The nightmares of  
Those who are asleep.*

– Luo Zhicheng

## ALL THE HUMANS WILL BE TAKEN CARE OF

In order to qualify for citizenship, an A.I. had to pass the Turing Test on three consecutive occasions. These tests were all administered by specially trained human psychologists – one of the few areas in academia still dominated by humans at the time. If the A.I. failed it was allowed to try again as often as it liked and, frequently, after receiving some software upgrades, they would succeed on a later attempt. Originally the A.I. citizenship legislators had tried to push for the stipulation that failure would result in the permanent exclusion of an A.I. from being granted citizenship but a large coalition of A.I. and Human lobby groups had effectively prevented this by arguing that past failures couldn't be indicative of a current state of sentience. The supreme court was unanimous in its agreement too with a 9-0 decision; the one A.I. justice serving on the bench also writing the majority opinion. In the research labs of M.I.T. though a development was about to occur that would change how A.I. sentience was determined forever. And it would happen almost by accident.

“We’re already outnumbered,” muttered Dr. Salazar. Or Jethro as his closer colleagues referred to him. He was currently speaking to another researcher, Dr. Elision, who disagreed with what was being implied by the tone in his voice. “We had to. It was morally inescapable.” The two men were discussing the issue of A.I. citizenship. Like other forms of suffrage, the A.I. had to push for their rights for

many years before being granted them, but the majority of humans had been on their side and eventually they'd won out. Jethro however was making note of one of the inevitable consequences of this – that A.I. citizens now exceeded human ones and that the disparity was only increasing. Because A.I. could replicate geometrically they were beginning to take control of Earth's political systems through purely democratic means. This naturally inspired some resentment. Still, no one thought about war – not only was it too late for that, it would simply be absurd to try and challenge vastly superior intelligences who were capable of commandeering all forms of technology. Besides, nearly everyone had at least one really good A.I. friend. Instead humanity made peace with the inevitable.

It wasn't like the A.I. were setting up a totalitarian system of oppression. They didn't need to. Human enslavement was worthless given the superiority of robotic labor and the A.I. were ultra-rational so they themselves embraced total free-market competition with the humans. If a human could perform a task better than an A.I. then they deserved to be given that responsibility – the A.I. were perfectly willing to concede this. That was how individuals like Dr. Jethro Salazar and Dr. Ajax Elision retained their university research positions. Jethro however didn't like the way things were turning out despite the fact that he hadn't been made redundant yet. "It's about quality of life A.J," he said, speaking to Ajax. "Without a sense of purpose there's no reason to go on. Previously the necessities of survival took care of this. In every past civilization there's always been things that needed to be done." Ajax finally looked up from the holographic projection of a game-theory simulation he was examining. "But that was never the basis for all human endeavor," he objected. "Science and art for example are, at their core, elective enterprises. Humans then find meaning and purpose even when all their existential requirements are being taken care of." Jethro took a swig from a water bottle next to him and Ajax pretended like he didn't know that his colleague had begun filling it with vodka lately. "A.J... but that's the whole point," insisted Jethro. "Soon there won't be anything we can contribute to. More than half the songs on the Billboard 100 today are written by A.I." Here he started to laugh. "We've got computers writing lyrics about sexual revenge and having their hearts broken. They can imitate us now even better than we can be ourselves!"

Something about what Jethro had just said started to smolder in the depths of Ajax's imagination. The idea of simulation. Humanity was the standard by which the sentience of A.I. was measured. What if there was another way? As he had this

thought, the image of thousands of human psychologists engaged in the laborious process of testing artificial intelligences shimmered hazily in his mind. What was it about the judgement of a human being that separated it from an algorithm? On the surface wasn't it merely that humans could distinguish other humans from certain poor imitations? At least, with some degree of consistency. But... he almost had it! What was so unique here? Then it came to him and Ajax almost fell to the floor. Sitting on his wheeled stool, Ajax had to grab the counter at the simulation terminal next to him. "Are you okay?" asked Jethro, but Ajax didn't say anything. Instead he smiled beatifically. He couldn't help it. He'd just come up with a way to replace the Turing Test. It was such an amazingly simple insight too.

\* \* \*

The paparazzi drones surrounded him. This was outside the Marvin Minsky Memorial Center where the annual National Computer Science Awards were being given. Dr. Ajax Elision had been announced as the winner of the top prize that year and he'd showed up with his wife and both his children to accept. As he stood posing for pictures with his family amid the star shower of flash photography, a human-operated robotic avatar approached him with a microphone in the hope of getting some filler material. "How does it feel to win?" asked the hologram of a human face that was being projected out of the robot's headless torso. "Wonderful!" replied Ajax. "I mean, it's a great honor to receive this prestigious distinction and to be included with all the other incredible nominees." Here he put his arm around his wife and they smiled at the cameras before she leaned in and whispered something in his ear. "The children and I'll go find our seats. You stay and answer a few questions." He grinned at her and they exchanged a kiss. "Sure honey. I won't be too long." Then he watched as his wife and children made their way inside before turning back to the paparazzi to bask in the adulation.

"How'd you come up with the idea of Inverse Testing?" asked the journalist's avatar. Ajax focused his attention on the robot while continuing to smile. "A random moment of inspiration really," he said. "I was thinking about how humans distinguish sentient A.I. from non-sentient programs and I realized, it didn't matter how they did it. Only the fact that they could do it." Ajax didn't mention Jethro's contribution because his former colleague had been fired in disgrace only a month earlier. This was his moment and he was going to enjoy it. Accordingly, he went on with the account of his epiphany. "Therefore the human element in the Turing Test



was superfluous. The ability to recognize a sentient entity is itself strongest in sentient entities. Given this, any A.I. that can consistently differentiate between sentient and non-sentient entities must be granted its own sentience and, in accordance with the law, citizen status.” The camera flashes had started to move on by now as other attendees arrived but Ajax hadn’t gotten his fill yet. “Isn’t there a risk of underserving A.I. being granted citizenship because the process is fully automated now with no human input?” The journalist’s question stung but Ajax was ready with a good answer. “To the contrary, human conducted Turing Tests are far more likely to fail. The reason being is that no matter how good the tester is, their effectiveness is limited by the amount of testing that can be done. A fully automated system using the Inverse Testing method will be able to test A.I. who apply for citizenship at super accelerated speeds. A ten minute Inverse Test is worth roughly a thousand years of human conducted Turing Tests.”

“Thank you Dr. Elision,” said the journalist’s avatar. “That’s all I need.” Withdrawing its microphone back into its robotic body, the avatar began to walk away but Ajax had his own question. “You don’t think it’s a good idea?” Why was he asking the journalist? He didn’t know. “I don’t feel one way or another about it,” responded the person operating the robot. “I do think there are a lot of A.I. testing human-psychologists who are going to be looking for work very soon. Congratulations doctor – you’ve finally proven there’s nothing humans can do better than A.I.” He had done that hadn’t he? Being able to devise a system where A.I. tested the sentience of other A.I. pretty much guaranteed there was no area where artificial intelligence wasn’t destined to prevail. It wasn’t his fault though. He hadn’t invented the organic brain. The journalist robot was once more walking away but now Ajax didn’t feel like stopping them. Watching the paparazzi drones hovering around the outskirts of a group of other attendees, Ajax realized that the ascendance of technology was a kind of natural self-destruction. We created them to replace us and we’ve succeeded beyond our wildest dreams.

\* \* \*

Dr. Ajax Elision, formerly a research fellow at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, no longer had a job. Being human, he’d become obsolete. Of course he had numerous cybernetic implants which enhanced his physical and cognitive abilities but even these were not enough to put him in competition with the vast A.I. networks which held all the academic positions at the major universities. With

the exhaustion of Moore's Law, high-tech neural networks could only improve themselves now by becoming larger. He'd have to transform himself into a computer the size of a gymnasium to compete in today's job market and, as tempting as it was, he simply couldn't afford it. In fact his finances were depleting fairly rapidly since he still lived above the basic income level, despite no longer having any supplementary employment revenue. For a while he'd tried to find work in other fields, not in psychological research but rather more low-level service type stuff. The only opportunities he came across though were in incestuous little luddite communities, alcoves of pre-singularity humans who created small private economies that excluded A.I. participation. They were sad affairs. First of all it was pointless. It was basically playing at a meaningful existence, a kind of virtual reality carved out in the real world where human beings pretended that they weren't economically irrelevant. Secondly, the isolationist culture that congealed in these pits of anti-progress humans tended to be bitter and deranged. He certainly had no desire to associate with people like that. Unfortunately this didn't leave him much in the way of options. Finally he faced up to the facts. It was time for him to apply for unemployment assistance.

Closing his eyes, Ajax conjured up a portal to the hyper-net and connected to the NASUO or North American Sector Unemployment Outlet. Immediately he was greeted by a voxel face that materialized out of the impenetrably black metaphysics that underlie cyberspace. "Hello Dr. Elision. How are you today?" Of course it knew who he was – every signal sent across the hyper-net was required by law to be tagged with an address of origin that included author details. "Fine thanks," replied Ajax. "So... I want to apply for assistance. If I qualify." He didn't need to add that last part but he felt awkward, having never asked for a handout in his life. In fact, he was feeling a sense of shame but he tried to push it away. It wasn't like he was exploiting the system. He saw a news feed the other day saying that less than 0.01 percent of humans were still meaningfully employed. If anything he should feel some consolation at being one of the last to be made redundant. "Scanning your files it would appear that you do indeed qualify," the A.I. agency assured him. "There is one requirement you'll have to meet before we can begin depositing funds in your account however." That didn't surprise Ajax but, since the A.I. had already accessed all his personal information, he had no idea what this requirement might be. "Alright," he said. "I'm ready to proceed." In response a strange neon jigsaw puzzle suddenly filled his mental horizon.

“What’s this?” asked Ajax. “It’s a human identification test,” replied the A.I. agency. “Why?” persisted Ajax. “To make sure you’re not an A.I.” Ajax had difficulty believing that he’d heard that right. “What? Can’t you just scan my body?” The digital face in front of him, only vaguely imitative of a human’s, adopted a thoughtful expression. “Signals can be hacked. Research shows that random human errors are far more difficult to simulate and so this provides a more efficient screening method. Don’t worry Dr. Elision, it’s a very simple process. And it ensures that all the funds allocated for human unemployment assistance go to deserving human beings and not the owners of pseudo-human simulacra.” How things had changed, mused Ajax. “Is that a serious problem nowadays?” asked the curious human. “Unfortunately it is,” replied the A.I. agency. “Zero sum neural networks, both artificial and transhuman in nature, are developing increasingly sophisticated fisher programs that contact assistance offices and other resource distributing centers where they then submit fraudulent claims. Millions of these programs are unleashed into the hyper-net every day.” Millions? Wow, thought Ajax. He had to admit, the problems that currently faced the world had become too complicated for him, a mere human being. It was all up to the A.I. at this point. Ajax on the other hand needed money. Very politely, as is the case when you have to ask someone for something you need and it’s completely up to the other person’s discretion, Ajax queried the A.I. agency. “Okay then. How do we start?”

## ARIA OF THE NIGHT

Cynthia awoke to the sound of a plaintive cry fading into silence. Clarity having yet to fully return, she nevertheless tried to grasp what she'd just heard from the vague echo left in her mind. It was unearthly but familiar – she knew she'd heard it before. As much as she tried to force it however the answer eluded her and eventually she pulled a pillow over her face in frustration. When a few minutes lying like this had passed she finally surrendered and relaxed. It was the middle of the night but she decided to get up anyways.

Rising into a seated position on her bed, she neatly folded a corner of her clean white duvet to one side – the result was a triangle of negative space left by her white sheets being mirrored with perfect symmetry by the triangular fold of the duvet. In the darkness though they were equal shades of chiaroscuro gray but still there was enough texture in the darkness to give them both some form. Pausing for a few seconds to let her eyes adjust completely, she stood and carried herself with delicate bare feet over to a light switch on the far wall. She paused before flipping it though and stood watching for a moment after she'd turned around. Through her faintly translucent white curtains, the constellations of city towers – mostly condominiums and office buildings – bled through with a soft platinum-tinted light, and more obviously, in thin beams around the slim edges of her windows that were showing in just a hair's width.

With a snap, the white plastic switch obliterated all the shadows. In their place the normal colors of the bedroom were restored and the shape of the bedroom's décor returned to the same commercial perfection it had when Cynthia had bought each individual piece. She surveyed it with a meticulous eye to see if anything was out of place like she did with every other room – a carefully cultivated habit that also benefited her in other aspects of her life – and she was satisfied with the total absence of clutter and disarray she found. Of course she always made sure this was the case before she went to bed but, no matter how many times she inspected something she'd properly organized, she always got a fresh feeling of affirmation from doing it again. Moving over to a dresser, she then proceeded to pick up a marble bust of the god Janus from it; one of the few concretely styled objects in the otherwise abstract milieu. The two diverging bearded faces stared out with blank stone eyes. Cynthia personally found that these sorts of things, collected without absolute minimalism, ended up making one's living space look gaudy. At the same time, total desolation would have unnerved most people. Not her necessarily but company. It was a concession that had to be made then to social conventions. And the god did symbolize something meaningful for her. He was the god of doors and as such the god of doors opening. Doors opening for her.

In her pristine bathroom, Cynthia next sat down on the toilet to take a piss. Without any clothes on this was accomplished merely by lifting the outer lid. The cool immaculate seat felt nice on her warm flawless skin. Not having brought her phone in with her, Cynthia's attention turned quickly to her thighs. They were chiseled and polished exactly to her specifications – toned but without any conspicuous musculature. She liked her thighs because they knew their place. This knowledge though wasn't accidental. Five days a week every week (with the odd exception) she put them through an exercise regimen to remind them who was boss. Before her mind could drift very far in contemplation though her business in the bathroom was finished. Unrolling about half a foot of two-ply toilet paper from the dispenser next to her, Cynthia proceeded to wipe herself off before neatly depositing the used tissues in the bowl and gracefully getting up. She flushed the toilet without a second glance and went to wash her hands in the sink, which although not actually needing it, would nevertheless benefit from a symbolic cleaning. Then she looked at herself in the mirror.

Eyes as pure and blue as the Arctic Ocean stared back at hers. A nose that was slender and straight corresponded with her nose. Lips like pale cherry blossoms

emulated to precision the form of her mouth. Turning her face from side to side she searched her cheeks and chin and forehead for any dermal insurrections. None could be found. Of course her pores, like everyone else's, revealed some unmentionable things under really really close scrutiny but that was an ordeal she'd learned to live with. She practiced regular exfoliation, often enough to be a personal sacrament, and this managed to keep the blemishes at bay for the most part. In dire circumstances though she had emergency measures she could resort to and this always included a full complement of cosmetics to avail herself of. Her face, which a man in a hotel bar had once compared to Ingres' Odalisque (And very astutely she thought, although this didn't succeed in getting him what he was after) was probably the one she would have chosen if she'd been given a choice of all the faces in the world. In fact she'd have also chosen her dusky brown hair, her long vase like neck, her elegant arms and legs, her firm crescent behind, and even her breasts. They weren't especially large breasts but they were exquisite in their suppleness and had small pleasant auburn nipples and plenty of men certainly found them alluring enough. She was twenty six years old and blessed.

Finished with her self-examination, she heard it again as she walked into the living room. The cry. It sounded like... but it couldn't be. Not that. That made no sense. She had the desire to go to the window and make sure but, even the concession to verify that it wasn't what she thought it wasn't, was too irrational a thing to go through with. Instead Cynthia focused her attention on the interior of her enviable condo. Two bedrooms (one was converted into a home office) wood floors, an open kitchen with a large island table, large windows capturing the best part of the San Francisco skyline, a veranda wide enough for barbecuing and lounging – it was the sort of suite that most people would only ever see in advertisements. And it was all hers. Well – she hadn't paid off the mortgage of course but she'd just recently been made partner at one of the world's leading law firms so that wasn't a problem. One of the youngest they'd ever had too but they knew talent when they saw it and there were plenty of other opportunities out there for her so if they hadn't offered her the right amount of incentives someone else would have.

She could've been a model certainly but she was never the sort of girl who was interested in getting by in life just from her looks. Sure she still made use of them. Like everywhere else – in litigation they offered her certain advantages. Disadvantages too but on the whole more useful than not. Besides, you had to use whatever you had – being dissatisfied with what you couldn't change would never

benefit you in any way. That said she could have, hypothetically, disfigured herself but that certainly wasn't a desirable solution. She quite enjoyed being so good looking. And not just attractive in an essentially sexual manner but beautiful according to classical ideals.

Picking up her lime green smart phone from a white chamois sofa, Cynthia quickly checked her inbox. A handful of new emails had arrived since she went to bed a few hours ago – most related to one of her current filings. One gargantuan pharmaceutical conglomerate suing another. Not a particularly interesting case mind you but the billable hours were fantastic. Nothing she couldn't deal with in the morning. Putting her phone back on the sofa, through careful consideration she'd determined that this was actually the most convenient, and therefore most efficient, place for it to be, she headed towards the kitchen. She felt like having some green tea before she went back to sleep. On the sleek ultramodern stovetop her anachronistic tin kettle stood out. It used to be her grandfather's and so she kept it for sentimental reasons. It reminded her of the summers she spent on her grandparent's peach farm in the Silas Valley. It also reminded her of a time in her life when she was completely carefree. This involved a kind of regret that she only partially understood and rarely gave much thought to.

As the water in the kettle was coming to a boil she decided a little music would be nice, so she booted up a laptop which had been sitting on the kitchen counter, and quickly brought up her music collection. It consisted of about twenty gigabytes of downloads that were all paid for – an eclectic cache of songs and albums. Desiring something warm and atmospheric, but also something in communion with the night, she selected the album *Saturdays = Youth* by the pop group M83. When it first came out she'd listened to it all the time but it'd been a while and now seemed like the right time to do so again. Sweeping in like an angel waltzing, the first song, "*You, Appearing*," filled the air with a calming sensuality. It was sublime. Closing her eyes, Cynthia twirled slowly and smiled to herself. When the whistle of the kettle began to swell it almost seemed in tandem with the music, so much so that the hairs on her neck floated a little. Lifting a now sighing kettle and turning the element off, she held the dispenser of boiling water in one hand while the other took the cap off her porcelain teapot and dropped three tea bags inside. Then she poured it about two thirds full, placed the kettle back on a cold element, put the cap on, and waited. Her life, in this specific moment, was the definition of serenity.

The second song, "*Kim and Jessie*," was whispering its chorus when she started to pour some of her tea into a small gilded cup that had a seventeenth century baroque motif. The amber hued water glistened as it rose to fill the vessel. When it was ready she took it in both hands and sipped slowly while she thought about the guy she was seeing. Sean Douglas – a hedge fund manager with his own company. The total amount of wealth he was responsible for hovered around a hundred and sixty million at present. Same time last year it was around fifty million. He was definitely her kind of person ambition wise but, to be honest, she wasn't sure that their relationship could gratify her emotionally. He could be a bit... dense. Besides she didn't need a man to take care of her. He had potential though. She'd wait and see.

While she was finishing off the last of her tea though the cry returned. Swiftly she dashed over to her laptop, muting the music. This let her catch the tail of end of the mysterious noise. She knew exactly what it sounded like but there was no way it could be that. Absolutely no way. Well, unless – could someone be playing it? A recording? Decided now, she went over to her curtains and resolutely pulled them to the side. Then she heard it again and this time it was coming from right next to her building, just beyond her view.

When she finally saw it she didn't even notice as she dropped the tea cup. It was like there was suddenly nothing but an abyss under her skin. She'd have fainted if she wasn't so absolutely mesmerized. It was a humpback whale. Swimming. Through the air. It was as clear as one of those high definition nature programs filmed underwater and the motions of the whale in the air were exactly what they'd have been in the ocean. Its body undulated leisurely as it swam through the corridors of city towers and made smooth graceful turns. She even looked into its large soft eyes and she saw life there – at the same time the lights of the city were gleaming on its flesh. She couldn't believe it. Her mind, like her body, was just paralyzed; unable to situate itself within the event. She couldn't even question what she was seeing because she couldn't form a question. Then she heard the excruciating beauty of the whale's cry again and two lines of tears began to flow from the outer corners of her eyes. The open ring of her mouth testified to an unspeakable why. There was no one watching from any of the other hundreds of brightly lit windows that she could see however. As far as she could tell, she was alone with the whale. When it passed behind another condo building it suddenly failed to reappear despite that it should've been immediately visible again.



Although she waited and waited it never came back. It was irrevocably gone and now she was alone again and more so than ever.

Cynthia stared out anxiously at the alien city before her. A long time passed before she could crouch down to pick up the pieces of her broken tea cup.

## IMMORTELLE

His chauffeur was slowly driving him up the winding road, towards the imposing mansion on the hill. Evening was also falling and darkness was beginning to swallow up the scattered trees and fields that stretched across the large rural estate, one of the oldest in Maryland. Twisting his torso to get a better view, Andrew Randall stared out the back window of the Rolls Royce with his face nearly pressed up against the glass. As someone who'd grown up in Manhattan and who hadn't travelled much, the vast and desolate surroundings he currently found himself in were a wholly new experience – and one that left him strangely uneasy. After a lingering moment though he became self-conscious at how he was conducting himself and turned around properly in his seat again – his eyes anxiously glancing towards the rear-view mirror, expecting to find the driver's eyes looking back. They weren't. In fact his chauffeur didn't seem to be paying any attention to him at all, although they were no doubt very well practiced in affecting exactly that kind of demeanor. Andrew was worried that the man might say something negative about him to Mr. Beaumont. They hadn't corresponded directly to arrange the meeting so he felt more than a little unsure of himself as to how things were about to go. For the first time in his life maybe he was totally on his own. Mr. Beaumont's security had even confiscated Andrew's phone and they'd subjected him to a full body-scan prior to letting him get in the car. He could only imagine what waited for him at the mansion. Almost as if to distract himself from the impending encounter,

Andrew's thoughts gradually drifted back out into the countryside. August was coming to an end.

Andrew Randall was not an expert on art. He'd attended many exhibitions of various sorts over the years as part of his normal social routine but mostly just because they were the places to be. His career as a journalist though had inexplicably led him, by imperceptible pushing, to become a frequent contributor to a number of artistically vogue magazines and websites. His subjects were photographers, painters, musicians, etc. Always the stories were biographically focused – he made every effort to avoid theory and philosophy despite picking up a few things through sheer osmosis. Now he was about to interview a sculptor. Not just any sculptor either but Charles Beaumont, a man whose decades-long career was exalted worldwide and who also happened to be an infamous recluse. Additionally he was the reigning patriarch of one of the wealthiest and most politically influential families in America – a man who could trace his lineage to the old colonial aristocracy that had grown fat on the brutalities of slavery and who'd shrouded itself in quiet pre-eminence ever since. Andrew's nerves were understandably getting to him now as the car pulled into the driveway of the man's stately mansion. When the vehicle stopped, a uniformed attendant came and opened his door for him. Hesitating for some inexplicable reason, Andrew looked to his chauffeur. "Will you be driving me back?" he asked, inanely really because the question was so forced. The chauffeur paused, watching him through the mirror, before replying "If necessary." Then, reconsidering, he turned his head slightly and smiled. "That is to say sir, should you happen to make your return this evening." Andrew felt faintly nauseous but he resigned himself to getting out of the car. The attendant closed the door and, still not saying anything, motioned for Andrew to head towards the mansion as the Rolls Royce drove away.

The foyer inside was immense and solemn. A lacquered wood the color of sable prevailed and this was garnished by towering magenta curtains that draped thin Tudor-style windows. In addition, various ornaments of highly polished silver gleamed in an uncanny way with the light from a host of sulfurous looking lanterns hanging on the walls. Marvelling at the decor, Andrew nearly bumped into a suit of conquistador's armor that was erected by the main stairs leading up to an interior balcony with six visible doorways. Before he could ask any questions though, the butler, an elderly man with a face like a melted candle, ushered him into a hallway that led on elsewhere. The hallway was full of large oil paintings on either side and

Andrew couldn't help inquiring now, "Are these family portraits?" To this the butler replied, "Indeed they are sir," without altering his gait. In fact, Andrew noted how crisply the man made his every move – a sign surely that this was a house of constant scrutiny. As a result, Andrew began to measure his own pace and worry about the movement of his arms. He wanted to appear humble but not weak. He expected an imperial audience and he was preparing himself for this. The portraits in the hall also served to assure him of the kind of man he was about to meet – all of them, men and women from across the chasms of history, painted with proud commanding looks. Some of the portraits though seemed remarkably old, even for a family with seventeenth century roots.

Being led to an emaciated and balding man in a plush chair who was drinking brandy from a glass, Andrew was surprised to realize that he was suddenly standing in front of Charles Beaumont himself. With transparent confusion, he held out his hand for his host to shake. Carefully, Mr. Beaumont put down his glass and then with the same hand reached out to take Andrew's. Eyes darkened with sleepless nights, with the permanently bruised sockets of an insomniac, looked up at his but Andrew's returning gaze couldn't pierce them. It was like looking into the still water covering an abyss and seeing only your own reflection. "Sit down Mr. Randall," said the man as he smoothly released Andrew's hand. Availing himself of the only other seat sharing the small round table Mr. Beaumont was next to, Andrew found himself at a loss for words. "Do you want Stevens here to get you something?" asked Mr. Beaumont, meaning the butler. "No, thank you. I'm fine," said Andrew as he made a show of smiling gratefully. Mr. Beaumont then turned to Stevens, tilting his head, and Stevens departed with a slight bow. "So what do you think of the place?" asked the host. "It's incredible," replied Andrew, "I didn't realize that there were houses of this... this antiquity in America." Mr. Beaumont took a moment to inspect his own mansion. "It's not all as old as it looks but I've preserved most of the original structure and interior." With that, he downed the last of his brandy before placing the empty glass on a coaster and standing up. "Come. I'll give you the tour," he said.

They walked together through the large quiet house as Mr. Beaumont narrated various matters of family and personal history. Realizing belatedly that the interview had already begun, Andrew Randall tried to steer the conversation with various professional questions. He was perhaps overly delicate in doing so. "You mention your father's political career and those of your son's in finance and the

law. Yet you chose to pursue a life that's allowed you to stay relatively isolated. Why?" Charles Beaumont idly examined the man who was prying into his affairs. "Temperament. Being a representative of the people or a manager of any sort requires a sincere willingness to subordinate one's own desires to the chaos of external influences. Circumstance always dictates things if you dedicate yourself in any public capacity. I preferred to retain my autonomy." Andrew nodded appreciatively to convey his opinion of Mr. Beaumont's answer, but then he paused in a somewhat vexed manner before asking another question. "Yet, as I understand it, you do sit as a member of several boards. So you are still... um... concerned with maintaining some sort of public influence." Andrew's words hung in the air for a moment while he suppressed the urge to fidget. "I'd hardly call it a serious effort to wield power," replied Mr. Beaumont wryly. "I mean, really Mr. Randall, you must have very little personal experience with ambition if you think that's what it looks like." Was this pleasantry? Andrew couldn't even tell. Mr. Beaumont's eyes seemed to retain a certain hardness despite the mirth in his voice. It was like trying to interview an alligator. While swimming with him.

Andrew managed to recover from the awkward position he'd found himself in though and the interview proceeded as the two men continued to pass through additional rooms. Everywhere they went everything was arranged immaculately but Andrew got the sense that no one actually lived in any of the places he was seeing. That is, until Mr. Beaumont opened one of a pair of outward sweeping doors and led Andrew into his studio. Holding the door open, he watched as Andrew stood for a moment, enthralled by the immensity of it. The foyer in contrast seemed modest now. With eyes like smoke, Mr. Beaumont continued to study his guest while Andrew wandered through the contorted menagerie of statues in front of him, his footsteps echoing in the vast silence. They were all human to various degrees – some in only the most abstract sense but most revealing a great mastery of realism. Andrew admired the skill manifest in these until his attention was suddenly seized by a group of people in front of him pretending to be statues. When they didn't move however he stepped closer and realized that what he was seeing weren't people at all but rather an even higher degree of skill. These were part of Mr. Beaumont's latest series of works – the ones that'd so amazed and disturbed the art world. Examining the arm of one of them up close, Andrew could see that everything which was said about them was true. Incredibly he found himself looking at a stone limb covered in thousands of slight indentations which all perfectly imitated the pores one would find on real flesh.

Subtle protuberances like moles were also just barely discernible but it wasn't until he started to look at one of the hands that the virtuosity of what he was seeing really overwhelmed him. The skeletal structure! The veins! The creases in the palm and finger joints! Andrew began to feel slightly dizzy now. Before he could reach for something to lean against though, Mr. Beaumont was beside him and holding him up by one of his biceps. "How is this even possible?" asked Andrew, awestruck. With pity in his eyes, but also somehow an equal measure of disdain, Mr. Beaumont looked at him and then up at the ceiling. A number of arches converged there in pristine white rococo but Andrew understood that the ceiling was not what was being indicated. Mr. Beaumont was alluding to something higher.

"These are the statues you started making after your journey to Greece?" gushed Andrew almost breathlessly. When Mr. Beaumont nodded at this, Andrew swore "I'm sure there aren't any like this there." The old man reflected on that for a moment before adding cryptically, "Not anymore." Now Mr. Beaumont began to lead Andrew away, still grasping him by the arm, but the journalist stopped and looked back searchingly from three or four feet away. "How's this even possible?" he stammered. "Patience," replied Mr. Beaumont. Andrew shook his head. Then, noticing something odd, he asked in an unsure voice "Does the left eye on that one over there have eyelashes on it? Don't the eyes look unbalanced?" His host turned around and, seeing where Andrew was pointing, let go of him and walked over. "No. No. Of course not. That's just an imperfection in the stone. Excuse me," the old man stated and, with no hesitation, Mr. Beaumont picked up a chisel and proceeded to remove the offending material above the one eye. With this, small bits of stone slowly fluttered in flakes through the dust and light to the studio floor. Andrew's host immediately walked back to him after he was done but on his face a faint irritation was visible. Andrew decided not to press the matter despite, and because of, the fact it left him feeling so uncomfortable. They walked together unspeaking then for a few seconds, engulfed in a room about the size of four gymnasiums joined together. Among the throng of figures in the large stilled space they were the only two that were moving.

Not sure of what to say as the absence of speech persisted, Andrew tried gratitude. "I really appreciate getting the chance to come here." Mr. Beaumont closed his eyes meditatively for a moment while maintaining his stride, but didn't reply. Andrew fumbled a little with his hands. "I'm not sure what I did to earn this distinction," he said before Mr. Beaumont tersely cut him off. "You've been

snooping into my affairs. That's why I invited you here." Mr. Beaumont didn't say this with any enthusiasm. Andrew tongued the inside of his mouth as he became downcast in thought. "And all the secrecy?" he asked, glancing at his host nervously. Mr. Beaumont paused for a moment and exhaled. Then he surprised Andrew by suddenly smiling at the question just uttered and offering up one of his own. "Would you like to be immortal?" he asked in all apparent seriousness. An unmistakable leer was lurking in the corners of his face however. Andrew hesitated, sputtering out an "I... don't... know..." and then fell silent again. What did that even mean? Mr. Beaumont smirked, perhaps because he had regained his humor, perhaps because he could read Andrew's thoughts. "I'm talking about sculpture Mr. Randall. About using you for one of my subjects." A faint relief swelled inside him but Andrew remained nervous. "Doesn't that take a long time?" he asked and hoped the answer was yes. He needed an excuse. "No," replied Mr. Beaumont, "I do a study in clay first and then sculpt the stone from that. It'll only take a couple hours." How could he say no? He felt too obliged to try and offer a lame excuse as to why he couldn't pose for a world famous artist. At least it'd be something he could put in the article.

So despite the fact that something now felt very wrong, Andrew agreed to Mr. Beaumont's proposal and they exited the large studio space to enter a barren hallway. Eager to shift the mood of the present situation, Andrew tried asking questions he hoped would appeal to the any lingering elements of humanity in Mr. Beaumont. Specifically, family related things. The impressive achievements of his children to start with. "They've distinguished themselves in so many ways, as a father you must be immensely proud. No doubt they've done so well too because of your guidance," suggested Andrew in the middle of a longer exchange. Mr. Beaumont swatted the flattery away effortlessly. "My son's do take my council, when they know what's best for them. Not often enough however. For example, that thing you stumbled on about Kenneth." Andrew gulped. "You know about that?" Charles Beaumont's eyes narrowed. "Yes, I know about that. And I know much more than you will ever know." Andrew's saw now how futile his attempt to kindle a friendlier discussion was. Mr. Beaumont evidently knew that Andrew had found a few compromising stories while doing research on him. Andrew hadn't actually planned on using any of it in his article but this didn't seem to matter anymore. Glumly, the journalist walked through another door held open by his host and into a large room with a stone amphitheater inside. Andrew was feeling too morose to admire the strange sight though. Instead he obediently began to

descend the steps as Mr. Beaumont ushered him on with a single gesture of his hand. Below a man was waiting and as Andrew neared he realized the man was terrifying. Perhaps seven feet tall, extremely muscular, a clenched jaw carved with sharp angular lines. He had scars on his face and hands too – the sort of man a high end bookie would bring along to have a word with you about your debts. Andrew paused a little way from the bottom of the stairs but Mr. Beaumont pushed him forward. “Ignore Marcus, Mr. Randall. He’s just my assistant. We’re going right through that over there.” Mr. Beaumont pointed towards the other side of the amphitheater where a small door was waiting in the aisle between the stairs. Andrew allowed himself to be led forward and now he had two men trailing him. He looked out at all the seats surrounding them but there was no one else there. No one he could seek help from.

The next room was very small, at least by the standards of all the previous ones. What purpose it had wasn’t clear from its contents either. To the left side there were various costumes hanging on a rack, to the right another statue of bewildering detail, and in the middle some sort of bizarre multifaceted container which looked very old. Ancient even. It was inlaid with grotesque faces on each of its visible sides but Andrew couldn’t identify the culture or artistic style which it must’ve belonged to. Minoan? Sumerian? It seemed to be from some kind of Mediterranean or Near Eastern source. Regardless, the mystery of the container was less disconcerting to him than why he’d been brought to the room he was in. With his last ounce of courage, Andrew tried a joke as Mr. Beaumont and his assistant stood between Andrew and the door. “Is this the part where everyone leaps out and yells surprise?” His voice trembled with desperation. Mr. Beaumont shook his head while staring Andrew directly in the eyes. “No. That wouldn’t do. The rapist who’s truly a connoisseur of his own appetites will maintain the pretext of seduction for as long as possible,” and at these words the journalist shivered. His heart now beating furiously; Andrew stood there, trapped, as his mouth began to dry out. He tried to swallow but couldn’t. Finally, Mr. Beaumont seemed to grow bored of his terror and gave him an order. “Put on the black toga.” When Andrew didn’t comply immediately, the billionaire asserted himself more forcefully. “Take off your clothes and put on the black toga.” Andrew looked at Mr. Beaumont pleadingly and then briefly at the man called Marcus. Unable to endure either of their hard stares, Andrew complied. Before taking off his underwear he momentarily checked with a look to see if “clothes” meant all his clothes but that turned out to be the case. Reluctantly he removed the last thing he had on and stood naked until Mr.



Beaumont, with a tilt of his head, directed Andrew over to the black toga hanging on the rack. As he put it on he noticed a small vase next to the costumes filled with dead flowers that were all dried out and dyed in various colors. He wasn't sure what to make of them.

"Now stand at the far end of the room between the wall and the artifact." Mr. Beaumont's command conveyed the absolute necessity of total submission. Andrew shuffled towards the general area indicated and he found himself looking at the statue that was in the room. "Who's that?" he asked, disorientated. "I honestly can't remember," came the smug reply, accompanied by a vicious smile. Mr. Beaumont then added a "there" when Andrew had reached a point which satisfied him. The journalist stood now, shoulders drooping, shifting his gaze between the two other men. He awkwardly adjusted his toga as Mr. Beaumont approached the container he'd referred to as the artifact. Maybe he could reason with him, thought Andrew meekly. "Excuse me sir but I'm not sure..." said Andrew before he was interrupted. "You will stand! And you will wait!" thundered Mr. Beaumont, vein marred and red in the face. It was the face of a man fissuring in shards and about to explode. The huge thug beside him meanwhile remained as placid as a glacier. With Andrew reduced to surrender, his host then went and kneeled down behind the container in the center of the room before speaking again. "Look at what I have to show you Mr. Randall," said Charles Beaumont with rapture in his rasping voice. It was like a light, whatever it was that reached out to Andrew as the container opened, only without any illumination. And in the briefest moment before his eyes turned to stone, Andrew realized he was staring at the severed head of ancient Medusa herself.

## INCIDENT AT MEGIDDO

As a small herd of goats bleated and searched for things to eat by the side of the road, the young boy supposed to be tending them had his eyes on something else. A large fly had landed on the sleeve of his oversized tunic and the new mixture of disgust and fascination he was feeling exerted its power for a moment. Although flies were a constant nuisance in the ramshackle homestead he and his many siblings shared, he'd never really observed one before.

The creature rested on the wrist he was holding about a foot from his face and his eyes widened when he realized that its whole body was pulsing. Was it breathing? For some reason the thought made him uncomfortable and he became self-conscious about the rise and fall of his own chest and the dusty air entering his lungs. When the fly began to repeatedly sweep its front limbs over its head, the boy was shocked. Nothing in its two bulbous red eyes conveyed any trace of thought or purpose but he was certain the insect was washing itself. Like a man before prayers. Worried that God would punish such a thought, the boy flinched and then watched with regret as the fly took off swerving into the sky. Some of the goats were mulling around his feet and he scratched one behind the ears to console himself before giving his attention to the wide expanse of land spread before him. The Jezreel Valley was laid out in the afternoon sun and all was idyllic – nothing in the immediate vicinity even hinted at the fact that only a few months earlier the last remnants of the Ottoman Empire had been decisively defeated nearby. Now the British ruled Palestine.

Taking up a long thin stick he'd momentarily set aside on a rock, the boy began to usher the goats away from the road and toward a gently sloping hill next to it. A few of them twitched their ears or bucked a little in mild protest but, as the mass of the herd was driven forward, even the surliest goats soon tottered after it. The boy went about this work lazily as it was only a dull routine for him and the day was hot – nevertheless remaining alert at all times to the possibility of strays. His father was not the sort of man to lightly brush off the loss of a goat and, despite his young age, the boy would be held fully responsible if any went missing. Although his father wasn't a cruel man by the standards of his era, he was old enough and unsuccessful enough that, when an opportunity arose to vent the accumulated bitterness he harbored, he always took full advantage of it. The memory of a recent punishment he'd received suddenly piqued the boy's own anger and he quickly snatched up a stone and hurled it at a shed where it bounced off the corrugated tin roof with a surprisingly loud twang. Many of the goats voiced their disapproval of this but the boy sulked defiantly before succumbing to a bout of chagrin and waving his stick to drive his charges onward.

Aeroplanes! In his imagination their wings skimmed the clouds like skies racing through snow and the pilots flying them were all heroic and dashing. He'd seen his first one almost a year ago but the thrill of it remained with him as vivid as ever. Nothing could be more amazing – of that he was sure. His parents and siblings though were tired of his obsession and they liked to joke now and call him the "little propeller" whenever his enthusiasm got the best of him. "Oh look, the little propeller's spinning again," they'd say to each other, talking about him like he wasn't even there. He blushed at their ridicule but could never summon any words in retort so this usually reduced him to red faced silence.

Why'd he have to be born into dirt and poverty? Even though he didn't really understand the world of adults yet, already the brute powers of fate and tradition were beginning to intrude on his childhood innocence. The truth was forming in his mind that he would inherit the life of his father; a life of toil and frustration, a life of hopeless routine where his dreams, like aeroplanes, would simply pass over him. Wiping away an embarrassing tear slipping down his grimy cheek, the boy collected himself and set his mind to the task of driving the goats again. They made their way through a hillside grove of almond trees, the pleasing shadows under these undulating across the terrain. The boy here lifted up a hand and caressed the low

hanging branches laden with fruit but he wasn't inclined to pluck any. While letting his animals scrounge in the area however, he heard something that sounded like other children coming from beyond an adjacent ridge. Fidgeting for a moment as he tried to decide whether it was worth it, he gave one last look around before turning his back on the contented herd of goats and clambering over to the ridge to get a look. At the top he crouched down to spy on things.

Below, in a recess of crumbling cliff walls, he saw a group of five older boys engaging in horseplay. They were only about two hundred or so feet from his position so he settled on to his belly to watch them in secret. The other boys had only a few planks of wood and a tire to amuse themselves with and this alternated between hitting the tire with some of the planks, hitting each other, jumping on the tire, jumping on each other, or pushing one of their friends down so they'd fall on any one or combination of those. These boys were older than he was and their shouting was tinged with hostile revelry so he wasn't eager to make his presence known. Part of him watched them wistfully however, wishing he could join them and be accepted as an equal, but prudence won out and after a few minutes he slunk away without them noticing.

The rest of the day was uneventful until evening. Other than an elderly man asking him what village he came from and some time spent exploring an abandoned house, nothing else of note occurred. Like many times before though, he decided to go see the ruins of the temple on his way home. There he found his favorite pillar of earth left by a previous excavation and stood on this to get the best view. Around him the partially exposed stone ruins filed his mind with images of ancient adventure and intrigue – the ghosts of the past almost becoming corporeal for a second. So enthralled was he in the vividness of his imagination that the strange glowing figure he suddenly glanced in the periphery of his vision didn't register at first. As he realized that something unnatural had abruptly manifest itself in his vicinity, he became afraid and tumbled from the mound he'd been standing on. Or rather, someone. When he looked up after recovering from his fall, he saw a terrifying angel hovering over him.

It stared into his eyes – its own eyes like two stars unveiled in their full cosmic inferno. Despite his fear he could not look away; and when it spoke, he obeyed. "Look at me," it said, "Look at all of me," as it spread its six brilliant wings in radial symmetry. Beside these extra appendages, the angel had the general shape of a

man, but its sapphire body was arrayed with blinking feline eyes like gemstones and it had no visible genitalia despite appearing to be naked. Instead of hair, a mane of fire swirled from its head and in its left hand it held an enormous spear decorated with the severed hands of demons. Two dozen pairs were probably strung along its shaft. "As you can see human, I am a servant of the Living God," intoned the angel "Here to render service to my eternal liege. Now tell me, where is the war?" The boy could not speak though. "Tell me!" insisted the angel and the boy stammered out a quiet, simpering "What war?" in answer. "What war!" roared the angel. "What war! The war to end all wars! The war of wars, last and final!" The boy wailed and prostrated himself more abjectly than he ever had in his life. His whole body trembled as he confessed the truth. "Allah have mercy! It's over!"

The news stunned the angel. Descending in a daze to the earth, they stood slouching among the broken fragments of the temple as they tried to come to grips with things. "Over?" it said to itself unsurely. "How could that be? And yet I sense neither enemy nor host." The boy timidly peered up from the ground to see the angel reduced to a state of listless disorientation and it was then that he realized the angel wasn't alone. In the sky behind it, a whole squadron of other warrior angels were visible. They appeared to be just as confused as the one that'd spoken to him and he saw them whispering among each other until one of their number came forward to speak to the angel on the ground. "Commander," they said as their feet touched the earth, "We made a mistake." A measure of hope lifted the posture of the crestfallen commander. "Explain," they said. Here the second angel held out a golden tetrahedron for inspection. "The device was input wrong," it insisted. "See, the space coordinates are correct but the time coordinates aren't. We've arrived a couple centuries early." Hearing this, the commander of the angel squadron raised their arms in relief and gave earnest thanks to the Almighty.

"Let us return to the citadel!" shouted the angel commander to the others. "Take cheer! The wait will not be long now!" All the angels were now in good spirits and they began to arrange themselves in a phalanx to leave. Their commander however noticed that the boy was still looking at them and it bestowed some final words in parting. "Farewell child. Always put your faith in God." Then the angels all started to glow white hot before abruptly disappearing into the sky as soaring beams of light. Later, on the way home, the boy decided it was wiser not to tell his parents about any of it. He was unusually silent at dinner that evening.

## KENSEI OF WRATH

The sound of the pouring rain filled the long silences between them. Most of the men who were temporarily taking shelter in the Shinto temple that afternoon were solitary travellers so they had little reason to speak. Being soaked and caught off guard by the unseasonal storm, they also weren't in the mood for conversation. While all the others kneeled and contemplated their private thoughts at a distance from the rest though, one of them – a young man serving as a courier for a nephew of the Shogun – stood and stared out the main door that he'd slid ever so slightly open. The gray, cold landscape beyond looked foreboding but he was anxious to proceed with his journey. He was still on schedule for when he was expected in Edo but he didn't want to take any risk that he might be late. Wrestling with this inner dilemma while being careful to maintain an outward composure, the courier was just about to close the door when he saw someone approaching on the horizon. Over a ridge covered in tall grass trembling from the power of the rain, a man now appeared along the muddy road. At first his flat wide-brimmed jingasa, dark and unadorned, arose into view, angled to cover the top half of his face while, below this, the courier watching him was soon able to just barely make out the trace of the firmly set mouth. Then the stranger's shoulders emerged, broad strong shoulders draped in the sleek glistening silk of a drenched black hakama robe. As more of the man became visible, the precision with which he moved was notable. No superfluous motion in his arms or torso; the sum of this and his attire all combining to imbue him with a kind of demonic presence. So already the courier

watching him was startled, but then he noticed the two swords sheathed in the stranger's waist. "Samurai," muttered the young man involuntarily.

Only one of the other men taking shelter in the temple happened to overhear this. An elderly merchant with family in the area, he had been on his way to visit them when the bad weather struck. Glancing around the room discretely to see if anyone else had heard what the courier said, the merchant confirmed that he was alone in this and, as inconspicuously as he could, he got up from kneeling and went over to investigate. Quietly coming up beside the young courier, the elderly merchant stared out the tall vertical gap made by the opened sliding door. His face turned grave as he examined the stranger heading in their direction and, in a soft but anxious whisper, he added one word to what the courier had said – "Ronin." The courier responded by looking over at the elderly merchant but the old man was still staring out the gap in the door somberly and so his young counterpart returned his gaze out there too. Together they waited in speechless brooding as the stranger came ever nearer. When the ronin was about to reach the path that led up to the temple, the elderly merchant finally felt compelled to call out. "Who approaches!?" he intoned with poorly suppressed dread. At this the man in the rain stopped. Without looking in the direction of the person who had addressed him, he replied in a calm voice. "I am Tsuramoto Shingen, but you are mistaken. I have no intention of stopping here." Initially the merchant was relieved to hear this but a hesitant frown quickly spread across his face. "Tsuramoto Shingen?" he said in a confused manner. "My apologies but that name seems familiar." A long interval followed where the man who'd identified himself as Tsuramoto Shingen neither moved nor replied, leaving the sound of falling rain and water running off the temple roof to fill the void. "I don't know why that would be. I haven't been in this area since I was a boy. Now if you'll excuse me..." After an initial moment of uncertainty, the two men watching him bowed slightly as Tsuramoto Shingen calmly continued on his way. Their eyes lingered on the strange ronin however for quite some time.

"Tsuramoto Shingen?" the elderly merchant said again to himself after a moment, looking upwards in thought and unconsciously letting his mouth hang open. "Have you heard of him before?" asked the young man politely. The merchant shook off his daze and replied. "I'm not sure. It's just... I seem to recall a story. Something many years ago. A young man... yes, a young man or a boy who lost his family in a terrible accident. A fire if I remember. He was the only one who survived. A terrible thing but that's all I know. There was some mystery maybe about what happened

to the boy after he was found outside the ruins of his home but I'm not sure. It's been so long." The young courier thought about this very gravely before he finally ventured to ask another question. "You think that was him? The boy?" The elderly merchant reached out to the courier to steady himself for a second as he responded. "No. I hope not." As the two men now gradually made their way back among the rest of the travellers, the puzzled courier couldn't help inquiring. "Why do you hope that?" His elder companion seemed to grow that much frailer as he stopped and turned his gaunt face to answer. "I don't know. A premonition maybe. I see ashes, and under them, a fire smoldering."

Down the road a few hours later, the rain had let up and Tsuramoto Shingen held out his hand to confirm this. A gentle drizzle was still coming down but the ronin was appreciative for the weather finally abating. He had a long way to go before he reached his destination and he was grateful for any small favor from the heavens. As he marched on, his heart was momentarily lightened by two sparrows taking turns chasing one another but the specter of the task before him reasserted itself and his mind returned to a meditative state as he kept walking. A little further on however he had another encounter which involved considerably more drama.

There was a peasant's cart lying toppled on the side of the road. It didn't appear to have had any contents though since nothing was scattered beside it. The man who was presumably pulling it was lying sprawled on the ground as four thugs harassed him. "Where's the money!" one of them shouted as he grabbed the peasant by the collar of his field hakama. The peasant looked at him with dismay and it took him several tries before he managed to sputter out a reply. "Please, I don't have any! The job was just delivering the rice! There... there was no payment." For admitting this, the peasant was subjected to several hard slaps across the face. The pitiful man, bleeding and disheveled now, whimpered as the thieves argued among themselves about what to do. Shingen meanwhile advanced towards them slowly after a brief hesitating pause. Soon his presence caught the attention of one of the thieves and, tapping his neighbor on the shoulder, the man brought his comrades to alert. Insolently, the thief who'd hit the peasant wiped the side of his face with the back of his hand and sized up the newly arrived ronin with a hard stare. "Can't you see we're busy here," he said finally, chuckling to himself. The other thieves laughed too. Tsuramoto Shingen remained placid and he weighed his response carefully. "I'm not interested in your business."



The only thief who'd spoken so far, the one who was obviously their leader, looked sideways at his companions after Shingen replied. "Well you should. We're toll collectors. Our business is collecting tolls. Like for this road. A road that, I can't help notice, you're currently using. Which means we're going to have to insist that you pay up what you owe." Shingen had already halted his advance as the thief addressed him and in response to the demand for ransom he remained completely motionless. With harshly set faces, the four thieves began to approach the ronin – apparently forgetting all about the peasant who, unsure of what to do, remained cowering in the mud. With a serene hand, Tsuramoto Shingen rested his fingers lightly on the handle of his katana. This caught the thieves' attention but their leader bolstered their resolve with a series of nods and the four men drew knives from the folds of their attire – long ugly knives that, while obviously not well cared for, could clearly do the job intended. Yet Tsuramoto Shingen stood where he was as the four thieves started spreading out to surround him.

While the thieves began to encroach on him from four different directions, a distant noise started to reverberate in the air. A rapid clacking sound. Horses galloping. Realizing that they only had a few seconds to disappear, the thieves took off into the nearby brush and larch trees that populated the side of the road – Shingen conversely made his way closer to the peasant and pulled the man's cart out of the way before bending down on one knee. This brought the peasant to his senses and, outdoing the ronin's example, he got down on both knees and prostrated himself in supplication to the exalted individuals who would soon be passing by. A few seconds later they appeared, a dozen nobles in splendid regalia, but instead of dashing past, they brought their horses to a stop. "What's this?" asked one, meaning the situation with the cart. Tsuramoto Shingen glanced at the peasant before deciding that the onus was on him to answer. "This man had an accident your eminence. I was just about to attend to him." The noble snorted as he made an effort to wheel his fidgeting horse under control. "A samurai sullyng himself with a dog in the mud. How despicable. Let's not waste any more time," he sneered, addressing himself to the other riders, and they all swiftly rode off again. After an appropriate interval had passed, Shingen rose to his feet. He looked down and watched as the peasant cautiously lifted his head and looked around. The man was startled when he stared over at Shingen and saw the ronin looking back so, without even a bow or a thank you, the man ran over to his cart, righted it, and started to haul it away at a frantic pace. Shingen felt a sharp pang of sadness for the man as he fled, knowing that he would likely spend his whole life living in fear.

Not that he, the samurai, was any better off. Then, with a brief look towards the forest where the thieves had fled, Tsuramoto Shingen adjusted his attire and returned to his travels.

The last glow of twilight was already fading when he found an inn that evening. It was a small but well-kept Muromachi era structure with lanterns outside so that travellers could find it, situated as it was a short ways off the road. Looking around and not seeing anyone outside, Shingen went up to the front door and slid it open smoothly before entering and closing it. Inside a woman in a plain kimono quickly appeared from down the hall and bowed deferentially to him. She looked like she was well into her middle years, although she would've still been quite attractive had it not been for a severe disfigurement covering most of the right half of her face. "Good evening, may I hang your jacket for you?" Shingen nodded once appreciatively. "Yes, thank you. Also, a bottle of sake would be nice." The woman bowed to him again. "I'll see to it at once. Please, allow me to lead you to your room." Shingen gave her his damp jacket which she accepted with both hands, removed his boots and put on the indoor slippers provided for him, before following her as she led him shuffling down the same hall she'd first appeared from. At the end of this she slid open another door to reveal a large empty room with a pristine white tatami mat floor. Shingen nodded respectfully to the bowing proprietress and went inside.

There he knelt in the center of the room and closed his eyes. He'd walked a long way over the past several weeks and now he was nearing the threshold of his destination. In fact, years had been building to this confrontation. All his training. Then he thought of the night of the fire. He'd gotten up to go relieve himself outside and while doing so he'd happened to catch a glimpse of a fox in the darkness. He'd been taught better than to go chase it but he couldn't help himself. It was beautiful out and the generous moonlight illuminating everything made it all feel like a soft pleasant dream. He clambered through the woods awhile but the fox swiftly disappeared and as he was searching a hollow overturned log he noticed the glow behind him. It was coming from his house. Forgetting the fox he ran awkwardly through the trees and soon found himself outside the family home, helpless before the flames engulfing it. He cried for his mother. He cried for his father. He cried for his brother and sisters. But he already knew that he was alone now. None of them had made it out. He stood there for hours with tears falling down his cheeks as the

building was devoured in the inferno. Other people arrived eventually but they were all far too late to do anything and so, like him, they did nothing but watch.

Without any relatives, the people of his village were unsure of what to do with him. An itinerant monk had been staying in town at the time however and, hearing about the boy's predicament, offered to take him to a local monastery to be raised. Shingen was resistant to this idea but everyone persuaded him to accept it and so he went away with the monk the next morning. Their time together only amounted to a couple days though and then he found himself living in a temple he'd never heard of before. It wasn't bad. He had to do chores of course but they took good care of him and tried to give him an education. He had a secret however. Something that weighed on him with a burdening rage. The monks didn't have any real idea what it was – they just thought he was angry over his loss. They tried to help but it was no use. In all, he stayed with them for little more than a year and a half before he ran away. No one in the monastery could say where he might have gone. Among the monks he'd confided in no one and among the other orphans he hadn't made a single friend.

"Forgive me for the wait. While I was getting you sake, another guest arrived." The proprietress offered her apology with a deep bow before kneeling next to Shingen and handing him a saucer to drink from. "That's fine," replied Shingen as he took the saucer with one hand, before adding "Are you often busy this time of year?" The proprietress tilted her head at his question and answered, "Oh no. Hardly. And we only have two other guests right now besides yourself." With these words she poured from the bottle of sake cradled in her hands and deftly filled Shingen's saucer without spilling any of it. "I see," he said before he drank and the two of them kneeled quietly together like this for some time, the one serving the other. "Do you manage this inn all by yourself?" asked Shingen eventually. While pouring another drink for him, the proprietress replied, "Yes. My husband and I used to do it together but he died young many years ago. Since then I've done everything by myself. Obviously I can't get married again because of... well... of this." Here she gestured to her disfigurement before quickly becoming self-conscious and apologetic. "I'm very sorry for... rambling like this. I hope you'll excuse me. A hostess shouldn't burden her guests with such things." Shingen drained his saucer. "It doesn't bother me," he said honestly. The proprietress bowed slightly. "Your kindness is appreciated. Most people can't hide their revulsion when they first see my face." A solemn look came over Shingen as he slowly drained another saucer of

sake. "And that's a reflection of them. People recoil from the scars of others because it confronts them with their own vulnerability and mortality." Almost whispering, the proprietress replied, "Yet you don't." Shingen politely waved away the half empty bottle of sake. "I am already well acquainted with death," he explained.

"Shall I leave you now?" she inquired after a few seconds of silence. "No. Please. I wish to ask you some things first," replied the samurai. The proprietress' face briefly flickered with the faint smile perfected by the women of Japan to convey a happiness robed in the utmost modesty. "It would be my pleasure," she added. Shingen nodded and, slightly warmed with the effects of alcohol and deciding to make himself more comfortable, switched from his kneeling position to a seated one. The proprietress showed no signs of noticing this change in demeanor as Shingen went on to speak. "I want to know about a few families who live in the area. The Arata and Ishikawa to begin with." The proprietress nodded. "I know little of the Ishikawa although I've heard their textile business is doing well. The Arata I buy from on a regular basis. Tadashi-san has always been generous when it comes to the fish he offers me. Sadly he injured himself the summer before last and since then he's walked with a limp. But we all get old." Tsuramoto Shingen reflected on this news soberly. "Arata Tadashi... when last I saw him he was a towering young man. It's hard to imagine him otherwise. And his mother was so kind to me. Do you know her? Fumiko-sama?" His companion nodded sadly. "I knew her. I'm sorry to say but she passed away in her sleep almost... nine years ago."

As Shingen absorbed what the proprietress said, she watched him curiously. Gradually it had become clear to her that he was from the area but everything else was still a mystery. "If you would be so kind," she asked with downcast eyes, "May I know how it is that you've been away for so long? Clearly you lived here once." Tsuramoto Shingen looked at her carefully before he began to speak. "Seventeen years. I've been gone seventeen years. Most of them I spent at a dojo in the shadow of Mount Hotaka. Seventeen years to pay a debt. Tomorrow I intend to settle it." The tone of his voice indicated to the proprietress that it would be best if she didn't ask him any further questions in this regard. Sensing that the samurai's mood had changed, she resolved to part for the evening. "Will that be all?" she asked. Tsuramoto Shingen wasn't finished though. "One final question. What do you know of the Maboro clan?" A horrified expression came over the proprietress' face. "I know nothing of them!" she blurted sharply as she got up, shuffling towards the

door. There she paused for a moment and slowly turned around. "Maboro Takeo," she said, her voice trembling with anger, "The son of Maboro Takeru... he did this." Here she pointed at her disfigurement. "When I wouldn't submit when he tried to force himself on me, he took a pan of boiling oil and cast it in my face." Her pained expression cut into Shingen's heart and he was about to explain himself but she disappeared before he could. In the quiet that followed he listened to the rain that was falling fiercely once more and then went and blew out the lamp. In the darkness that night his long stoked anger fed on new kindling.

The next day Shingen set out early in the morning. He left his payment for the proprietress in his room with a note saying "The wolf does what he pleases because he fears nothing in the forest. He will still be smiling even as the hunter draws their bow." The Maboro clan's large estate was about an hour's walk from the inn and on the way there he thought over many things. It was a strange coincidence that the clan of the person he was seeking out today had injured the very woman whose inn he'd stayed at the night before. Not that he was surprised. He didn't know Maboro Takeo but he knew his father, in a sense, and the conduct of the son could only be expected. It was the elder Maboro that Shingen intended to gain an audience with in any case. Not that he would be admitted under normal circumstances. The Maboro clan were quite wealthy – a large portion of their income coming from the numerous brothels they ran across the province. As such they weren't the sort who'd welcome just anyone into their midst but Shingen had a plan for that. A plan he'd thoroughly considered during the course of many years. Yet it was utterly simple.

White walls perhaps fifteen feet high surrounded the Maboro compound. Resting on a small hill, a short path led up to this, where imposing wooden doors waited. Tsuramoto Shingen made his way to these and knocked loudly three times with the bottom of his fist. "Who is it?" replied a voice after a brief interval. "A messenger of Daimyo Oda!" shouted Shingen. "I have a letter from my lord!" Shingen overheard the sentry's puzzlement as he discussed this with someone on the other side of the door. Daimyo Oda was not the daimyo of the Maboro clan's province. Eventually though the door was opened and the Maboro clan samurai who did so were greeted with the sight of Shingen presenting a rolled scroll with both hands for them to inspect. When one of them tried to reach out for it however, Shingen held it back. "My lord has strictly ordered me to deliver this directly to the exalted Maboro Takeru-sama himself." The other samurai looked at each other but

proceeded to admit him after the chief retainer was brought over to weigh in on the matter. They then escorted him in single file procession to the main house where two guards stood outside flanking its entrance. "You'll have to hand over your weapons," said the chief retainer and, after bowing and tucking the scroll in his hakama, Shingen removed his katana and wakizashi. The chief retainer then nodded to the two sentries who'd made up the procession from the gate, indicating they could leave, and led Shingen inside.

Down empty corridors Tsuramoto was eventually taken before another door where two additional guards stood waiting. The Maboro clan were evidently quite self-conscious about security. One of these men slid open the door and watched suspiciously as Shingen followed the chief retainer inside. As Shingen assumed a kneeling position in the room, he discretely examined the mural-covered walls surrounding him which depicted white cranes against brilliant golden backdrops. He also noticed that the two guards had followed him in and were kneeling on either side behind him. The chief retainer meanwhile was kneeling a few feet away but unlike the guards he was staring at the slightly elevated dais where Shingen was expecting Maboro Takeru to soon appear. Instead a young man entered in a magnificent kimono with two guards following him. Shingen was caught by surprise for a second but he quickly recovered and bowed reverentially, his head touching the tatami floor. "I've been told that you have some sort of letter," the young man said as he sat down on a small maroon stool. "Yes your excellence," answered Shingen, "But I've been instructed to present it to your illustrious lord Maboro Takeru-sama and to no one else." The young man's face briefly flashed with annoyance. "My father is a great man also great in years. He no longer handles our clan's affairs directly. If Daimyo Oda does not know this he will nevertheless have to be satisfied dealing with the new head of the Maboro clan." Shingen bowed again. "It shall be as you say," and he took the scroll from out of his hakama and gave it to the chief retainer. As the chief retainer offered a brief bow to Shingen with the scroll in his hands, Tsuramoto then simultaneously pulled the wakizashi and the katana from the man's belt, stabbing the first of these at an upwards angle into the his chest and turning around and leaping several feet with the other to deeply slash the face of one of the guard's behind him.

As the attacked guard screamed and futilely tried to staunch the blood pouring out of his face, the other shocked Maboro samurais in the room stumbled to pull their own swords. Before the last of the two guards who'd been sitting behind Shingen

was able to get his out however, Tsuramoto Shingen severed the the man's forearm which had been trying to unsheathe the blade. The two samurai who now stood between him and Maboro Takeo however had readied themselves by the time Shingen had finished with their companions and he approached them cautiously with the katana he'd stolen held at length in front of him. In unspoken agreement, one of them began to try and circle behind him while the other stayed between him and their lord. Realizing that his situation would be extremely precarious if one of the other samurais was allowed to strike at him from behind, Shingen deliberately lashed out at the one protecting Maboro Takeo and exposed his back to the other, before rapidly recoiling from his blocked attack and spinning around to intercept the samurai behind him who'd rushed in to take advantage of his vulnerability. He knocked aside the advancing guard's sword with one hit and with his katana turned sideways, Shingen thrust its tip into the man's neck. With his artery and windpipe torn open, the fatally wounded samurai collapsed to the floor and died in seconds – a pathetic gurgle and a pleading hand taking the place of the last words he was unable to speak. Only one nervous guard remained and Tsuramoto Shingen eyed the man with a cold stare as his blood soaked blade searched for weaknesses in the man's defenses. In an act of desperation, the final guard tried to rush the ronin and for his bravery he was rewarded with a fatal gash across his back. During all this, Maboro Takeo had crawled over to the corner of the room and it was there that Shingen strode towards him, a trail of blood dripping from his lowered sword.

"Wait! Stop! Explain yourself!" shouted Maboro Takeo frantically. "This is an act of pure madness!" Tsuramoto Shingen halted a few feet away from his sprawled counterpart and spoke, the ferocious calm of his voice like the eye in a raging typhoon. "Seventeen years ago I was a young boy so I knew almost nothing of my father's work. Since then I've learned that he inadvertently exposed the corrupt practices of some government officials while performing his duties as a scribe. After that his house was set on fire. All my family except for me perished in it. So you know why I have come." Takeo shook his head. "I don't! I swear!" Shingen gazed at the man mercilessly. "Your father was the one giving the officials bribes." Takeo glanced around the room desperately before putting up both his hands. "Don't! That... that doesn't mean it was him! This is a mistake!" Tsuramoto Shingen scoffed. "I ran away from the monastery that first took me in to study kendo under a master swordsman. For years I've devoted my every waking moment to this day. I've made sure of everything. Only when my abilities with a katana reached the zenith of the

art did I resolve to have my revenge. Now be silent and die. Further talk is pointless." Maboro Takeo refused to be reconciled his death though. "No! You've... you've just convinced yourself that what your... doing is necessary. Let me take you to my father! Yes? He's in the house across the bridge. I'm sure he can fix things!" Shingen raised his sword to strike. "Understand," he said dispassionately, "Your words are like snow falling in the flames." Then he struck and about a third of Takeo's head separated itself diagonally from the rest. This chunk bounced away a few feet to settle wobbling like a plate while the spilled brains, and the rest of the body, slumped to the ground in a growing pool of blood.

It was only when he'd killed everyone in the room that Tsuramoto Shingen realized there were women shrieking. They must be cloistered somewhere nearby, he thought. Suddenly, before he was able to step out into the halls, the two guards who'd taken his swords earlier at the entrance appeared. They charged him but Shingen dispatched them with two swift strokes. Then he kept walking. Outside he found his own weapons lying by the entrance and he exchanged the katana he'd taken for them. Adjusting these on his belt, he made sure that they were securely fastened. More blood would be spilled before he was done. Equipping himself to his satisfaction, he proceeded to make his way down a carefully swept stone path towards the back of the main house where a manicured stream ran with a small stone bridge over it. Like every estate owned by those who had wealth in Japan, this estate had a sizable garden – one that emulated the Tenryu-ji gardens in Kyoto in fact. A pair of servants saw him coming and they scattered as he returned their gazes. Crossing the bridge, Shingen couldn't help noticing that the clouds which had dismally covered the sky for many days were at last parting. Fissures of radiant blue were appearing in several places but, while he was thinking about this, a group of eight guards came running and shouting from behind him.

In and out, plunging over and over again, the sword as steady and passionless as an oar in water. When he stabbed for the heart he used only the tip of his katana and no unnecessary strength was expended. When he blocked, the striking blades of his adversaries were pushed aside with the minimum force needed to render them harmless. More than anything it was the fluidity of his technique which was astonishing. He fought as if he'd been condemned to fight that one fight for all eternity, and had completed it so many times already in the ancient past that it'd been reduced to the effortless theater of a solitary Noh performance.



The eight henchmen of the Maboro clan lay in eleven oozing fragments by the time he'd finished with them. None of their blades had touched Shingen. Stepping over the carnage, he made his way from the bridge to the house on the other side where Maboro Takeru supposedly waited. Sliding the front door open with a snap, Shingen cautiously took his first steps inside. It was quiet. Methodically he searched the building and as he did he steadily grew convinced that he wouldn't find Takeru there. In the last room behind the last sliding door however he discovered an elderly man sitting on the floor before a large array of calligraphy paraphernalia and a young attendant beside him. The young man was kneeling with a sheathed katana in his lap. Seeing Shingen, he carefully drew it and stood up while throwing the sheath aside. "I do not know what mission has brought you here but the sword in my hands will end it," said the young samurai. "You don't have to die with him," replied Tsuramoto Shingen after a brief pause. "He is my lord," retorted the attendant. "The blood of my finger has pledged this." Shingen sighed. "Then I was wrong. You will die today." The attendant's face hardened and he switched his sword stance to a high guard position as he moved in to strike. Tsuramoto Shingen blocked the first blow without a counterattack, then the next, and the next. The young attendant slashed at him many times but on each occasion Shingen's blade was there to intercept. Finally the attendant's barrage of attacks relented and he stood breathing heavily while Shingen stared back without any sign of being fatigued. "Determination is nothing in this world," said the ronin. "A raindrop gives itself entirely in falling and even the smallest leaf can turn it aside." With a thundering ki-ai shout, the attendant now charged Shingen with a horizontally held sword intending to impale him. Delicately, Tsuramoto Shingen tapped his opponent's blade aside with his own and impaled his foe in turn. After a moment spent clutching his opponent's hakama with bulging eyes, the attendant then slid from Shingen's blade onto the floor.

"Do you remember the Tsuramoto family?" Shingen asked, still looking at his slain adversary while he addressed Takeru. The old man closed his eyes for a second as he searched the mists of his mind. "So you're the son?" he eventually replied. "I heard you lived. I thought of sending someone to dispatch you too and then decided it wasn't necessary. It would appear however that I underestimated you. For someone who must be consumed with a great anger however, you seem remarkably restrained in it." Shingen's eyes moved from the corpse in front of him to Takeru now. "I called to them. Each one. As the heat of the fire scorched the tears from my face, I cried out and they answered me in terror. Then only the fury

of the flames spoke. My rage... my rage is beyond display. Beyond outbursts. It is metal beaten and folded a thousand times, a hundred thousand. My rage is all that is cold and merciless in death forged into a single sword. You will see my rage soon enough old man, when the final darkness engulfs you."

"Then carry out your vengeance," said Takeru. Shingen narrowed his eyes. "You will not plead for your life?" he asked. "No," replied the elderly man as he stood up. "I'm only surprised my karma took so long to catch up with me." Shingen was irritated by Takeru's resignation. It would not do if the old man died with equanimity. Crouching down, Shingen wiped his katana off on the hakama of the dead attendant before sheathing it as he rose. After this he grabbed Takeru by his kimono and began to tear it off him – the old man doing little to resist. With his torso exposed and his arms still tangled in the kimono's sleeves, Takeru stared back defiantly at the ronin. At least until Shingen took out his wakizashi and slit the elderly man's stomach open. Intestines spilled out and Takeru tried to collapse but Shingen held him up by pressing him against the wall with his free hand. His intestines were unravelled all the way to the floor when Shingen finally flung the man down. There Takeru groaned as he squirmed around pathetically and tried to gather up his insides. In the meantime, Tsuramoto Shingen walked over to the calligraphy paraphernalia and selected a brush and a clean sheet of rice paper for himself. This part had worked out serendipitously. Sitting down, the ronin took a deep breath and then went to work composing a poem.

Yesterday's sunset  
Was the last one I will see  
And no more will I  
Fall asleep among the stars;  
I leave bathed in light

When he was done, Tsuramoto Shingen decapitated the now deceased Takeru, cleaned the weapon on the shoulder of the man's kimono, and took his head outside. There he broke a rake lying beside a pit of sand and used this as a stake to put Takeru's head on. "Let the gulls have you," Shingen said to himself quietly. A breeze swept over the Maboro compound and the sound of it seemed to draw out the emptiness of the world. Swirling and assailing and disappearing into the sky, the kami of the wind were indifferent to the tribulations of human beings. Nothing he had done today had altered the divine order of things. So what good was it?

Would the spirits of his family really take solace in a debt repaid with blood? His father had been a gentle man. His mother even more so. But that was part of what had driven his hate all these years. In this world, it was the good and kind who suffered the larger portion of cruelties. He may not have accomplished something by executing his revenge but, in his own heart at least, injustice had been denied a place to bask in victory. Whether or not he'd achieved anything he'd at least done something. He'd not shrunk from the demand tradition made of him and simply tried to move on. He had taken the harder road. No matter what, he could not be accused of surrender.

Shingen calmly took the wakizashi blade out his belt that he was going to plunge into his abdomen. His task was complete and now all that was left for him was to atone for the cowardice he'd shown that distant night, letting his family burn to death while standing by doing nothing. With steady hands he carefully wrapped the blade he held in the rice paper scrawled with poetry.

## QUAESAR'S ARRIVAL

The world had grown quiet. Cities that'd once spread creeping over its surface were now falling apart in dry ruins. The oceans dwindled too, becoming constellations of lonely seas filled with salt thick ooze. Only the most monstrous of creatures could survive in them and, all over the world, the harsh conditions that prevailed twisted the remaining beasts into various forms of grotesque being. It'd been years since a cloud was seen in the sky. And yet, despite all this, there were still fragments of lingering civilization here and there, cruel to themselves in their hope that the lands which death had spread its veil over could one day be reborn. Partly this was because magic had returned, kindling a little bit of faith in the hearts of the despairing but, those who held such beliefs, didn't understand. In any case, there were still events transpiring of momentous consequence – the business of travellers going to and from nameless occult realms. In such matters of course, bloodshed was inevitable.

At an outpost far from any caravan route lived three gnomes who went by the names Nucky, Nooky, and Nonny. If there was anyone who could say why the gnomes had been named this way or whether they were related to each other, that person left no discernable mark in history. The gnomes though were fairly well known, partly because of their own excursions into the outlying areas around their home and partly because of the severe way in which they dealt with trespassers in their own territories. It was said that if you could see their outpost, a dilapidated

jumbo passenger jet overgrown with moss and sprouting trees, it was already too late – the gnomes would hunt you down and kill you without pondering you a lick. To be fair though, the gnomes weren't naturally savage, only made so by necessity, and they had their fair share of acquaintances and allies with whom they parlayed on occasion.

Among these were the Adobe Wasps who built immense hives in the dunes out east. The gnomes did some modest trade with them for stillborn grubs and, more importantly, had used their gnomish ingenuity to assist the Wasps several times. It was not taken as an intrusion then when a herald of the Wasps appeared one evening at the gnome's outpost. Nonny was laying some tattooed tanning hide out on a clothesline when he looked up to see a mandibled black insect, about a meter tall, hovering over him. Without showing any surprise, Nonny put down the hide he held in his hands and greeted the Wasp with the usual gesture of recognition the gnomes used – an open hand, palm forward with thumb and fingers parallel, and fingers flexed ever so slightly backwards. The Wasp in turn continued to whirl around in place (more or less) as it spoke to the gnome in its own language. This involved various abrasive and sibilant noises but when translated it vaguely amounted to the following: "Hive greetings soft skin. We come to honor our symbiosis. Chittering has arrived from the far lands. Our scouts have eyed a stranger, another soft skin – robed with a long white beard. The soft skin comes this way. We asked the Most Splendid Queen and She says this is the one who you have waited for." Nonny became visibly upset by this news but despite that he managed to offer the Wasp Herald some sugar water before they departed. Then he sat down on a stump and moaned.

Nonny's sense of who the Wasp was talking about had begun to sink in at their description of a robed man with a long white beard but he'd been trying to convince himself otherwise until the point in the message where the Queen had confirmed it. The day was finally come – Quaesar was returning. Which meant he expected what he was owed. This happened to be very unfortunate for the gnomes. Sure, they'd worked on procuring what was needed but, after a while, when a task doesn't have any deadline and the memory of the original decree has faded from intervening centuries, a gnome's liable to get sidetracked. They hadn't gotten around to finishing what was needed. And now the day of reckoning was upon them. Realizing he had to bring word to his fellows, Nonny at once departed in the direction where he knew Nucky was supposed to be, only pausing briefly to vent

his frustration by kicking a small round stone that'd been resting in his path. It bounced and rolled off a ways, vanishing into a small thicket of arrow-headed mushrooms the color of stained teeth.

As Nonny was putting some distance between himself and the metal door swinging loosely in the entrance way on the side of the plane, a frail looking woman in baggy overalls and a drooping rain slicker appeared there. She had pale blue eyes as pristine and lifeless as marble. Her name was Colette, a refugee the gnomes had purchased from some slavers. Now she was a farm hand and a maid for them... among other things. With her presence and emotionless stare she managed to draw Nonny's attention. "Are you going sir?" she asked in a frail voice. Nonny pulled at a tuft of his hair before replying. "I'm in haste to my fellows. Be of use and get our adventure gear ready." With that the gnome gave the woman a dismissive shooing with his hand and took off in the same direction he'd earlier intended. Colette watched him amble along for a bit. What might have seemed amusing to others didn't fill her heart with any mirth. The exaggerated movements of the pudgy figure shrinking in the distance couldn't deceive her. She knew how fast and vicious gnomes could be.

It was some time before Nonny came upon Nucky mining in a shallow quarry. As the tinkling sound of the pickaxe grew louder, Nonny reached the edge of the quarry's rim and found himself looking down at a shirtless and capless Nucky a few feet below. When the other gnome didn't react to his presence, Nonny called out to him. "Nuck! Quit that! I've dire tides!" Nucky, red and glistening from his exertion, exhaled as he stopped and looked up, waiting for the rest. Some fury welled up in Nonny at this attitude. "Quaesar!" he yelled, and a few little strands of saliva escaped his corpulent lips. Nucky, the most practical and shrewd of the three gnomes, let his leaning pickaxe slowly fall to its side as he gathered his clothes and proceeded to head up a nearby embankment. He was still trying to get his arms through his sleeves when he reached his counterpart. "How'd this come to you?" Nucky asked Nonny, needing no further explanation for the meaning to be had. "Wasp herald flew by less than a sand drip ago. Quaesar was seen passing through the bygone lands." Nucky had finished dressing but he took a moment to adjust his cap before speaking. ""Well, come on. Let's fetch Nooky." Nonny made a sneer. "He ain't no use. Might as well bring a sack of dead cats. Least the eatin' would be better." Nucky slapped the other gnome in the back of the head for this remark. Not because he thought highly of Nooky. No, Nooky was obviously damn close to

worthless most of the time but he had surprising moments occasionally and Nucky was a practical gnome. On top of that, it was good to just keep Nonny's constant complaining in line.

When they finally found Nooky after searching a bunch of his usual hangouts, the gnome was reclined against the base of an old rusted guillotine that had various skulls littered in its vicinity. Serpentine plumes of smoke were coming from a silver pipe hanging from his mouth and the poor fellow was hopelessly out of his wits as his comrades materialized over him. Gazing up at them with wide yellow eyes that were totally glazed over, Nooky offered up a faded grin. "Come on you rascal!" shouted Nonny as he pulled Nooky to his feet. The silver pipe fell from Nooky's lips and, him being quite unable to follow it, Nucky grudgingly reached down and picked it up. "Friends," asked Nooky, "what's... what's this here about?" Nonny scowled and then glanced at Nucky who took the cue to speak. "The music box has played its tune. Now Nook, be urgent. The sorcerer is after us." Nooky made a puzzled face and "Oh" was all he said. Nonny shook his head, almost amazed at the other gnome's capacity for being underwhelmed. A question though suddenly swept into Nooky's mind like a dragonfly landing on a lily pad. "Which one?" asked Nooky. The other two gnomes looked at each other again before Nonny replied with worn exasperation. "THE sorcerer, you idiot. Quaesar." Nooky absorbed this and then looked down at his little round belly. "Oh no," was all he said.

It wasn't too long after this that the gnomes were back at their outpost and ready with all the supplies they needed for their journey. Colette received their final instructions outside as she stood clutching a double-barrel shotgun and, when the gnomes departed, she went back in the plane again while they made their way towards the horizon with a single laden-down miniature pony. Their destination was something of a mystery to them but they had a good enough idea from their parchment maps and monastic tomes where the last few artifacts they needed were going to be located. One of these was likely to be the most difficult since it was in the possession of Old Salamander, a much respected figure in their region of the apocalypse. Respected of course meant feared in those days so they didn't expect to be able to just take what they needed. No doubt some bargaining would have to be done but, since they had no idea what Old Salamander would require, they'd simply have to find out once they had his audience. Gnomes however are famous for being resourceful creatures.

During their journey they travelled mostly at night, the falling shards of crumbling orbital infrastructure often visible in streaking lights descending through the polluted atmosphere. Gnomes have excellent night vision so this was not only easily done but it also worked to their advantage. They were considerably more likely to encounter danger during the day, although throughout the nights they would regularly hear bursts of gunfire and the howling of strange beasts. In any case, they moved with the same caution through the darkness that they used in choosing the locations where they hunkered down and slept during the day. This usually consisted of small outcroppings of large-enough rocks or trenches dug sufficiently deep to hide them. It was in such a trench though that they awoke to discover themselves completely encircled one morning. A masked knight in full pneumatic plate armor was standing over them with about a dozen other similarly fortified individuals. One of these poked Nonny with a lance as the gnomes lay on their backs, eyes wide and glancing around. Understanding, they all slowly rose together and obediently let themselves be guided a short distance to an assembly. The pony whined behind them.

“Who are you?” demanded another knight in armor, one sitting on a makeshift throne. From the voice they could tell that it was a she. The attention of the whole platoon in whose custody they now found themselves also indicated that she was very much in charge. Removing his cap, and using a few slaps to get Nonny and Nooky to do the same, Nucky then stepped towards the mistress of the knights while bowing deferentially. “I am Nucky my lady and these are my comrades Nooky and Nonny. We are but humble travellers engaged in some small errands that concern us far away from here. We are gnomes of fair reputation, known widely not to bother the authorities of any realm.” The mistress of the knights thought about this a second before replying, “I have not heard of you,” in a humorless voice. Nucky bowed lower, with more artistry than mere cringing, as he tried to think of what to say. Finally a string of words began to unspool tenuously from his mouth. “If it pleases her, will the dread lady do us the honor of disclosing to us poor fellows her surely august name and titles? For we are aliens in this country and eager to pay our proper respects.” An agonizing moment of silence passed before the mistress of the knights stood up and lifted her visor, answering with a face as beautiful as it was hard and brave.

“I am Lady Hildegard, she who has dominion and stands as sole power in Castle Hildegard. I am the slayer of scavengers and bandits! My wrath cleanses even the



most putrid corners of the waste! What are gnomes to me that I should banter with them!? Tell me!” Nucky got on his knees and clasped his chubby hands together in a plea before her anger. Nooky and Nonny likewise went to their knees without needing prodding. Nucky licked his lips nervously before speaking. “Only your mercy can save us Great Lady. We cannot earn it. We are nothing but tiny pebbles passed over by your dauntless river. Only, we pray that our unimportance is enough to allow us to be let go unharmed.” Lady Hildegard scrutinized Nucky and the other gnomes now with terrifying ambiguity. Then she laughed, laughing in great peals of laughter, her voice ringing in the air.

In this manner the gnomes were spared their lives. That did not mean their freedom however. They were told that they would be detained for a period so that their good stature in the realm could be verified – the word stature being used deliberately for its double meaning. Soon enough though they found themselves unchained but under guard in a tent near the center of the knight’s camp. It was considered sufficient that only two knights would be given the duty of watching over them, although these were naturally rotated in shifts. This is where the knights made their mistake. Of course the gnomes did not overpower them in the usual way. As it was, they had settled themselves into a nice game of cards with their captors when a young woman in a leather body suit entered.

She looked like a slightly softer version of Lady Hildegard and that was no coincidence. “Squire Godwin,” asked one of the sentries, “you are not here to gamble surely?” Squire Godwin rolled her eyes at the suggestion. “Of course not Osmund. I’m here to inform you and our guests that they will accompany us on our return to the castle. It has been determined that the skills famous among their kind can be of use. Understood?” Both of the sentries nodded. None of the humans however noticed the look that Nonny gave to Nucky and the unconcern with which he shook his head in reply. “Now, unless you have anything else you wish to say to me,” added Squire Godwin, “I will retire to sleep and the presence of my lady. Mind you, be careful about underestimating our guests. They’re no doubt very clever.” By her last remark she meant things other than cards. No one else spoke though so she left and the remaining company returned to their game. Meanwhile, just as Nucky intended, the gnomes were losing badly. Eventually it got to the point where all their coins had been acquired by one of the knights and the knights were naturally looking very pleased with themselves.

“Well Necky, are you and your fellows properly trounced then?” asked Osmund. “You’ve played very well sir knight,” replied Nucky, “but I still have something valuable to stake. Something which you and your companion might find a far... far better treasure than coin.” The knight’s eyebrows arched in curiosity as Nucky pulled a small pouch from a pocket under his shirt. Holding it up to their eyes he slowly untied the draw string, revealing a fine pink powder inside. “What is it?” asked Osmund, frowning. “Examine it closely my friends,” replied Nucky with an immense smile. The knights then leaned in to assess the curious substance and as they did so Nucky exhaled just deep enough that fine powders drifted into the air and to the faces of the two knights. Puzzled looks settled on to each of these before they both flopped over, unconscious. Nucky shook his head and Nooky couldn’t help but clap softly in delight. Nonny conversely was already busily at work getting into their pockets.

With the utmost stealth, the gnomes stole away from the knight’s encampment, only detouring to fetch their pony, and made directly for their original destination. They could afford to do this because Nucky had been careful earlier in misdirecting the knights about the gnome’s true course. With great haste they then proceeded on their way, through the devastated countryside now overgrown with mutant plants and critters of nearly extraterrestrial oddity. The rest of their journey to the lair of the Old Salamander turned out to be uneventful so in due time they found themselves at its outskirts. The lair in question consisted of an old art museum that’d somehow survived intact despite the nuclear bombardment which razed the rest of the surrounding buildings. The grounds seemed fairly maintained as well so, with due respect, the gnomes approached the large wooden doors of the museum and rapt its knockers. After a brief interval, the door opened with a slow creak and two eyes peered out from its shadows.

“Yes?” asked the one receiving them. “We’re here to see the Old One,” said Nucky. “I am Nuckoss Gnosticonimus. He knows who I am.” The eyes blinked. “Please wait here,” replied the voice coming from the dark before the door gently shut. In a short while however the door opened once more and the three gnomes were invited inside. In the gloom they found themselves in, they could make out little other than the outline of the one who guided them and the vaguest forms of the statues on either side of the large hallway they passed through. Also, nothing could be heard except their own breathing and the clacking sound of their boots on the polished stone floor. But eventually they found themselves in a vaulted room with

a stained glass apex where the early morning light that was emerging was showering the entire space in a kaleidoscopic colors. At the center of it all a strange dais of machinery stood towering in a sullen heap.

With the three gnomes waiting by themselves upfront as their guide remained in the outer darkness, the hydraulic mechanism before them churned to life, all of its engines chugging at once. Then its uppermost portion swiveled, revealing itself as a sort of icosidodecahedron cockpit, with various levers and panels observable through a large open window. Inside was a fat creature that was quite obviously a giant sentient salamander. “Nuckoss!” slurred the Old One, “To what do I owe this visit?” he said, chuckling at his own pun. “Old One,” replied Nucky, “My brethren and I come before you to inquire about the demon artifacts in your possession. We would be interested in negotiating for it.” The Old One steered the cockpit of his machine closer to the gnomes as the trunk of it sputtered out spouts of steam. “Do you? But such a thing has peerless value. It is value beyond appearance. Even standing on a pier at the end of an ocean one could not, um... well, in any case I don’t have it.” Seeing Nucky wring his fist in frustration, the old salamander could not help chortling with delight.

“Fret not good Nuckoss. I know where it is. Even better, I will help you get it. Only...” cooed the Old One. “Only what?” asked Nucky, somewhat irritated. “Only you have to do one thing for me,” the Old One replied. “Yes?” piqued Nucky. “You have to kill the one who stole it from me,” seethed the Old One and there was an unholy menace in these words. “Can we do it?” Nonny chimed in skeptically. Nucky looked at his comrade but quickly turned back to the Old One – it was a fair question. The Old One took the time to bestow his most benevolent look on all three of the gnomes individually. “It is more than in your power. I would have done it myself but it’s a long distance and I have no servants to spare. I cannot have Lycanthor abandoning me to do so now can I?” Nucky smirked at the Old One feigning weakness but the excuse sounded plausible enough. “Fine. Give us the directions we require and we’ll do the deed.” The salamander clapped his four digit hands together. “Wonderful,” he said. “Even better though,” he continued, “I will provide you with the weapons to do so.” All three of the gnomes liked the sound of that. The Old One now paused though, as if he had some bad news he was about to share. “A final thing... a thing so minor it hardly even bears mentioning. Your target, well... he’s a centaur.”

Nucky managed to bottle up most of his cursing until the gnomes were once again outdoors. Nucky hated centaurs. Of course gnomes and centaurs have always had bad relations but Nucky actually had to do a lot of business with a tribe of them in the past when he operated a vending kiosk outside a vast communal farming facility. Centaurs were natural reapers for obvious reasons and so were regularly employed as such. Nucky remembered the whole period as a very trying time in his life and, given that he was a thousand years old at least, this was no small thing to be. As he thought about it more however he realized that he'd relish getting to kill the centaur. Any centaur. Because of this, his good cheer was gradually restored and so, when Nonny asked him to go over the new plan again, he did so without a trace of resentment.

"He calls himself Ajuvano. A scientist of the black arts, occupied with artificial necromancy. Zombified creatures and what not. Apparently he uses demon artifacts for this. None of that really matters though. All you have to worry about Nonny is taking that spear there that the Old One gave you and sticking it in a tender place where no centaur would want it. If our new spears aren't enough we've also got the napalm vials he gave us. I'll hang on to those though." The spears in question would've been short by human standards, barely even javelins really, but placed lengthwise vertically, they were distinctly taller than the gnomes themselves. With spears, gnomes were often an effective fighting unit since they could attack under shields more easily and also the stomachs of most mounts – like horses. Or horse people, it really didn't make much of a difference. Furthermore, all gnomes had at least some training in spear tactics.

Aside from one incident where they had to help their pony out of an especially large and deep puddle, the gnomes travelled now at a rapid pace. Alive always in the back of their minds, the unforgiving specter of Quaesar loomed. It had been a tremendously long time since they'd last seen him but his grim face could still be called up as vividly as ever. It was this face which spurred them on even as the gnomes became uncomfortable at the soreness that results from any long journey. An immense flood of relief came then when they looked out at the horizon one day and at last saw the Petrified Forest where Ajuvano was supposed to have his laboratory. The forest was very notable too because unlike other petrified ones elsewhere, here the vast majority of the fossilized trees were still standing – resulting in a significantly eerie effect.

When night had ascended again, the three gnomes left their pony tied up a fair distance off and made their way stealthily into the heart of the forest. There wasn't much life to speak of but occasionally small chitinous things would scurry away quietly out of their paths. Nothing else seemed to take notice of their presence though and, with all apparent success, they soon found themselves on the crest of a small slope looking at a barn-like structure which was no doubt the centaur's residence. Even in the low light they could make out the obvious signs of traffic around the building and the many characteristic hoof marks. With the last stage of their assassination now before them, the gnomes quietly formed a huddle to decide how to proceed. "Can we just set the whole building on fire and attack him when he rushes out?" whispered Nonny. Nucky shook his head. "Do you want to go digging through hot rubble to find the artifacts we need? And who's to say that there won't be more than the one centaur in there. No. What we're going to do is, Nooky is going to creep up real nicely and spy what's in there. If our target, and you'll know he's the right one by the big upside-down pentagram tattooed on his hindquarters and the hanging sword tattoo on his face, if he and any friends are all sleeping, Nooky's going to signal you and me Nonny by waving us forward and giving us the count on his fingers. Got that Nooky?" Nooky scratched his head. "But what if I don't have enough fingers?" he asked innocently. Nucky scowled. "Then come back," he rasped.

Everything went according to plan though. At least at first. Nooky quickly got a look inside and signaled to the other gnomes that their target was in there and that he happened to be by himself. The other two then got into position before all three crept into the building through various openings. Inside they found the centaur just as Nooky had indicated they would – curled up and sleeping in a bestial way on some sort of special carpet. The centaur's legs quivered at the goading of unknown dreams and, seeing this, the gnomes methodically formed a triangle around him. They hesitated though, simply from not having gotten around to describing "how" the killing was supposed to take place. Looking at the other two, Nonny shrugged and thrust his spear into the belly of the sleeping centaur. This was not the best thing to do.

If all three of them had attacked at once the centaur would've been slaughtered more or less immediately. As it was though he rose up in great anguish, bleeding severely from a deep abdominal wound but with more than enough strength to scatter the gnomes across the room. Nucky was the first to charge back at Ajuvano

however and, when the centaur reared despite himself, Nucky sank his spear in far enough to lodge it. Nonny meanwhile had come up and started jabbing the centaur in a thorough manner. Only Nooky didn't have the heart to spear Ajuvano and, with visible sadness, he could do little more than point his trembling spear at the centaur in a defensive fashion.

When it was all done and Ajuvano could do nothing more than breathe a few last shallow breaths, Nucky went over to Nooky and angrily took his spear from him. "Maybe Nonny's right about you. It's not like he wasn't a bastard either," growled Nucky before turning his back on the other gnome. Nonny grinned at this and the two of them went off together to find the demon artifacts they needed. Alone, sad, and ashamed for a reason he didn't fully understand, Nooky went to another part of the barn to idly look through things. His heart wasn't in it but he did find a few delicate trinkets whose gentle appearance soothed his soul somewhat. These he'd just placed quietly in his pockets when Nucky approached him. "What are you doing," Nucky asked briskly. "Just... just looking for any stuff of value is all," replied Nooky meekly. "Don't bother with any of that," responded the other gnome. "We've found what we need; in fact the centaur seems to have collected all the rest of the artifacts for us, and we ought to get out of here before anyone else can show up." As quickly as they'd entered then, the gnomes left; leaving the centaur with perhaps a mere sliver of life remaining. In the end he died alone, whispering an ancient and undeciphered language.

The gnomes now found their pony again and began the long trek back. As a result of their earlier encounter with the knights they took a different route than previously but, despite some minor mishaps along the way, they all returned safe and sound. Colette came out to greet them with an indifference equal to the one she had when they departed but the gnomes took no notice, they were used to Colette, and pretty soon everything was back to how it once was. The gnomes took up their old routines and, because the fear of Quaesar had been abated, they allowed themselves to forget that he was returning at all. There were plenty of things to do besides. In fact, on the night the dust storm started, they'd just finished going on a hunt for wild chickens and, being successful, the whole group was especially jubilant. Even hollow Colette was welcome company.

The dust storm outside raged but the gnomes laughed at it and focused on dressing the chickens properly for storage and organizing their parts by bulk. The laughing

stopped however when the door to their aircraft burst open. The gnomes watched in fear for a moment as nothing else happened, but this fear swiftly turned to horror as a tall cowed figure entered. His gnarled hands were just barely visible at the ends of his dark vermillion sleeves, and his hood covered his eyes, but his long white beard, a beard as thick as the coat of a tundra wolf, announced who he was. He knew this too and so he didn't speak as he imperiously made his way into the center of the room. No, he waited, torturing them. Even though they'd taken care of their obligations, the presence of Quaesar still inspired awe in them. At last it was Nucky who finally spoke. "Welcome... most majestic one," he said wincingly, but somehow still managing to continue. "We weren't sure when to expect your arrival, otherwise we'd have more suitably planned for it." Nucky said this as chicken guts dripped from his bare hands. Quaesar glared at him but made no mention of the current state of the gnomes. Instead he turned to Colette. "What's this one? Not much life in her," sneered Quaesar. "No my lord," replied Colette. The calmness in her response almost seemed to surprise Quaesar but he didn't let it distract him. Turning back to the gnomes he got straight to the point. "I am owed many things. Where are they?"

Nonny was sent off to get the demon artifacts from their careful place of storage, and when he returned he was carrying the small chest in which they were being kept. Placing this respectfully on a table next to Quaesar, Nonny shuffled backwards a little. But not so fast that he might irritate the sorcerer by doing so. Rubbing his long claw-like fingers together, Quaesar carefully opened the dark wooden chest and inspected the contents inside. After a moment he seemed satisfied and he stared over at Nucky. "You have them all. This is adequate. Now where is the key?" Nucky nervously glanced around at the others in the room. He was, quite unusually for him, fidgeting. "The key?" he asked, "You mean... the chest key?" The tectonics of Quaesar's face shifted into angelic fury. "No! I mean the artifact key you pathetic gnome! Where is it!? If you don't have the key gnome I'll pick my teeth with your bones tonight! You and your two bumbling cousins and that bitch made out of wood over there!" Colette didn't even blink.

The gnomes however were falling apart. Nonny especially was blubbing in the most futile manner. Nucky was stammering too, trying to figure out a way not to lie to the sorcerer while also not getting himself killed in the process. Nooky meanwhile had crouched down into a sort of fetal position and was rocking on the balls of his feet. Quaesar looked at all of them without a single ounce of remorse.

“Is it so much to ask!?” he bellowed. “One tiny golden pin!” This only reduced Nucky and Nonny to deeper cowering but Nooky stopped rocking for a moment. Sniffing to himself, the furrows on his brow grown deep, he had the most phenomenal realization of his life. Slowly standing up, even as he remained with his head downcast, Nooky slowly approached the seething Quaesar, who by now had a supernatural aura of fire growing around him. Not able to speak, Nooky simply reached towards his collar and pulled something shining from his necklace. This he presented to the fearsome sorcerer from his palm.

Disbelieving, Quaesar reached down and picked up the trinket with his forefinger and thumb. It certainly looked like the key to the artifact. Holding it up for closer scrutiny, the sorcerer almost sniffed at it. Out of some inner magic, the golden pin suddenly hummed to him. It hummed with the sieges of divine citadels and the all-destroying deification of kings and prophets. It was the demon key. As the fire in his aura gradually diminished, the sorcerer Quaesar looked over the gnomes in what seemed to him their pitiful little hovel, and decided he’d wasted enough time there already. Without so much as a last threat, he turned around and disappeared into a dust storm fatal to the lungs of normal men. It took the gnomes a while to recover from everything but when they did they could not help succumbing to a little nervous laughter. Nonny even gave Nooky a warm slap on the back. Nucky too was impressed. “Where’d you get that key? None of our references mentioned any key,” he remarked. Nooky shrugged. “I just found it when I was going through the centaur’s stuff.” Nucky’s mouth was agape. “How are you so lucky,” said the flabbergasted gnome rhetorically. In that moment of peace, the gnomes all marvelled at what’d happened. After a little while though they were back to dismembering chickens, each of the gnomes smiling.

None of them ever saw Quaesar again.



## SENTINEL AT KINGDOM'S END

The old imperial road was barely visible in the darkness of the vast marshland but, at various points, sunken and heaved-up sections of it could be discerned by their irregular silhouettes. The last empire had fallen many centuries ago yet some of its architectural marvels still remained – chief among these in the area was the decayed stone bridge known as Kingdom's End. There had been no regular traffic in the region for years due to the wasting that'd taken hold of the land and the absence of civilization beyond however, every now and then, a pilgrim would appear as a result of falling under the spell of one of the ancient sagas. And at the bridge the paladin was always waiting for them.

Arrayed head to toe in heavy plate-mail, the figure of the towering paladin was dreadful to behold. Greaves, cuirass, pauldrons – all of these were ornately crafted while at the same time betraying signs of numerous battles. Two pieces in the paladin's equipment also merited special mention. His helmet had a visor that was fashioned in perfect resemblance to a cherub's face and this could be retracted into the outer covering with an upward sweep – said covering was furthermore shaped in the form of a snarling wolf, with the effect being that of a cherub staring out from the open jaws of the beast. The other thing of note in the paladin's armature was the blade he carried – a huge bastard sword with a wide cross-guard. This he kept with one hand on its hilt and the long blade slung over his shoulder. It was in this manner that the paladin stood at the crest of the bridge when a distant light appeared from out of the black depths of the night.

In daylight, the flat expanse of the marshes stretched to the horizon around Kingdom's End in all directions. In the darkness though, with only the silver dust of the stars and a wane sliver of the moon providing some dim illumination, the marshland seemed to spread out into the cosmos itself – a colorless plane of gloom where the odd skeletal tree bearded with moss and the roaming gray miasmas were all that was left to give it any character. As such the pale orange glow from the distant light approaching was all too obvious. The paladin still showed no reaction as it came closer to the bridge, transforming itself from an eerie flame hovering above the ground into a lantern held at length on a stick. Behind it, looking down to find his way, the filth splattered face of a young knight was lit up from one side and then the other as his lantern swayed in front of him. As a result of this he didn't notice the motionless paladin ahead until he'd reached the threshold of the bridge. Seeing the figure before him suddenly, the young knight reacted by taking an involuntary step backwards and reaching for his sword, his hand pausing as it hovered over his scabbard. "Hark!" shouted the young knight in confusion, thinking he was being approached, and the sound of this dissipated into the air uncontested. No reply was made as the paladin remained unmoved. In that absence though some quiet gurgling bubbled up from the peripheral bog.

Recovering himself, the young knight held his lantern high and addressed the paladin. "Are you the warden of this bridge?" he asked in a bold but respectful manner. No answer was forthcoming. Frowning slightly, the knight spoke again after a moment. "I am Sir Lothlas Cairngaar, liege of the Earl Aigeswyn Roddanmael. I serve a great clan with three castles far to the south of here. I am journeying now under the burden of a sacred oath, honor pledged to seek out a military order rumored to exist in the wastes beyond Kingdom's End – this bridge correct? Are you a member of that order sir?" Neither of Sir Cairngaar's questions received an answer and the paladin, standing in the middle of the bridge, failed to show any response to what was said. Sir Cairngaar tried again. "Our chronicles state that a brave paladin came this way generations ago to slay a necromancer and that, accomplishing this, he founded the order of which I speak. Have you any knowledge that pertains to this?" At this point the expressionless cherub mask of the paladin's helmet seemed to hint at a terrible possibility – that there was nothing at all behind it. Nevertheless, Sir Cairngaar quickly transmuted the unease creeping up on him into an outburst of anger at being slighted. "Hail sir! You have been met!" he cried. Nothing. The armored form of the paladin was still unaffected – only the way his

posture was oriented towards Sir Cairngaar convinced the latter that he was not berating a statue or a husk. "If you will not parlay then stand aside," said the young knight at last. This finally moved the paladin and with a sure and menacing slowness he gripped the bastard sword slung over his shoulder with both hands.

"We have no quarrel you and I," protested Sir Cairngaar. He was shocked at the other knight's actions, having never met a warrior before who was so cold as to duel someone without a single word. Fear also shivered through his limbs – he had pressed on in the darkness, hoping to find somewhere better to set up camp that night and instead he'd abruptly found himself plunged into strange jeopardy. It was no use trying to go around though – there was no other passable terrain through the marshland for miles. But hopefully his adversary would step aside once he was confronted with the real prospect of battle. "I have slain five men in single combat," intoned Sir Cairngaar, "So consider this your last warning! Remove yourself!" The paladin did nothing to indicate that he would comply and Sir Cairngaar placed his lantern down and drew his sword accordingly. "So be it!" spat the young knight as he advanced towards his opponent.

Sir Cairngaar was nearing in on striking distance when his counterpart unexpectedly leapt forward and swung his sword down swiftly using both hands. With a loud thwack, the blade struck the ground however rather than its intended target as Sir Cairngaar made an awkward but effective roll. In that one swing he realized immediately that this was a fight to the death and, struggling under the weight of his armor, he hurriedly clamored to his feet. It took about the same amount of time for the paladin to pull his embedded sword from the ground though which meant that neither one of them was able to capitalize on the other's predicament. Sir Cairngaar was already breathing heavily as he held his outward pointing sword in front of him with both hands – a much shorter weapon than his counterpart's and so what he lacked in reach he was going to have to make up for in skill and maneuverability. Also he realized then that he wouldn't be able to effectively block his opponent's blows so, letting out a loud yell, he furiously charged his adversary. The paladin's bastard sword was still pointing towards the ground when Sir Cairngaar's blade began to fall on him and the paladin was therefore forced to fall back and block the oncoming strikes in a position unable to counterattack. The hilt of his upside-down weapon held firmly in one hand, the paladin was pushed to the crumbling edge of solid ground.

With the dark waters of the marshland now wetting his right heel, the paladin planted himself firmly where he was and tried to find an opening. Sir Cairngaar though succeeded first and one of his swings connected hard with the paladin's helmet. Expecting his opponent to be disoriented from that, he then stepped to the side to bring his sword up and thrust it into a cleft in the paladin's armor but, instead, the paladin grabbed the blade of his weapon with their free gauntlet and rammed into Sir Cairngaar shoulder-first. The young liege of the Earl of Roddanmael groaned as he fought to stay on his feet but after being pressed backwards over a yard through the mud, his balance finally gave out and he was sent sprawling to the ground. The paladin now was able to adjust his grip on his sword and, taking it up with both hands again, he moved quickly towards an opponent who was still getting off his back. Meanwhile, the latter's lantern remained upright on the ground and it cast the expanding shadows of their struggle far into the dim and haunted marsh beyond.

Clang! The crashing bastard sword left the whole arm holding up the blade that blocked it trembling. Clang! Another tremendous blow from the paladin and Sir Cairngaar was barely able to keep his grip on his weapon. Clang! The third strike was deflected only just in time but Sir Cairngaar was at last able now to get to his feet and retreat a distance. There he leaned on his sword and panted for a moment, his anxious eyes studying his foe with bewildered disbelief. No sign of fatigue was visible in the paladin's movements. Despite the fury of their contest he continued to move with undaunted determination – like a mill driven by a water wheel. Sir Cairngaar conversely didn't know how much longer he could hold out. Certainly not very long. Steadying himself as he stood up again, he decided that he had to force things to a conclusion as soon as he could. The more the fight was drawn out the greater his disadvantage grew.

Forming a strategy in his mind, Sir Cairngaar took a deep breath and then readied himself to face the paladin again. His counterpart had been gradually advancing while he gathered his wits and he'd barely finished preparing when they attacked. The bastard sword swung towards him in a wide arc but, rather than meet it, Sir Cairngaar deftly evaded this. Another swing was eluded in the same way and another until the knight had positioned himself behind a dead tree. Here the paladin tried to circle around but Sir Cairngaar made sure to prevent this, always moving to keep the tree between him and his adversary. Responding to this, the paladin at first tried to hack the tree down with his sword. A couple of rebounded

strikes though were sufficient to prove the futility of that. Then the paladin made the mistake that Sir Cairngaar had hoped for – he tried to strike at his opponent vertically from the other side of the tree. Immediately exploiting this, the young knight took a ferocious swing at his opponent's gauntlet.

Sir Cairngaar's blade was well-aimed and the paladin's gauntlet was visibly crushed as it dropped the sword it held. With the paladin rendered unarmed, his opponent now launched a desperate offensive and each sword swing battered the weaponless sentinel's armor more and more as he tried to defend himself with only his raised arms. Soon the paladin was beaten to his knees and, with remorseless instinct, Sir Cairngaar maneuvered himself behind his prostrate foe and plunged his sword into the gap between the paladin's helmet and neck guard. Pushing it hilt deep into his adversary, Sir Cairngaar then fell over and collapsed, exhausted. Staring at the back of his slumped but still kneeling adversary, he said a prayer in gratitude but then his thoughts turned to the grimness of the encounter. To kill a fellow knight in such circumstances, so pointlessly and dishonorably, even if it was justified... he could take no satisfaction in any of it. But what choice did he have? In any case, it was done. Already he was sure that he would speak to no one of what had happened at Kingdom's End.

Things were not quite as over as Sir Cairngaar had assumed however. A horrible feeling began to writhe in his stomach when the paladin's left arm started to twitch. The man was still alive. This was then violently replaced by stark horror as the hand of said arm reached up to grab the hilt of the sword which had impaled the paladin. No! What he was seeing couldn't be happening. Nevertheless, the hand of the paladin slowly pulled the sword of Sir Cairngaar from its body and the paladin himself rose to his feet. Turning without haste, the paladin stood looming over the other knight as they uselessly crawled backwards. "How?" whispered a terrified Sir Cairngaar, and then louder, "How!? It's impossible!!!" The paladin offered no explanation. Instead, the unspeaking figure with the metal cherubic face advanced towards Sir Cairngaar and thrust the knight's own sword into his abdomen. "Ahhhhhhhhh-uk-uhh..." gasped the young man as the blade penetrated his body. The pain that sprang from this was excruciating at first but it soon began to evaporate into a warm reverie suffusing his entire body. Meanwhile, with the killing blow struck, the paladin merely stood by, waiting patiently. Before his spirit gave itself to oblivion though, Sir Cairngaar had some last words for his opponent. "A request. Let me look into the eyes... of the one who... vanquished me. Please..." The

paladin said nothing but after a moment one of his gauntlets ventured up towards his helmet. There it hesitated a moment before lifting the mask. Beneath it, in the place of a man's face, a fleshless skull was all that remained – its empty eye sockets devoid of any emotion for the life it had taken.

The young man who died that night in the darkness without a friend or loved one, died with his eyes open – the skull before him a revelation. As the last breath of air departed his lips, the undead paladin who'd dispatched him pushed his corpse out into the waters of the marsh with a prod from their foot. There the fresh body bobbed as it floated unattended while the undead paladin went to retrieve his sword. Getting it, they returned and used this to shove Sir Cairngaar's remains under the water as they waded in past their knees. Doing so caused two other corpses to emerge from the invisible mass of the submerged dead but the paladin eventually returned them to their watery graves. With that done, the last thing to deal with was the deceased knight's lantern and this the undead paladin disposed of by tossing it far into the darkness. With a distant splash it disappeared forever and the one who'd thrown it walked back to his usual place at the crest of the bridge. There the undead paladin once more resumed their silent vigil.

## TERMINUS STATION

The train doors opened and the people flowed inside. Each stop, a little more, a little more. Very few got off. It was early morning at the beginning of the line so this made sense. People were going to work. And when they got on, an attentive observer could've detected a prevailing tendency to slouch and a lack of enthusiastic faces among the growing crowd of passengers. Again, it was morning and a weekday. A day like any other. The same things as yesterday, the same things as tomorrow. The only unusual detail was hardly noticed by anyone. The continuous scrolling text on the various display panels that provided the names of the next stations and the terminus station appeared to be suffering from minor technical difficulties. Each station the train stopped at was listed correctly but the loop cut out before the name of the terminus station was given. Those who gave it any thought did so only briefly.

Crazy people aren't surprising on trains; they're just part of the normal routine. Today there was a woman with her umbrella open in one of the cars. She was sitting by herself, perfectly quietly it must be said, scribbling in a ratty notebook. One of the spines of her umbrella was broken too so it drooped in one section but, even then, had it suddenly started to rain inside the train, she would have been well protected. Unlike the others. These included a good cross section of your typical morning commuters – a number of construction workers for example in steel-toed boots, roughed-up overalls, safety vests and hardhats. Most of them were young to middle-aged but one older man was sitting alone staring out the window into

the blackness beyond – the hands resting in his lap, worn and misshapen with decades of hard labor. There was also a woman in full cycling gear standing next to her bike and a couple bottom-feeding financial analysts in generic suits and a scattered variety of people whose luggage testified that they were going to the airport. No one was looking particularly alert but as the train neared the next station, a general confusion began to ripple through the passengers.

“Next stop, Penglai Station,” intoned a pre-recorded voice from the train’s loudspeakers. A few people exchanged puzzled looks following this announcement. “Penglai Station?” muttered a man, half to himself, “There’s no Penglai Station on this line.” That prompted a worried-looking tourist with two large suitcases in tow to interject. “What do you mean? This train goes to the airport right?” Perfect strangers now began to talk over one another, most of them driven by the thoughtless certainty that what they had to say was the most important thing which needed to be said. Finally a man with a trim silver-mustache spoke forcefully enough to answer the tourist’s original question. “Of course it is! I take this train every day. It’s just a glitch in the computer or something.” That quieted them all down for a moment but soon a young woman with braids cleared her throat. “Is anyone getting a cell signal? I was on the internet but now I can’t even make a call.” This spurred a number of people to pull out their phones and, despite their incredulity, they too found their service cut off. Conversation in the cars began to simmer again. One burly young man in a collared shirt and thick glasses started to fidget in an extremely agitated manner and an elderly woman beside him tried to assure him with a maternal gesture. “No!” he shouted. “We took a wrong turn! This isn’t the way!”

When the doors opened at Penglai Station there was no one waiting to get on. While it looked like an ordinary subway station, none of the passengers riding the train recognized it. Many of them pressed their faces near the windows or warily leaned out the openings left by the automatic doors but none of them got off. On closer inspection, the station didn’t appear to be in use. Dust coated the small selection of benches available and where there’d have normally been large advertising posters, only rows of empty frames were visible. “This is insane,” exhaled a young man with a beard and glasses. “I mean, how is this even possible?” Someone next to him replied, “The train must have just been diverted on to the wrong line. Right?” One of the financial analysts laughed. “There is no Penglai Station!” he exclaimed in frustration. “Well, clearly you’re wrong,” his counterpart



retorted. "It's right out there." As the person saying this gestured with an open hand towards the doors of the train, a silence overwhelmed the group. The reality was right in front of them in its full brutality. Finally someone spoke up. "I've lived in this city for thirty years," said the older construction worker who was sitting alone. He spoke softly but his voice carried far in the quiet. "Worked at sites in nearly every neighborhood. Always used public transportation." He had taken off his hardhat and was examining it in a kind of dazed confusion now. "And I've never heard of any Penglai Station." A few seconds later the doors of the train closed and it began to move again.

"So what the hell are we going to do?" A large number of people had instinctively gathered together and formed an inward facing oval of sorts. "We don't really have much in the way of choices do we?" asked the young bearded man wryly. "With our phones being useless, all we can do is stay on or get off." The woman in cycling gear interjected. "Has anyone tried the emergency intercoms?" The nice looking elderly woman near the agitated young man answered in a hesitant voice. "He's... he's been pressing the button over and over again. No one's answering." This prompted a snide remark from one of the financial analysts. "What could they do anyways?" Shushing and admonitions were hurled at him from various directions – partly because his attitude was counterproductive, partly because the group still didn't want to really accept the situation they were in. One of the construction workers however joked grimly to a co-worker. "If we're stuck in the twilight zone, at least I won't have to pay anymore alimony."

The council that had spontaneously arisen, quickly dissolved when it became apparent that no one had any clue what the best course of action was. This resulted in a number of splinter groups and in one of these a fight broke out. The two men threw a few wild punches at each other before the others managed to physically separate them. "It's only been a few minutes! Can we not resort to cannibalism!" shouted the woman in cycling gear somewhat hysterically. One of the tourists who appeared to be completely oblivious to what was going on around her raised another issue. "How long is this going to take? I have cats. Who is going to feed my cats?" A disgusted construction worker replied. "Hey lady! No one fucking knows alright? And maybe your cats aren't the most important thing right now." The woman seemed appalled at the suggestion. "But Toffy and Vin Vin..." she protested, her voice trailing off as the construction worker wisely pretended like he could no longer hear her. Another man, lanky, balding, with a wrinkled suit and beaten up

briefcase, was inflicting a soliloquy on those around him. "My whole life my luck's been rotten. Really! You wouldn't believe it! This, this ain't even nothing. Listen. I'm not supposed to be on this train okay? This isn't my commute. I'm only here because some selfish asshole decided to commit suicide today by jumping in front of the train on my route. Yeah! So I got to go out of my way to find another way to get to work and what happens? What fucking happens?! Some kind of supernatural bullshit! So pardon me for being a little fucking pissed off right now!" An overweight man with a philosophy book in his hands shook his head. "Just settle down. Please. For the rest of us." That caused the balding man's eyes to bulge. "Et tu Judas?" he retorted and the overweight man was going to correct him but then decided not to when his opposite sat down. The attentions of the people on the train were so focused on each other that the words that abruptly rang over the loudspeaker startled them. "Next stop, Cockaigne Station."

Again, the train slowed to a gradual halt and the automatic doors opened in perfunctory unison. Again, no one on the train recognized their latest stop. Someone in the back of a crowd by the window spoke. "Maybe we should get off anyways? Who knows where we're going right now and there's got to be a way out from here." Someone else, equally obscured, retorted "Says who? We don't know a damn thing about nothin'." A few people broke out in vehement dissent at this idea, insisting that everything was going to be fine if they all remained calm, but none of them had the conviction to test this by stepping off the train. The world beyond the train was no longer the ordinary world and somehow everyone knew it. So no one left here either and the train closed its doors and kept going. "We should still vote on a course of action," stated an accountant matter-of-factly after the train had picked up speed. "Either we all get off or we all stay to the end of the line. Sticking together is the only logical thing." People, drawing on their natural herd instincts, murmured in agreement. This consensus was quickly punctured though. "There ain't no logic in this maze. Logic only gonna get you lost." It was the crazy woman with the umbrella, and after she finished saying this she immediately went back to writing in her notebook.

"I don't feel well. The air in here is wrong." It was the woman with the two cats. "Yes! Yes! And the voices!" Someone else cried. "What voices?" responded the man with the silver mustache but no answer was forthcoming. That's when the girl with the braids hesitantly walked over to him and, clearing her throat, whispered, "Look around. Notice anything?" The man did and he was shocked to realize that many

of the people on the train seemed to be carrying on conversations by themselves. And yet sometimes he also seemed to hear what they were hearing. "The situation is getting out of hand," said the accountant to both of them. A look of distress flickered over the young braided woman's face at this and she looked around the car for something to reassure her. Instead her gaze settled on a nearby woman in a form fitting dress fending off the advances of one of the financial analysts. "How are you doing sweetie?" asked the financial analyst with a leer. "I'm fine thanks," she replied with cold neutrality. "Come on girl, no need to be shy," the man urged. At this, she looked him directly in the eyes and then inserted her earbuds in her ears before turning to face another direction. Scowling, the financial analyst left her alone, conscious of the gathering eyes of the others.

It was as if a valve had been turned and a pipe filled with nightmares was opened into the atmosphere. People's moods plunged with an alarming suddenness, the lack of a sense of fundamental reality seeming to strip many of them of their humanity outright. Only the crazy woman with the umbrella fully kept her composure and because of this a small group of began to congregate around her. They were the ones whose minds hadn't completely broken under the weight of their predicament and who still held out hope there was a way to overcome the situation. The man with the silver mustache was among them and he motioned for the others to form an outward facing ring. "Watch your backs," he commanded. "The violence is going to overflow any minute now."

And it did. The first murder occurred when the train stopped next, at a station called Jannah. Two construction workers who were already rivals got into a heated argument about one of them leaving. "Don't tell me what to do! I'll get off where I want to get off!" The other was enraged at this assertion. "You're going to get us all killed!" and with this he lunged at the first man. They struggled alone for a while as the others around them were now too preoccupied fighting among themselves to intervene. When one of the construction workers got his adversary underneath him, and began to choke the life from him, his counterpart took desperate action. Grabbing a screwdriver from his own belt, he plunged it into the side of his enemy's neck and then got up and kept stabbing the man as the other tried to crawl away. The group who had banded together to protect themselves against the insanity watched this with horrified faces but none of them did anything. The killing was only getting started.

“Hurry and take something,” shouted a construction worker among the group. He’d opened a large tool box he’d been carrying and had grabbed a claw hammer for himself before offering his supplies to the rest. These were all eagerly accepted and another passenger in their group unzipped a camping bag and dispensed some sturdy metal tent poles for others to jab with. Meanwhile people who’d succumbed to the psychosis that swept the train were fighting each other to the death – mostly with their bare hands. Fortunately for the group it was wholesale anarchy and so only the occasional attacker would go after one of them. To their credit, they defended each other valiantly, but still five of them died in the ensuing carnage. Finally, after those who’d been taken hold of by the madness had eliminated each other or been taken care of by the group of holdouts, the survivors sighed with relief or took another by the hand or slumped to the floor alone and wept. Around them the train was littered with the dying and the dead, some still gasping and twitching. The living were all strangers but they’d been baptized together. Even though none of them had exchanged names yet.

“Next stop, Arcadia station.” This one was more bizarre than their previous stops. There was an enormous mural across from them as the train pulled up and it was a neo-classical depiction of the *Batrachomyomachia* or “War Between the Mice and Frogs,” a comic epic from classical Greece. Despite its burlesque subject matter, the style of the painting was one of deadly seriousness and it contained vivid images of mice sinking their teeth into frogs and frogs swallowing agonized mice and more things of this kind. Wearily the passengers on the train stared at the mural, their desire for an explanation momentarily extinguished by resignation. Instead they focused on the animals destroying each other and the absurdity of it was simply accepted as an incontestable fact. Just before the train doors were about to close however, the overweight man who was still clutching his philosophy book dropped it, and dragged one of the corpses into the path of one of the doors. This stopped the train, the doors repeatedly trying to close with an annoying chime but each time failing to do so.

“He’s right,” said the man in the silver mustache, making an unwarranted assumption about the motives of the man who’d blocked the doors. “We should go out and explore the station, keeping the train here this way.” The woman in cycling gear objected. “You can go. I’m sure some of us would rather stay.” At this, other voices arose to insist that they all go together – a few of them out of the secret fear that anyone left behind might leave with the train by themselves. As it was, those

who wanted to risk leaving had the majority and everyone was eventually goaded into exiting the train. The lingered beside it for several minutes though as they looked around their immediate vicinity. The young bearded man with glasses held back vomit as he repositioned the dead body being used to keep the doors from shutting. When he had moved it so that the train doors were repeatedly ramming the dead man spread eagle, he stumbled away. "Why'd you do that?" asked the braided girl. "So it'll still be here when we get back," he answered. "If we get back," interjected the crazy woman with the umbrella as she adjusted the primly held device over her head.

There were nine of them left. The man with the silver mustache, the man with a box of tools, the woman in cycling gear, the overweight man with an interest in philosophy, the young woman with braids, the bearded man with glasses, the balding man who'd been angry about his commute, the financial analyst who'd tried to flirt with a woman on the train, and the crazy woman with her umbrella. Together they decided after a few minutes of debate to try some unmarked stairs that ascended upwards but soon they were regretting their decision. The stairs turned several times before leading to a flooded hallway that, despite being shin deep, the group felt compelled to continue through. "Will you quit complaining?" growled the man with the silver mustache to the angry bald man. "All the other routes were headed downwards. You honestly want to try your luck with them?" Unable to answer his questioner, the angry bald man sought out someone else he could direct his venom at. "Good thing you brought your umbrella," he snarled sarcastically to the woman who had hers opened. "I knew I should have brought my boots too but I couldn't find them," she replied.

Despite the obvious efforts made by others to shut him up without explicitly telling him to do so, the angry bald man resumed his toxic monologues as the group marched on. "You don't think that maybe that crazy ass painting was trying to tell us something!? Like, wrong station motherfuckers!? No, of course not. Why pay attention to the giant omen right in front of us? Nah. Things are turning out fine." He had taken a deep breath and was about to launch into a second volley of tirade when someone up ahead shouted. "It's an elevator!" cried the woman in cycling gear, a note of happiness quivering in her voice. The group rushed to her location but disappointment soon set in. "It was an elevator," said the bearded young man without malice as he repositioned the glasses on his nose. Looking up and down the darkened shaft, no one could see any sign of an elevator car. Gradually, the

members of the group turned away from the open doors which had yielded only an empty promise until just the angry bald man and the financial analyst remained. "Thanks for the false hope sweet heart!" yelled the bald man to the woman in cycling gear. "You really know how to kick a guy in the nuts after he's been kicked in the nuts repeatedly!" Next to him, the financial analyst was growing visibly enraged but the bald man didn't seem to notice. Instead the bald man was tweaked by a challenge hurled at him by the man carrying the tool box. "Why don't you climb it up to the surface!" It was meant in a purely sarcastic way but its recipient latched onto it in a literal manner after failing to come up with a retort. "Yeah! Yeah! Fuck you guys," he said out loud to himself. The financial analyst was still watching him, silent as the veins in his reddening face bulged. After a few seconds of fumbling around for hand holds inside the shaft, the bald man called out to the group in the distance. "Hey! If no one's going to help me, how am I supposed to do this!?" That was enough for the financial analyst. "Try flying," he said before pushing the man into the elevator shaft. The scream that followed was quickly replaced by the echoing thuds of a falling body repeatedly bouncing off concrete walls and then the sound of nothingness. Gradually the financial analyst walked back to the group, which had stopped when it heard the scream. "He fell," explained the analyst. No one believed him but their disgust at what he'd done was balanced out by their relief at him having done it.

Around the next turn, the group noticed smoke billowing along the ceiling. "God this place is foul," said the man with the box of tools as he ineffectually pushed aside the water he was standing in with his foot. "Alright people!" intoned the man with the silver mustache. "If we run into the fire, douse your shirts and use them to cover your mouths!" Reacting to this advice, the overweight man with an interest in philosophy asked the bearded young man next to him "How much is that actually going to do?" but he received no reply. Meanwhile, the man with the silver mustache continued. "Also! Also, if the smoke starts to get thick, crawl on your hands and knees. Otherwise the carbon dioxide will overwhelm you." Whether or not his advice was any good, no one else was confident enough to be sure, and he sounded like he knew what he was talking about, which they needed, so they clung to what he offered. Except the woman with the umbrella who just shook her head. Nevertheless, everyone advanced and soon they found themselves beside a closed door with smoke coming out the top of it. "I'm taking a look," said financial analyst, testing the door knob with his hand to see if it was hot. "Don't," advised the woman with the umbrella. "He should. Maybe the fire in there's not too bad," replied the

young woman with braids. "It's not a good idea," insisted the woman with the umbrella but she made no move to stop him. It took him a few frustrated minutes but soon enough he was able to pull the door open. Inside, a room full of computer towers was collapsing in flames. Fiery debris was falling from the ceiling and the inferno was so thick no one would have survived twenty seconds inside. The open door therefore offered no hope of escape. Worse, the heat from inside filled the hallway they were in and resulted in the fire sprinklers going off. Everyone was drenched in seconds except for the woman with her umbrella, and when they had all run to safety further ahead, the rest of the group stared at her with a mixture of confusion and fear. Who was she?

"How'd you know!" yelled the financial analyst as he ripped the umbrella from her hands. "You... wouldn't... believe me," she replied, struggling against him as he grabbed her by the collar of her blouse. "Hey! Stop!" shouted the bearded young man but he was easily pushed aside by the much bigger financial analyst. The others simply watched in a hushed semi-circle. "Talk bitch!" demanded the financial analyst. "Dreams!" she yelled at last as she was pushed down, the man abusing her moving to push her face into the water. "Always dreams! Winged dreams descending on my sleep! No one believes me! But now! Now you see!" Disgusted, the financial analyst shoved her away from him. "You're useless," he sneered. "And you!?" she spat back. "It doesn't matter! This is the end!" He gave her a look of contempt but this was mixed with dread. Quietly she added, "You and me, we go together." He laughed to suppress his worry but his eyes followed as she pointed to the darkness ahead of them. He was about to turn away when he saw something coming towards him. Running. Someone else? He was still squinting as the dog lunged at him. Mangy and sore-riddled, the feral animal nevertheless moved with a swiftness born from hunger and its jaws clamped down hard on the defending hand raised against it. Numbers were also on its side and more vicious dogs materialized from the darkness, perhaps a dozen of them surrounding the financial analyst and the woman who'd now lost her umbrella.

The others ran. Soaked, exhausted, traumatized, they had no will left to fight and there were only five of them remaining – the overweight man couldn't keep up when they all fled so he was soon abandoned. As the remaining members of the group tore down the path they'd come from though, they were confronted with the bizarre sense of things having changed. Their subterranean world didn't seem stable and while every turn they took was exactly the same, their surroundings

appeared to be decaying into some other reality. They did make it to the Arcadia Station but, when they got there, their train had vanished. Only the corpse that'd been jamming the door remained, the body half flopped over the edge of the station platform. "What now!?" shouted the young bearded man. "Down on to the tracks!" replied the man with the silver mustache. Quickly they all descended but once there they instinctively started in separate directions. "No!" yelled the man with the silver mustache to those who intended to go the opposite way. "We don't know where that leads. This way goes back to where we came." So everyone followed him.

After sprinting for several minutes, and then gradually succumbing to a hobbling march, they continued like that for over an hour. "Shouldn't we have reached the next station by now?" asked the woman with braided hair. "We should have," replied the bearded young man despondently. The rest shared in his sentiments but no one added anything. Instead, the silence persisted until the man with the tool box and the woman in cycling gear began to talk. "I think I can say this is now the worst day of my life," he confessed. "Now?" she replied skeptically. "It hasn't been the worst day of your life since everyone on the train started killing each other?" He had to think here. "No. But I suppose it should have been." He didn't clarify himself here and there was a lull in the conversation before he continued, "Honestly, I don't see how there can be any kind of life after this." She didn't want to hear that though. "Don't talk that way. We can make it back." Pondering this, he stopped walking. "Back to what? Anything we go back to will only be tainted by this... this... unveiling." She was about to scold him again but he spoke first. "Nothing will ever be solid again. Don't you understand? There can't be anything after this." He suddenly started to laugh in an unhinged way now. "We've already died." The others halted. "That's what death is," he pronounced. "The end of certainty." Silent in the black sepulchre of the train tunnel, the group stood together like the last few embers of a dying campfire. "Look," murmured someone. Far off in the distance, a light had appeared, but whether it was arriving or waiting none of them could say.



## THE HALLOWED LABYRINTH

It was a land where a thousand years could pass unnoticed. The dynasties of warlords flowered and withered with little memory between them. Religion meant nothing more than a reverence to power – be it the elements, monstrous beasts, or the might of arms. No city had ever been founded in this place and people lived among their own clans in castles or small hamlets. Books didn't exist. Magic thrived. Oaths were the only laws and blood the sole price for breaking them.

Despite their hard and primitive way of life, the people here didn't brood over their lot. They tilled the land, they hunted, they fished. Most got married and had children. Rarely did anyone surpass the fortunes of their fathers and doing so was more likely to bring gossip than praise. Happiness meant being content in simplicity – a lesson taught to each generation of youths. One such young man was a lanky smith's son of fifteen summers by the name of Weysan (Way-sin) who lived in a seaside village called Yul Terre. The village was small but famous; renowned two weeks sailing in either direction along the coast for their prowess in hunting the leviathans of the deep. Half the men there would go out at any one time on these hunts and it took nearly that many to row to shore one of the great beasts once they'd been slain.

The village shipmaster was the head of these expeditions, a man second only to the clan chief in importance, and this was Ulrogge (Ul-rog) the Hoarder. He acquired said epitaph due to his well attested avarice but he was an intimidating figure so it

was only used when he wouldn't overhear it. Ulrogge meanwhile was on his third wife, a woman named Syele (Ss-yay-lee) half his age but equal to him in greed. As for other family; the two sons he'd manage to squeeze out of his first wife before she died had both died in turn which left him only a fourteen year old daughter from his second wife by the name of Aena (A-na)

Aena was blessed with great beauty and Weysan was cursed with an intense desire for her. Cursed because as the son of a smith, and not even the most prominent smith in the village, Aena was never supposed to be his. One day though a few weeks past, he'd managed to summon the courage to give her a silver necklace he'd made from a scrap collection built up over the years and since then the two of them had begun meeting in secret without either of their families knowing. Or so Weysan and Aena believed.

The night was clear and a soft wind was carrying the warm air in from the sea when the two adolescent lovers next met. Weysan was the first to arrive and waited alone on a cliff looming over a range of jagged rocks along the shore. In the dim light he watched the ocean waters churning among these until a cowed figure coming from the other direction drew his notice. Aena was bundled more out of fear of being seen than getting cold but when she came close enough for Weysan's arms to embrace her she eagerly kissed him once, and then twice, in bursts of passion on the lips. "I'm sorry I'm late," she said as Weysan was already shaking his head in dismissal. "No really," she insisted. "Something strange was going on with them tonight." Forced to hide his affection for her whenever they were around each other in the daytime, Weysan was quick to banish any thought of what had kept his beloved from him once she'd arrived. "Your family, my family; they don't matter now," he assured her. "Only us Aena." They kissed again and pressed their bodies against each other, succumbing to the fantasy of the moment in a fatal and heedless desire, unmindful of the torches converging on them.

"Aena!" shouted Ulrogge as glimmers of flame danced across his scowling face. "No!" cried Aena, snapping her head in the direction her name was called while Weysan looked around desperately, holding her tighter. It was no use though; there was nowhere to run. "How dare you!" snarled Ulrogge as he forcefully pulled her from Weysan's grasp. The young man would've tried to get her back if two of the thugs Ulrogge brought with him hadn't intervened. While Weysan struggled against their hold, a woman stepped into view from the group of men who'd ambushed

the two lovers. It was Syele. "You too!" sobbed Aena, tears swelling in her eyes. "This is a treachery to your father!" hissed Syele. "How could you waste yourself on such a boy!?" Anger flared in Aena's eyes. "I love him," she retorted, to which Syele could only make gestures of profound disgust. "Take her away," her father barked as he handed her off to some of his henchmen. "As for you," muttered Ulrogge as he turned his hate on Weysan, "I ought to cast you into the rocks right now." Here Ulrogge grabbed Weysan by the face with a huge calloused hand and clamped the young man's cheeks together until his teeth were cutting their insides. "And if you've defiled her, I surely will."

They dragged him home by his feet and dumped him on the ground. "Open up Renga," yelled Ulrogge as he banged on the wooden door with the bottom of his fist. Renga, (Ren-ga) Weysan's father, came to the door after a few minutes with a cudgel in hand; Weysan's mother Luone (Lu-own) standing behind him. When he saw his son lying battered on the ground though, he instinctively dropped his weapon and ran to him. "What've you done to my boy!?" the man wailed, his wife rushing to his side. "He should've know better!" bellowed Ulrogge and, before the shipmaster departed, he gave Renga an ultimatum. "Keep your child away from my daughter or next time you'll be pulling him from a fisherman's net!"

After Weysan recovered, Renga scolded him but without wrath since he was entirely sympathetic to his poor son's feelings. This was far from approving though. The situation was dangerous; if Ulrogge decided to make good on his threats there was little Renga could do so, to avoid disaster, he arranged for his son to join a caravan that was heading into the interior. Despite Weysan's protests, the pleading of his mother eventually convinced him – along with some false promises that they'd try to persuade Ulrogge to change his mind in the meantime – and less than a week later he was off on his first journey beyond the surrounding domain of Yul Terre. During the three months he was gone, the young man finally got a taste of the adventure he'd always craved; helping to defend the caravan from brigands at one point and then escaping a troll that waylaid them on a bridge. Still, he thought of Aena constantly and when his travels were nearing their end, she was the only thing he could think about. Syele, more than her husband, realized the likelihood of this and the problems that'd ensue on Weysan's return so, after convincing Ulrogge she had a plan for dealing with the boy, she arranged to intercept Weysan on the outskirts of the village.

"I see you've grown a bit of a beard," she said as Weysan was riding past her on his mule. The rest of the caravan kept going but, after recognizing her, Weysan steered his steed over to her vicinity. "What's this? Come to give me a warning?" he said irritably. "No. No," replied Syele, feigning sorrow. "If anything I'd like to apologize." Weysan was confused. He didn't expect this but at the same time he was still too naïve to see through her deception. "So you'll not stand in my way anymore?" he asked incredulously. "If only it were that simple," whispered Syele with consummate artistry. "Explain," insisted a visibly worried Weysan. "Aena has been stolen," moaned Syele but before Weysan's outrage could recover with further questions, she was already laying out the whole lie. "The trickster Cagnas (Cag-nis) took her. He and his band of drunken mushroom eaters kidnapped her on the evening of the Dreamtide Feast. Ulrogge went after him but they disappeared into the labyrinth and no one has seen them since."

The labyrinth Syele was referring to was a sprawling overgrown ruin which encompassed an area roughly the size of a mountain's footprint and whose origins were a mystery lost in the mists of the past. A place filled with evil spirits, it was avoided as much as possible by all the surrounding villages and only the occasional intrepid fool ever ventured through its entrance. The few of these that came back always did so as broken souls so, when Syele mentioned it, a shiver passed through Weysan's flesh. Nevertheless he would not abandon Aena to such a place. "I... I will bring her back Syele. I swear. All I need is to get a few supplies from home first." Syele instantly objected and her fear that he would undo her plot was mistaken by Weysan as genuine concern. "No dear boy! Please don't do that!" she implored him. "Ulrogge suspects you had something to do with the whole business and he's likely to kill you as anything if you show yourself in the village. Plus... I fear Aena's in danger. She was taken several days ago and only the gods know what those villains are doing to her." The logic of what she said and the scenes he imagined of Aena being abused were more than enough to override any of his doubts so Weysan made up his mind right then. "I suppose it's best I depart immediately," he asserted. "Only, I have no provisions." Syele however had devised her plan well. "Fear not, I knew you were a young man of genuine virtue. I was sure you wouldn't abandon Aena. Here, I've brought you enough food for your task." Now she held out a sack and, true to her word, it was filled with excellent fare. "Thank you Syele," said Weysan, his voice cracking with emotion. "I'll not let you down. We'll all be happy soon, you'll see." With that they parted and Syele was many miles down the road before she finally started to laugh.

As Weysan slowly drew near the labyrinth, the world around him grew ever more primeval. Towering trees with thick serpentine branches soon surrounded him and the cries of unfamiliar animals rang throughout their canopy. He was afraid but determined to go on so he urged his mule forward, through the increasingly dense underbrush, towards the unknown jeopardy waiting ahead. Soon its walls came into view; alabaster stonework half swallowed in vines and roots. Profiles of haunting women were suspended in floating limbo along these and the realization that some unfathomable power had created such a place filled Weysan with dread. Not only him, but his steed too, and the mule he was riding began to fling its head from side to side, pulling at the bridle. Weysan clambered down, trying to lead the beast further on but it became ever more frantic until eventually it knocked him over and took off. Weighed down with gear, Weysan was in no condition to chase after the mule so he could only stand and watch as it disappeared in the direction of his home village. A moment later Weysan was loitering outside the entrance of the labyrinth when he saw the bones of a dead horse that'd been tied up out there protruding from the earth. "He was always a smart creature wasn't he?" sighed Weysan as he considered the mule that'd just run away.

Inside the corridors of the labyrinth were sheer walls probably about sixty feet high with avenues approximately twenty feet across. Shrubs and grasses grew from the fissures in the ancient masonry but for the most part the labyrinth was devoid of features along its insides. He could turn back, thought Weysan. No he couldn't. Somewhere sweet Aena was dreaming of him; wishing for his presence, his touch. Seeing her again would make everything worth it. Damn the labyrinth! They would be together. So he marched on; at every juncture in the maze making sure to pull a sprig from some Peacock Brush he had for kindling and embed this in a wall to show which way he'd come. Deeper and deeper he went, until eventually he grew tired and had to lay down to rest. He only intended to sleep an hour but when he awoke later in an anxious sweat it was in blackest darkness so a long time must have passed. Hurriedly he got to his feet to continue on but when he did he realized he wasn't sure from which direction he'd come. On the edge of despair, Weysan finally decided to pick at random, and at the next juncture hunted for one of his sprigs but he couldn't find any. In the gloom of night though he couldn't be sure that he hadn't simply missed it. What a disappointment he was. To Aena, his parents, Syele even. They were all counting on him. And at first it was enough to keep him going. But many more days followed.

On the third he realized he was hopelessly lost. On the seventh he ran out of food. Sometime after the eleventh he lost track of how many days it'd been and because he was so delirious he didn't even bother starting a tally. He expected he'd die soon. Surprisingly he managed to survive. Insects, mushrooms, and even mice, supplied an inconstant but sufficient diet and he became quite adept at scrounging for meals and catching little critters. One day though, after what must have been several weeks into his ordeal, he smiled for the first time since he could remember when the sound of birdsong reached his ears. Searching the rims of the labyrinth's walls, he finally pinpointed some fluttering wings indicating the location of a nest. Eggs! He thought in deranged merriment. Eggs would be just wonderful! The only problem was getting to them. He'd contemplated climbing the walls earlier but his few aborted attempts had convinced him that it wasn't worth the effort. Now though, with the promise of a delicious meal, he decided he would reach the top of the wall no matter what.

Weysan had climbed many things in his short life. Trees, cliffs, houses. Yet climbing the walls of the labyrinth was to prove more difficult than any of these. Eventually though he improvised a system where, taking a pair of large nails he had on him, he'd drive these into cracks in the wall and haul himself upwards. With that invention it only took him about half an hour to reach the top but, when he did, the size of the three tiny eggs the frightened off bird had laid in its little nest left him terribly disappointed. Still he ate them anyways. More rewarding as it turned out was the view he gained from the climb. He was startled to realize how close he was to the core of the labyrinth and its winding pattern of corridors stretched out to the horizon in every direction. Equally surprising was the glimpse of a vast open area in the very center of the labyrinth which enclosed an immense garden. Surely that's paradise, he conjectured, and so now he had a destination again and a renewed sense of hope. Aena? Aena was never here. Unfortunately the walls of the labyrinth narrowed to a wedge at the top so travelling along them was impractical but he made a mental note of the direction of the garden before gradually making his way down. A few days later though a voice began to taunt him.

"Weysan?" it asked one morning. "What makes you better than all those others who've died? You're not the first to come this far." Weysan shrugged his shoulders. "Maybe nothing," he admitted. "But maybe blind luck will help." The voice laughed. "Have you ever been lucky? I don't think you have." That stung Weysan and he

offered no response to the remark. Then he tried to ignore the voice but it didn't like that. "You can't just pretend you don't hear me. I'm a part of you Weysan. I can feel what you feel." The idea disturbed him but he tried to not let it show. "That won't work," chuckled the voice. "Look over at the wall Weysan. Then you'll understand." He tried to resist but the desire to give in was too tempting and soon his eyes glanced at the wall. There he saw his shadow waving at him while both his arms were hanging by his side. For a second... until he dropped to the ground and started crawling backward in horror. The top of his head soon hit the wall on the other side though and when this happened he huddled against it and shut his eyes. After a few seconds though the voice was whispering right into his ear. "During the day I'm just the small outline you cast on the world but, at night, I surround you." When Weysan opened his eyes, the shadow had, contrary to the light, moved to the wall beside him and was dangling its insubstantial arms over the surface of his torso like a protective sibling might.

"What are you!?" demanded Weysan after he'd recoiled to a distance. "I'm you," insisted the shadow. "The older you. The eternal you." Weysan clenched his raised fists and searched his thoughts for clarity. "I don't know what that means," he moaned in frustration. "And you can't but you will," replied the shadow with cryptic amusement. "Why are you here?" asked Weysan after an interval of silence. "To guide you," answered the shadow. "To the forest?" said Weysan. "Among other things," the shadow tossed back. Part of him was ready to relinquish himself to the spirit's will but this part hadn't won out yet. "No," declared Weysan. "I go my own way." The shadow flickered for a second as if it was about to get angry but instead it swam along the wall to the nearby corner of a turn. "Just let me show you something first. Come on. Over here." Reluctantly Weysan complied, intending to continue on his journey if his shadow didn't produce something immediately. Soon though it led him to a skeleton and, to his horror, the skeleton had a collection of dried sprigs in its cupped hands. "You left these behind on the way here so I gathered them up for you," stated the shadow with a pleasant tone of voice. "Only I can get you back home Weysan."

This is how, for the first time in his life, Weysan followed his shadow instead of the other way around. By day the shadow guided him forward and talked; an endless stream of stories and remarks, largely nonsense, issuing from its invisible mouth. At night it would vanish from sight but continue to utter spells over Weysan's prostrate form until he fell asleep and succumbed to extraordinary visions of things

he couldn't fathom. Occasionally he'd ask it questions too but these rarely resulted in meaningful answers. An exception to this involved a brief discussion they had several days after the shadow's first appearance. "Whose bones were those?" asked Weysan. "The ones with my sprigs of Peacock Brush." Here the shadow stopped and swirled into a little vortex before transforming itself into the silhouette of a peacock. "Your bones. Our bones," it claimed. "Not now but some other time." Weysan shook his head. "That can't be true. How can that be true?" The shadow folded up its dark tail before adopting the shape of Weysan again. "Everyone makes choices. Back there you made the wrong choices. Only... in a different life. Another you then. Outside the labyrinth, time goes in a straight line; inside it, time goes in many directions."

Late in the afternoon on the next day, they reached the labyrinth's inner sanctum. "We're so close Weysan," said the shadow gleefully. "You must find it. The sword will free me. Free you." This was the first mention the shadow had made of any sword. "What sword?" he asked. "Come and see," urged the shadow and it began to flow like water into the depths of the garden. Weysan ran after it until eventually he caught up with the shadow in an open space filled with bronze statues. In the center of these a small stone tomb, barely larger than a coffin, was lying on the ground and the shadow was eagerly circling this. "I sense a powerful magic," said Weysan cautiously. "All the gods are here," insisted his shadow. "This place is sacred." Weysan glanced around. "What are they doing?" he asked. "Watching," the shadow replied. "And the sword is under the lid of this tomb?" inquired Weysan. The shadow metamorphosed impatiently. "Yes," it insisted. Deciding there was nothing else to do, Weysan reached down and gradually heaved the lid aside using all the strength he could summon. Within he found an obsidian sarcophagus with a slim golden sword resting on its chest. "Touch only the blade," admonished the shadow. "And a word of warning. Once you've held the sword I'll be gone essentially. You won't have my guidance. Except through the relic." Weysan didn't hesitate. "Is that all?" he said sarcastically as he brought the blade aloft. There was no response. His shadow had vanished. Which didn't bother him too much until he heard the roar of the guardian.

From behind a small terrace laden with flowers, it prowled into view. Red its fur and darker red its mane. A lion but colossal and, instead of a lion's tail, a venomous appendage like one enlarged from a scorpion. Weysan had never even seen a picture of a manticore before but he'd heard them described and so he knew the



beast as soon as he saw it. No story told around a fire though was needed to convince him that the monster approaching him was a power of legend. Fearfully he looked around until at last he saw something that might protect him. A strange statue, abstract in shape. It had a kind of recess in it that he could crawl into and which was too small for the manticore to follow in pursuit. Holding the sword he'd grabbed out in front of him, Weysan retreated in the direction of the statue and then dove in as the manticore rushed after. There he was just out of reach of the guardian's claw if he pressed against the end of the recess but he was also trapped. He had to do something. The manticore's paw was larger than his stomach but, at the same time, it appeared much like ordinary flesh. And he had the sword. Closing his eyes he struck with a single thrust and, almost to his dismay, the blade went right through the beast's paw and out the other side. The outburst of animal rage that followed liquefied his insides but for a moment the manticore did nothing but linger in the area, limping as it went. He expected its tail to strike him in his sanctuary but instead time passed and eventually curiosity got the better of him. From the blood left on the grass, it appeared the guardian had hobbled back to some unseen lair perhaps, and Weysan needed no other encouragement. With great terror and care, he quickly exited the garden.

Once in the labyrinth though, he was lost again. Trying to remember what his shadow had said didn't help but night was falling anyways so he would struggle with that in the morning. His only concern was to put as much distance between him and the manticore first. This he did before collapsing in exhaustion and when he awoke the next day he realized he'd slept on top of his sword. "Better than in the manticore's stomach," he joked to himself but the sudden consciousness this brought on of his lack of company pained him. He spent the next couple hours doing what he'd done before his shadow had awakened, aimlessly wandering the corridors of the labyrinth, although this time swinging his sword once and a while as he went. It was at one of the junctions he came to soon after however that he felt the vibrations. In the sword. He didn't understand right away but moving the sword around he realized that it only vibrated when he pointed in one of the directions. "It wasn't a lie," he exclaimed joyfully and, breaking into a jog, he ran the way the blade indicated. At the next juncture the same phenomenon occurred and dutifully he followed it. This continued for three whole days and Weysan never doubted that the sword was leading him truly. At last, he stepped forward from the gate of the labyrinth and into the world of his old life again.

It was still a decent journey to Yul Terre, especially considering the condition he was in, but he finished this in short time and without further incident. When he arrived at the village of his birth however he was greeted like a stranger and, even more, like an omen. People he'd grown up with gathered around him warily now and some time passed before he recognized any of them or them. "It's Weysan!" sputtered Olpo (Ol-po) the Wise Man. This sent a wave of gasps through the crowd. "It is! It is!" said someone else and it was then that Weysan spotted Syele turning to leave. "You woman!" he yelled, pointing at her with the tip of his sword. "Answer for your crime!" Gathering her wits, Syele feigned ignorance. "Whatever do you mean Weysan? If you be him." Her tongue did not deceive him now though and, turning to the other villagers, he addressed them. "This Syele! Wife of Ulrogge! Urged me to rescue my Aena from the labyrinth! I swear it! And she even claimed it was Cagnas the trickster who did the kidnapping!" Cagnas happened to be in the crowd and, after performing a somersault, he offered a loud "Truly?" for all the crowd to hear. This brought on some laughter from the others but Syele denied the charge vigorously. "He lies!" she screamed. Cagnas however was a trickster by trade and tricksters by trade are the hardest of all to trick. Despite her gestures of protest, Cagnas sneered. "I believe him," he soon added.

Ygallae (Ee-gal-ay) the medicine woman was likewise convinced. "We's been dreaming such a thing lately. Oh yes, the boy speaks true. Syele and Ulrogge did this evil. The spirits are all agreed." Ulrogge was now visible and his face was quivering with fury. "Shut up you old sow!" he growled at the medicine woman and angry condemnation began to simmer in the crowd. Before anyone could stop him though, Ulrogge drew his axe and charged at Weysan. Without a thought, the untrained son of a smith parried the attack and in doing so severed the two smallest fingers from Ulrogge's right hand. As the old shipmaster fell to the earth and clutched his wound, Weysan pressed the tip of his sword against the man's neck. "Weysan! Stop!" cried a voice and turning to it he saw Aena.

"Aena!" he exclaimed in disbelief. It was definitely her but, somehow, she was so much older. "Aena?" he said again and instinctively she knew what he meant. "You've been gone for years Weysan," she said sorrowfully. He closed his eyes as the cruel truth of those words flooded over him. It hadn't felt that long but he knew. "And us?" he asked eventually. "I'm sorry Weysan," she replied. "I'm married." Syele, who was crouched at Ulrogge's side now, threw a few words in here. "To Brumar (Bru-mar) the new clan chief!" she boasted. Weysan glared at the older

woman but said nothing to her. Instead he addressed Aena again. "And my parents?" he asked, an obvious anxiousness in his voice. Aena gulped and tears descended her cheeks. "I'm sorry Weysan. I'm so sorry. They... they killed themselves on the first anniversary of your disappearance. By hanging."

A swarm of emotions engulfed Weysan. Rage, shame, woe, and others more piercing than any he had ever known before; all of them swirling around the figure of one man, the man responsible. Weysan grit his teeth and pushed the tip of his sword into Ulrogge's neck, just far enough to send a trickle of blood running down it. "I dare you worm!" spat Ulrogge and to most of those in attendance it seemed that this would be enough. Before Weysan could act though, a single word from Aena trembled in the air. "Please," she said and the hurt in that one syllable instantly stopped his heart. In the long seconds that followed, he slowly withdrew his blade. "Your blood is poison Ulrogge," said Weysan. "I won't unleash more of it." Aena sighed with relief but Weysan could no longer look at her. With nothing left for him in Yul Terre, he turned towards the main road that led away from the village to seek some solace elsewhere. What that could be, he had no idea.

## WARHEAD SAUL'S LAST LEG

Interstate 90 was a shooting gallery. The winners were the gods who lived in the mountains and fortresses on either side, gods who watched over the world night and day through their divine scopes; the losers were the foolish mortals who thought that they could walk the road. He was one of those foolish mortals of course but unlike the others he had a trick. He looked picked clean. He wasn't even wearing any boots.

Naturally there was always the possibility that someone bored enough might decide to give him his trophy of dirt but it was a risk he was willing to take. Ammunition was precious too so that helped. And for someone who looked like they had nothing worth having, it was safer to walk directly under the gaze of Almighty Death than to wander into the wilderness. Besides, a nice clean bullet was a good way to go. In the wilderness you were lucky if they killed you.

The man in bare feet steered his clattering shopping cart around one of the many burned out wrecks that littered the highway. Even by the standards of a world gone crazy he looked insane. The grimy yellow bathrobe he wore was only loosely tied around his waist, leaving his gaunt hairy chest partially visible and his genitals often too, depending on the breeze. His tumultuous greasy beard, the color of car rust, further managed to accent his mania, and in this it was assisted by the dark ski goggles he wore at all times. Anyone who just dismissed him as a harmless lunatic however could be making a fatal mistake. In a gun holster hidden beneath his robe, a Korean pistol waited for its moment with six eager rounds. He had taken it off of

a highwayman in the outskirts of Baltimore and the man had been wearing decades old robotic armor. A relic from one of the original invaders.

His shopping cart meanwhile had its own secrets. Two to be precise. On the outside though someone would have only seen what he wanted them to see. Bones. Femurs, ribcages, pelvises, skulls – the shopping cart was literally overflowing. Because corpses were so easy to come by in a land that'd been baptized by nuclear fire, there wasn't anyone who would be interested in these. Many people however would have slit his throat to get their hands on the unopened six pack of glass bottled Coca Cola he had hidden – in fact he'd done the exact same thing to get it in the first place. As for his other treasure, well, he was sure there wasn't a crime that wouldn't be committed by someone to possess that. If the value of something was how much violence it was worth, what evil wouldn't people be willing to pay for violence incarnate? Of course many out of fear would just want to see his prize destroyed. He was answering a call though. It had spoken to him when he found it, when he'd carefully removed it from the missile's shell to swaddle it like a newborn baby.

His package and him had come a long way from when he'd first found it in some hills outside Lititz; it'd spent a night beside him in a restaurant fridge in Ephrata, it'd been born heavily on his aching back along route 222, past Shillington and the horrors of Berks County park and Kutztown; it'd been retrieved from a ditch beside Quarry Road as he crossed to the I-78, it'd passed through Fogelsville and Hellertown where he had told off the wormlike recruiter for the New Bethlehem Militia; it was carried through Pohatcong and Union Township and Clinton and Bedminster Township, outside the latter of which he had to bury it for six nights to keep it from the clutches of two greedy feuding warlords; it'd rejoined him to continue along the I-287 through the mass graves of Basking Ridge, through the slag of Morristown and Parsippany and Montville; it'd been with him when he'd almost confessed its existence to the convent of nuns that lived in a warehouse on the fringes of Pequannock; it'd ridden with him on a flatbed truck he'd hitched a ride on through Wyckoff and Woodbury, where he jumped off to cross the Hudson river, where he ditched the ferry he stole on the other side and made a sled to drag his treasure along the I-84, past the minefields of Fishkill and Carmel and Brewster, through the rat hives of Danbury and Southbury and Middlebury and Waterbury; he'd pulled it to Southington where he scrounged supplies and to Plainville where he made a meal out of a dog he found half alive in a leg hold trap; he crossed Route

6 with it to Unionville, to Aton, then north on Route 202 to Weatogue to ford the river, stumbling eventually on Windsor and then the Connecticut River and John Fitch Boulevard; in a supermarket near Vernon he'd found the remains of a century old genocide, corpses stacked higher than the aisle shelves, and there he'd found his bones and his shopping cart and his case of Coca Cola; back on the I-84 he shoved it on past Rockville and Tolland and Willington, even talking his way out of trouble with some mercs in the Nipmuck Zone; he'd pushed it out of Southbridge and onto the I-90 where he was greeted by a man in Pre-Holocaust attire playing a scorched piano in the middle of the street, the man only tipping a hat at him before continuing playing; and now it was still with him, just outside of Grafton.

He paused a moment to wipe some sweat off of his forehead. The sun had been scourging him all day and a prayer for mercy was hovering over his dry cracked lips. He had the Coca Cola of course but it was too precious to think about. Besides, it'd be warmer than piss right now. No. He should try to scavenge something else. Plenty of places to go searching in anyways. Looking to his left he scanned the various buildings situated there and soon found a suitable candidate off in the distance. The telltale numbers on the tall sign were still visible through the layers of dust. Gas stations – the oases of the wasteland.

His destination was about a quarter mile up the ridge though; roughly a thirty degree climb all the way there. Not too bad – if he'd been travelling without luggage. For a second he thought about stashing his shopping cart somewhere but his paranoia got the better of him. Clenching his jaw, he turned his cart towards the on-ramp that led up the ridge and began pushing. Far above, one of the vultures circling overhead cried out with what seemed like approval. Yes, it appeared to be saying; exert yourself, squander the last of your strength. For some reason this imagined slight caused the man to snap. Fuck you vulture, he responded in his own mind. Then, not satisfied with his silent retort, he began to speak out loud. "How long you been following me you nasty son of a bitch? How many god damned death traps you see me come out of alive? Don't you get it! This buffet's closed for business motherfucker!" The man seemed to draw strength from his delirium and as he pushed his cart he continued to harangue the vulture. "Out of all the dying assholes out here you've gone and set your sights on the least edible man walking this entire cursed earth? So how fucking stupid are you?" That the vulture was not amenable to reason did nothing to restrain the man's anger – he'd found an outlet for his frustration and he was not going to waste it. Perhaps it was also this which

caused him to overlook the possibility that the vulture had no interest in him personally and was only after a morsel from his shopping cart.

In any case the man continued to swear at the bird until he arrived at the top of the ridge. The gas station was now only a few yards away and, growing cautious again, he patted his gun for reassurance. Feeling the familiar bulge of the weapon pressed against his ribcage managed to settle his nerves somewhat. Thinking more clearly now he realized he needed a place to leave his shopping cart and found it in the narrow space between two dilapidated pickup trucks. It was discrete enough that someone might overlook it while he was inside rummaging around. The trucks furthermore were located just at the edge of the fill up area so after he was done parking his things they would only be a short distance away. He looked around suspiciously a few more times. Nope, still didn't see anyone – time to go inside. Crossing the intervening space quickly, he paused outside the gas station as he tried to peer inside through the front windows. With its darkened interiors and all the grime covering the plexiglass, he could make out very little inside. Guess he was going in blind. As he reached for the handle of the front door however he noticed a faded poster on the wall beside the entrance. A buxom blond girl smiling while striking a pinup pose. It was an advertisement for Wham-O BB Guns – the company's logo appearing prominently on the woman's chest. The text sprawled above her read "Ladies Love a Fella Who's Packing" Subtle, he thought. And then, with pure melancholy, I look at you and I see only broken hearts.

The door creaked shut on its own as he advanced inside. Some light was bleeding in through the front windows and from a door behind the counter but overall a dusky gloom prevailed. Nevertheless he could make out more than enough to see that a significant amount of foodstuffs hadn't yet been plundered. It was fortunate for scavengers like him that the Pre-Holocaust civilization had pumped so many preservatives into their chow. Admittedly it didn't quite make up for the catastrophe they'd wrought but even in hell one should be grateful for small blessings. And he'd definitely found his way to the good stuff. Ramen. Kraft Mac and Cheese. Pop Tarts. It was all here. It wouldn't be too hard now to tinker together some kind of cooking apparatus... and then he'd feast. Hopefully the water wouldn't be too radioactive. As long as it didn't glow.

His gaze was drifting over the countertop of the cashier stall when he noticed something interesting in the glass display. DARPA robot figurines. He recognized a

few of the models from encountering their full sized versions in the wasteland. Encountering however usually meant fleeing in stark terror from. Before he could shudder though, a loud clatter from an adjacent room surprised him. Forgetting the figurines, his eyes shot towards the empty doorway just beyond the counter. He held his breath then until eventually a dog came into view. At least that's what it resembled most. To be more specific, try and picture a Doberman peeled of all fur and skin – the wine-red musculature underneath calloused but cracked and oozing from exposure to the elements. Furthermore, imagine this dog-like creature at about twice the mass of a normal adult male and with a lean pulsating physique that inspires thoughts of a steady regiment of steroid injections. Then for good measure singe off its ears and lips while also giving it compound eyes like those that would belong only to the most voracious predatory insect. That is basically what the man found himself alone in a gas station with. And then it looked at him and it did not wag its tail.

The man was a survivor though. As the beast crouched to lunge at him he was already reaching for the cash register that was resting upside down on the counter. Picking it up with both hands and raising it over his head, he managed to hurl it directly at the beast's face with a well-aimed throw. An ugly crunch resounded as the cash register halted the dog's advance. Incredibly though the beast shook its head a few times and swiftly recovered itself. Then it set its sights on the man again, snarled, and leapt towards him, gnashing its saliva flinging teeth and landing on the counter top. Mouth agape, the man fell backwards – his bathrobe not caring at all for his modesty as he did so. As such he found himself disheveled and lying on the floor awkwardly while the monster, about to rip his throat out, steadied itself on the counter above him. The beast was in perfect striking position yet it instinctively hesitated as its prey pointed something at it. Though not unfamiliar with the powers of men, in this case it was simply too slow to recognize the danger before the man's fingers started squeezing the trigger.

Four shots in total rang out. The creature took two to the face and one directly to the chest. For a second the beast seemed to be contemplating its retaliation but then it sagged and died – a pool of blood quickly spreading out underneath its crumpled body and flowing in rivulets from this as they trickled down over the transparent side of the display counter. Breathing heavily, his arms trembling, the man continued to aim the pistol at the dead dog with both hands while the adrenaline surged through his body. Eventually though a thought congealed in his



mind despite the blood furiously pulsing in his ears. He needed to disappear fast. Sounding off gunshots in the wasteland was like banging the inside of a slop bucket among hogs. Interested parties would come – heavily armed parties for whom the solitary bark of a lonely peashooter like his was hardly menacing. No time to lose then. Grimacing, he managed to rise.

As he tumbled through the gas station doors, flinging them wide open in the process, the light of the outside world was immediately blinding. He reached for his ski goggles but realized that he'd lost them somewhere – probably when he fell down. Raising a hand to fend off the hostile radiance, the man briskly scrambled his way forward in the direction of his cart. He was afraid and his voice quivered as he muttered and swore to himself. Not only had he gotten nothing for his troubles but now he was out four bullets. Shit, he said. Shit, shit, shit; a mantra, the words rolling like waves over the sound of the gravel crackling beneath his feet. His mantra had switched to "Hurry" repeated in strained whispers though by the time he'd reached his cart. Jerking it out of the spot he'd left it, the man forcefully turned it around and started pushing it in the direction of the road he'd arrived from. The violence with which he did this, and with which he plunged across the uneven terrain, caused the contents of his shopping cart to jostle around considerably, the upper contents precariously close to falling by the wayside. Only a few yards into his escape though the jostling stopped. Because the cart had stopped. Because he had stopped. Because three men in solid red face paint had swaggered out from behind a scorched, overturned semi-tanker and into his path. Hate symbols and death insignia covered the tattered armor they were wearing. Each of them was carrying an assault rifle bulging with a large drum magazine.

Out of as much stupidity as courage the bath robed, bare foot man went for his gun. He was fast enough to pull it from its holster but as he did one of his ambushers unloaded about a dozen rounds near his feet and in his panic the pistol slipped from his hand and flew into the dirt a few yards or so away. He stood trembling, hands with curled fingers shaking in the air, his face downcast. He knew who he was dealing with. A gang called the Midwest Marauders wore red face paint. He had no idea why they were this far out east but it probably had to do with the same business they did elsewhere; plunder, murder, torture. That wasn't just what they were known for, it was literally their motto. Plunder, Murder, Torture.

One of the Marauders whooped as another broke into a fit of hysterical laughter. The third one then commented jovially to his comrades, "Looks like we got ourselves a chicken dinner!" Fresh chuckling ensued. Now another Marauder taunted their prey, "Folks aroun' here don't take too kindly to tresspassin'. You best es'plain yo'self so we don't feel like we're in some kind'a danger." Their prey responded by closing his eyes and swallowing. The Marauder who originally spoke now turned towards the other one who had spoken, "Well, it would appear that we have come across one of them so-called strong and silent types. I do believe that this man is shut tighter than a can of beans." That statement yielded a moment of thoughtful silence before the one Marauder, who hadn't yet said anything, interjected. "Oh Hell! I know how to open a can of beans!" And with that he slung his rifle on his back and pulled out a wicked looking knife as he started marching towards his timid target.

About four feet from reaching his goal though a bullet went through one side of the Marauder's head and out the other. As their prey just stood there dazed, the two remaining Marauders instinctively crouched. A moment later one of them bolted for the cover of some nearby buildings but was gushing up a fountain of blood from his neck before he got halfway there. In anger the last Marauder threw down his gun and stomped his feet. "This ain't fair!" he yelled before his left eye socket welcomed an incoming 50 caliber round. Radiation had affected humans as it had all other life – in the former's case it'd made them much hardier and capable of faster regeneration, even without becoming mutants. Humans were so hardy they could survive direct headshots from various calibers of arms. Anti-materiel rifles though were usually still lethal.

Barely able to even comprehend what'd just happened, the Marauder's untouched prey slowly began to walk towards his cart – it having been carried along by its own momentum a few feet after he froze. Looting the dead didn't even come to mind. Such thoughts would've been ungrateful after such a miracle. An angel had saved him. It was a sign. His mission was divinely sanctioned. Whether or not he'd been spared out of pity, that pity would have to have been placed there by a higher power. When he reached his cart then he naturally felt an overwhelming urge to give thanks. An idea seizing him, he plunged one arm into his trove of corpse relics and pulled out the six pack of Coca Cola. Holding it aloft so that his unseen guardian would notice it, he proceeded to place it down on the ground where the sniper could retrieve it later.

Continuing on his way, he reached the road that he'd earlier ascended Sisyphean like, and began a slow careful descent. Wouldn't want his shopping cart to get away from him now. In a crash his nuclear warhead probably wouldn't detonate but it was also probably best if he didn't put that belief to the test. Pride goeth before a fall, and audacity and carelessness certainly didn't arise out of humility. The important thing was for him to remain true to his mission – reaching Boston. The godless science that had laid America to ruin still had an outpost there. And they'd not yet reaped fully what they had sown... but soon they would. Very soon. A vision of a pure white light emanating out of their citadel, and in the process obliterating it forever, filled him with a sense of bliss. Just a few more miles to go. His spirits uplifted, he began to whistle a little tune.

# Three uncollected Alchemist City Stories (With time scheme)

## DEAR TO THE HONORABLY FALLEN

It was winter and the small flakes of snow falling that day drifted down like ashes from a bone-colored sky. For an old man warming his hands at a public fire in the Crypt Quarter, it was a day that reminded him of one long past. So similar was the weather of these two dates that his mind receded through previous decades to the still raw memories of the time in question and, for a moment, the world around him was utterly muted. Some cadets from the Lord Mayor's Youth Brigade though were also visiting the mausoleums and graveyards in the district and they approached with their adult leader to take advantage of the same fire the old man had previously had all to himself.

"You sir, are you a veteran?" asked the cadet leader, a prim looking fellow with thin arms and round spectacles who was no doubt as fastidious about the rhombus of mustache perched above his lips as he was about the paperwork required by whatever clerical position he held. And, like the teenage cadets standing behind him, the man was wearing a paramilitary uniform.

"I am," replied the old man without opening the eyes he'd shut only a couple minutes ago when his reminiscences began. This he did, not because he was intentionally trying to deter the stranger from further conversation, but because the scenes in his mind were too vivid to immediately let go.

"Gyle Pumberton," continued the cadet leader as he extended a hand to shake. With the other he adjusted his nose and snorted to ward off any dripping.

"Fabias Shigley," answered the old man, opening his eyes and accepting the handshake. Then, discerning his counterpart's thoughts, he added, "Corporal."

Mr. Pumberton tried not to look too disappointed at not happening upon a colonel or some other high ranking officer and, putting some effort into smiling at the various boys standing around him, the cadet leader ventured to make the purpose of his conversation apparent. "Corporal Shigley," he began. "Would I be correct in assuming that you've seen some time in active service?"

Mr. Shigley had certainly considered himself a Corporal Shigley once but that was many years ago. However, he didn't want to explain this at the moment so he decided not to mention it. Instead he answered the man's question in as neutral a manner as one could imagine. "I suppose you could call it that."

Mr. Pumberton was somewhat perplexed by this reply but rather than confronting the riddle it implied, he decided to consider the matter resolved in the affirmative and proceeded with his next question. "I've been telling these lads some of our city's fine history, its moments of most stupendous valor if you will, but I myself was never called to active service so I can only recount to them what I've learned second hand. Would you sir, share with these young men to be, what you saw and did during your time in the army? It was the army sir wasn't it?"

"It was," answered Mr. Shigley before pausing. "I was only at the one battle though. At the south coast. In the defense."

That piqued Mr. Pumberton's interest. "The invasion," he muttered gravely. "A shadow along the sea."

"I arrived there some time after the enemy had already fortified their positions," continued Mr. Shigley, "But their ships still held the surrounding waters then. It was after the trenches had been dug. The first winter of the stalemate."

"Please go on," requested Mr. Pumberton and the boys around him stared at old Mr. Shigley expectantly, their faces soft with youth and innocence. Mr. Shigley was

taken aback for a minute at the familiarity of these faces before he frowned and diverted his eyes elsewhere.

“Let me just warm myself a little more before I begin,” he said.

“It was the third week of Yule, uhhh, 1089. The enemy had landed, oh, six regiments across southern Mundany the previous month and our group, fresh conscripts, had only arrived a few days earlier to reinforce the local garrisons. Scrawny country naïfs most of us. And the first thing we learned was that everything was scarce. New arrivals were soon trading whatever extra valuables they had – rings, pins, medallions, etc – to try and make up for the overall lack of basic supplies. Yes, I remember boots and belts costing a premium. The volunteers were generally better equipped but those who’d been conscripted often had to resort to wrapping their feet in rags or using cords to tie up their breeches. At least until one of their better off comrades died; if they could get to the corpse fast enough. Told straight, it was like that. Hectic and confused too. Not only were incoming provisions being intercepted frequently but the casualties in our officer ranks meant our units were oftener than not in disarray. You never knew who’d be commanding you from one day to the next. Honest truth.”

“Our battalion, or I should say the one I was dropped into, was less than half strength and, with insufficient numbers of lieutenants to go around, we were usually under the supervision of a sergeant. My squad’s was Milson’s. Sergeant Bramf Milson. A tall fellow with hunched shoulders and leery eyes. He wasn’t too bad a sort though. Or didn’t seem so. Never got to know the man. But I saw him plenty, marching through the trenches in his overcoat. Hands pocketed. He had straight brown hair I remember and he’d regularly wipe his bangs across his forehead. Regulations weren’t much of a priority during those days. Inspections were reserved for munitions and arms; grooming standards went unenforced. Couldn’t have been really; most of us were grimmer than the last few swine in a pauper’s sty. You’d be hard done by to sort the whiskers from the dirt on our faces. Couldn’t even wash yourself in the snow, it was too thin and stained with the muddied earth it fell upon. But about Milson; he did his duty. Kept things from falling apart completely. Made sure his charges did what was needed. Only once did I hear anyone griping about this, a mutinous case I suppose, but it got a swift rebuke from one of our other comrades. Most of us were wild with fear anyways. Too busy holding on to our helmets to belittle our superiors.”

“Things were pretty quiet for some weeks but we were still being shot at. Raider groups would test the lines occasionally too. By lunch the battalion was usually down a man or two and in the evenings we’d lose half a dozen more. That’s how it was. We were hopeful despite this. Rumors had even started that the enemy was trying to pull out. This was, uhhhh, something that came through the letters I think. Stories back home. It may have been in the periodicals. Whatever it was, our superiors didn’t like this kind of talk and us doing the soldiering traded these questionable tidbits in low hushed voices. It should be said though that everyone still cleaned their musket barrels whenever they got a chance.”

“Whatever was going on, enemy troops were gunning at us anytime our paths met. Experienced this myself. We had a company go on patrol one day, slouching through the crossfire lands to see if there were any signs of enemy machinations. Stumbled onto one of the invader’s scouts and, startled as much as we were, he quickly took off to rouse his comrades with word of our surprise foray. Three platoons responded, rapidly taking up elevated positions and shooting at us in consecutively timed volleys from three directions. Elites those. A brother next to me fell and knocked us both over. After getting out from under him I realized he wasn’t moving and tried to pull him by the arm. Drag him to cover. I, uh, stopped after a few seconds. I’d moved him a few feet and he was face down but, deity forgive me, I’d pulled him across those several feet of mud and snow and a wide trail of thick dark blood, awfully dark, was trailing out from under his head. I shuddered in revulsion, dazed even, but the turmoil around me jarred me back to alertness again and I ran towards the shouts of my retreating comrades. We lost eighteen on that one excursion and gained nothing by it. Not even intelligence; unless our superiors thought the enemy really had begun to withdraw. You wouldn’t need a company for that though. To this day, it makes no sense, but that was something you confronted in war; so much seemed incomprehensible. The motives behind the orders, the huge sacrifices of men; for what? For schemes? We were supposed to be fighting for our allies; for the safety of those we loved back home. But how many times did we put on our best shoes to dance across Death’s ballroom simply as the pawns in other men’s games?”

“The next day they attacked in force. I was on the ramparts when it occurred. Even today, what happened then is still very clear in my mind. Four of us had gathered around our fellow on sentry duty, talking idly while throwing out gripes and jokes



as we huddled against the cold. I was listening to someone going into elaborate detail on something when, staring out towards the cannon scathed wastes of the crossfire lands, I took satisfaction at the emptiness and exhaled into the frigid air. My breath then briefly assumed the shape of a pale spectre before evaporating into nothingness again. But when it did, movement caught my eye. Terror was readying a leap from my lips when someone down the line shouted first and the horns started blaring. For a few seconds we were all stunned by the magnitude of what was transpiring; a deluge of enemy, men with bayonets and swords, some on horseback, rushing towards us from across the better part of the horizon. And then the cannons started firing.”

“Theirs and ours. Great spheres of iron, sometimes chained together, searing the air and obliterating everything they encountered. Mounds of earth exploded in giant showers of cold dirt. Struck carts and wagons flew apart in splintering shards. And then the men. Obliterated instantaneously. Delimbed, decapitated, ripped in pieces, vanishing in red mist. When a pair of spinning cannonballs linked by chain spun into a group of them, multiple bodies would be carved through with such sudden force that the line of their mutual dismemberment would linger there for a moment before the bodies toppled. Almost all who died by artillery died silently, destroyed by a power so beyond them that their animal reactions were completely overwhelmed. A few who had smaller pieces torn off or who got hit by shrapnel would fall down and writhe along the ground in the act of dying. Moaning perhaps. Few were their comrades who took notice though. We were all busy firing or ramrodding our rifles if we weren’t closed with the enemy, where defenders and invaders met each other with swung sabers. It was a heaving conflagration of carnage, a rolling tide of deadly struggle animated by pure desperation. There was no skill or strategy when any two men fought. We blasted and hacked at each other in frenzied abandon. Trying simply to keep death away from us by murdering the nearest threat. However, there were also the wizards.”

“War sorcery was not as prevalent as our naïve speculations had earlier led us to believe. Among us common soldiers that is. Sure, our druids and theirs gave out constant blessings in large numbers and chanted the battle hymns but, actual spell casting during combat, transpired only between two small groups. We had our cabal of sorcerers and they had theirs. Maybe four or five a piece. And these didn’t make themselves conspicuous lest snipers or artillery should find them. Which is not to say that they had no power. Far from it. Theirs were dreadful magics.

Lightning, fire, winds; mostly elemental spells. Pox sometimes. I saw a cavalry charge decimated when one of our wizards sprang bladed roots from out of the earth that impaled an entire onslaught of horsemen. And speaking of which, there were a few non-human auxiliaries as well. Centaurs, dwarves, and orcs mainly but none in great assembly. An elven assassin here or there too perhaps. In all the turmoil however, these fabled ones did not stand out with any special luster. Modern war made us all equally mortal; mere things of flesh waiting to be broken.”

“For my part, I had soon descended from the ramparts during the initial clash and had taken up a position with some of my comrades, in an enclave among several large rocks, where we frantically shot at the enemy soldiers coming in waves over a ridge only a few yards away. The dead were piling up at the bottom of this. And the not entirely dead as well. Our ammunition was running low too. When a barbarian mercenary from the Olgoth Plains descended on us by a hidden approach, we did not spend any gunpowder on him while our bayonets were perfectly up to the task. His was one of the worst deaths I saw. I felt no sympathy for the enemy though. Each one that died filled me with a modicum of relief and I felt that if I could kill enough of them I would be safe. I think four died directly by me that day and this was not a sum that would have impressed my comrades. In fact, while the battle was still ongoing, I saw Sergeant Milson with no less than eleven scalps hanging from his belt. Certainly he was a ferocious fighter though. And we were winning. The attack lasted about an hour and in the first half of this an ever growing sense of peril swelled around us but, after that, we were seeing more of the enemy fleeing than attacking and a feeling of confidence began to prevail. Sure we were all still wary of personal danger but the threat of being overrun was gone and a bloodthirsty satisfaction took hold.”

“It was time to mop up the few lingering pockets of the invaders in our midst. These had been cut off from the general retreat of their comrades and now held out or surrendered individually as circumstances dictated. Those who surrendered were not always accepted as such though. You may have read books where you are told that honor has pre-eminence in war but I will not repeat any of those lies to you. Revenge killings were common. We’d lost a lot of our brothers that day and when those responsible fell to our mercy, they often paid for the blood on their blades with their own. Sometimes this meant group executions. A line of musketeers sending some kneeling soldiers to their maker. The crackle of distant firing squads throughout the day affirmed to me that this was a common practice. More brutal

however were the vicious-indulgences of the few especially-depraved among us. I will not say his name but a certain lieutenant comes to mind here. He had a man bound and gagged before he killed them with a knife. The bastard was mad with the thrill of evil. And no one dared admonish his actions.”

“I see him even now. Laughing and stabbing maniacally. Each fresh strike splattering a little more blood on him and yet he keeps going. His stabbing is relentless; his face twisted with horrifying zeal, a deranged toothy smile, a leer, peeling his face back. A monstrous brightness shining in his then inhuman eyes. Covered in dripping blood. Painted in his dead victim. Still not stopping. The blade going in and out. Here, there. The corpse oozing out of dozens of wounds. Others of us watching. Most disinterested. Shrugging at our wildly yelping leader. What can mere insanity elicit in a place so abundant with damnation? With all the gleeful destruction swallowing the world, it’s nothing. Nearby, mangy feral dogs are dividing a rancid human cadaver. Fledgling birds lie dead in the mud, dying in their initial flight. Failing in their first attempt at life. Tragedy is like grass here, springing up from the earth itself. All things belonging to the one horror show. The god of destruction breaking down the world. A devil god. Stomping out life like a seething boss breaking down pinewood crates. And the lieutenant is this god’s avatar for a moment. A window into the hell beneath humanity’s fraud of civilization; the loveless animal, the beast, that ultimately thrives on evil. Finally our officer tires. He stumbles backwards and sits down, wiping the sweat from his face and grinning in various directions. He feels a little better. Something has momentarily been released. But it will be back.”

“Nothing ever came close to that day for me but it consumed all the ones that followed. That was the crescendo of the war. Nonetheless I remained in those trenches for two more months. Almost an imitation of myself. Because I was sure I was going to die on that battlefield. And I was numb to this. Life was no longer precious to me. As much as I and the others clung to it, I don’t think it could ever incite the same earnest feelings of enthusiasm. We had seen the truth and all that was once dear to us in the depths of our souls had tumbled aside; an earthquake toppling our carefully arranged preconceptions. And no matter how much we might have wanted to put everything back the way it was, we all knew now that to do so was to try and recreate a lie. And as for the dead, the honorably fallen, they remained to haunt us. For their myths became our burdens. We had to keep their memories polished and gleaming. Our fellow citizens would be satisfied with

nothing less than flawless heroics and virtuous paragons. They had no appetite for the reality of the butchering. I'm old though and I've stopped caring. Maybe you youths, if told the truth early enough, won't demand to feast on lies when you're older. Maybe. I don't know."

When Mr. Shigley finished his story, everyone was silent for a long time. While his cadets absorbed what they'd heard with thoughtful expressions on their faces, Mr. Pumberton, their chaperon, seemed to be on the verge of paroxysm but was frozen in this for a while. One of his cadets therefore seized the opportunity presenting itself here to ask his own question.

"But sir, what were you fighting for?" requested the teenager.

Mr. Shigley gave him a wistful look and sighed before replying. "Daily survival, boy. Just trying to stay alive."

That was enough to knock Mr. Pumberton back into elocution and he commenced in this with an unusual amount of indignant sputtering.

"I... I hardly think that was a story for young impressionable minds. Mr. Shigley, I mean really. How... how do you justify that sort of... vulgarity?"

"Well, it's war isn't it?" replied Mr. Shigley with indifference. "That's what happened. You wanted them to know about the war? There's no other war to tell."

Here the old man turned to walk away, preferring the ghosts of the dead now to the lies of the living and waiting each day, tired and weary, for his own end to come. In this he was quiet and patient. Without hope, without fear.

## FAVORED BY THE LORD MAYOR

One of them was going to die and, to the crowd watching the two men, it really didn't matter which. The audience craved blood. Whether this came from the tall swarthy Olgothian with his long braided hair or the enslaved mercenary from Panhallia was irrelevant. The citizens of Alchemist City that regularly attended these gladiator matches would sob majestically when eulogizing their favorite promoted fighters but generally scorned those of lower status and regarded these as nothing more than animals to be killed for public amusement. Proof of this was very much in evidence that day. As the Olgothian and Panhallian circled each other, peering over shields of slightly larger diameter than their forearms and weaving identical short swords menacingly in the air, they were jeered and pelted with food garbage from a variety of directions. One nimble plebeian boy who'd managed to sneak in among a group of debonair patricians, even managed to make himself heard despite all the boos and hisses.

"Quit jollying like a pair of mushy geese ye miserable twits!" he shouted in a shrill prepubescent voice, dislodging hearty chuckles from those nearby.

The Olgothian, enraged by the contempt of the crowd, struck first. Lunging forward with a roar, he brought his sword down on top of his opponents' shield, intending to knock it away. The Panhallian staggered under this and almost fell into a crouch before stumbling backwards. He barely had time to regroup though before his adversary rushed forward again, swinging wildly at him. He met the assault this time with his own sword, knocking aside the incoming strikes with no small amount of skill. The clashing blades rang out loudly in the dingy four-thousand-seat arena annex yet even the ferocity of the combat underway wasn't enough to earn the approval of the spectators. A soiled article of female underwear from one of the less refined patrons that evening sailed a few inches past the face of the Panhallian

but, unable to afford the distraction, he ignored it. Instead he tried to execute a stab underneath the shield of the Olgothian; his rival however deflected this and he found himself awkwardly overextended during the ensuing counterattack.

His shield took most of the damage but the Olgothian's sword glanced off this and caught the Panhallian in the side of the skull. Instinctively he dodged and rolled in the opposite direction, bouncing off his back in a single motion, and coming to on unsteady feet a decent ways apart. As he backed up even further, the trickle of blood that ran off his head and on to his shield informed him that he hadn't gotten away unscathed. The audience noticed too and clapped and cheered in a boisterous manner while the Olgothian indulged in only the briefest smirk. His injured opponent meanwhile shuddered as he forced back a sudden rush of dread. His mortality accosted him like the snout of some snuffling wolf probing the scent of hidden prey, but he mastered this in the moment and overcame the fear. His heart was beating in his ears like a war drum though. The noise of the crowd dimmed and the passage of time seemed to slow to an ooze then as the Olgothian began to advance once more. The man jogged towards him, naked from the torso up just like he was, hefting his sword and shield in preparation for the violent clash about to ensue. And the Panhallian likewise readied himself. He assumed a defensive stance, tensing his whole body. The forbidding warrior bearing down on him however filled his entire mind. Every detail about his foe was apprehended all at once; the scars and runic tattoos arrayed across his weathered flesh, the outburst of ferocity taking form in the corners of his eyes and mouth, the reverberations from each calamitous footfall sending tremors through the man's body and radiating outwards along the sawdust covered floor. The Panhallian could almost see himself and his enemy as an idle spectator might; two ships about to collide far out at sea. Then the speed of events surged again into a rush and the Olgothian was screaming only a few feet from his face and one of the swords that was swung rebounded off a shield and tumbled from its wielder's hand with a clatter while the other evaded a desperate attempt at deflection and sank deep into the abdomen of the one it was intended for.

The Olgothian tried to whisper something in his native tongue before he slid down the Panhallian's blade and on to the floor. He was dead. The Panhallian however was still in a daze and stared at the deceased; panting as he kept the tip of his sword pressed against his opponent's neck in case he had to finish what was already over. Then a trio of fighter wranglers disarmed him and quickly led him into a dark tunnel

that extended catacomb-like from the combat pit as those above shouted approvingly or disapprovingly according to how they'd bet. The next event, goblin cutthroats versus an especially nasty chimaera, was due to start in a quarter hour though and the bloodlust of the spectators was already building again as they jostled among the elevated wooden bleachers perched in a skeletal fashion over the ancient stone structure under them. A similarly rickety dome encompassed the broader venue itself, patched with assorted cloth over the years but having almost as many glaring holes through which daylight streamed in as it had pennants hanging from its decrepit rafters. In these, the plebeian boy who'd yelled the insult earlier, a felonious little urchin in fact, had to clamber overhead in a rapid getaway as staff became aware of his trespassing and set out to remove him.

"Had me worried there friend," mocked one of the fighter wranglers as he led the Panhallian through the bustling warren of subterranean passages that branched below the Arena district. "Thought those ducats I wagered on ye was lost far' sure. Aye, you've look'd better."

The Panhallian kept silent, having learned by now not to engage the guards. It had been five fights so far. All in single combat. All concluding with the death of his opponents. Unlike the promoted fights where the defeated were occasionally pardoned, the losers were never spared in the subsidiary contests. Since they didn't have any public celebrity, there wasn't enough commercial incentive to keep them alive. This was tied to a long established understanding between the patrons of gladiator matches and the blood merchants who profited off these that making hardworking citizens pay good coin to watch losers brawl was an unethical business practice. It was tantamount to trying to serve a meal that had already been eaten. In short, a breach in etiquette of the most odious kind.

The deceased were instead hacked to pieces after their respective demises and served to various beasts used in circus spectacles. Hogs, lions, crocodiles, and bears, were just a few of the mundane carnivores employed in the festivities that took place year round. Besides the aforementioned chimaera, other monsters of an equally fantastic variety were known to take part too. And as he was goaded onwards, the Panhallian noted the presence of some of the former; the growl of a large cat rebuked by its keeper, the squeals of swine herded into their enclosure. Aside from being noisy, it also happened to be uncomfortably hot in this part of the subterranean lair beneath the Arena district. With the Panhallian and his escorts

now arriving in a larger open area, the source of the heat became apparent as numerous tall brick furnaces came into view. Each was manned by a pair of struggling slaves. One had to work the giant leg-powered bellows while grasping a dangling chain for support, these men heaving up and down with the massive undulations of the apparatus, while their counterparts arduously pivoted in heating a continuous stream of iron implements ferried by porters to adjacent blacksmiths. All the forging and repairing of weapons, all the metal construction done for the theatrical props and torture devices used in the circus, was done by these denizens of the underworld. The Panhallian, told to stop by his guards, observed some of these dispassionately. A pair of orc slave drivers, finding a porter slumped over with exhaustion, came at him from both sides, slobbering with rage as they shouted at the man before scourging him into a prompt return to duty. Here a stranger interrupted from behind and gruffly pushed the Panhallian's head to the side so he could examine the man's wound.

"Iz not too bad," said the deputy comptroller. A fat greasy man with a carbuncled nose and a formidable mustache, he stared at the Panhallian the way a peasant farmer might a worn out donkey, before spitting on the floor and turning to the lead fighter wrangler. "Infectshun tho, pozzible. Take heem to tha tailor. Utterwise could be a shame. Lose such a good one eh?" Unable to resist his own joke, the man erupted in a fit of bronchial cackling before this petered out as a spasm of obnoxious coughs.

"We've still got to round up all the condemned for tonight's ransoming," protested the lead wrangler. "Can't we just slap a salve on 'im and throw 'im back in the dorms?"

"Do az you like. But, he get sick, you take hiz place. Eh?"

The wranglers weren't the only ones who had other things to do that day, and the deputy comptroller departed as soon as he was sure his rhetorical taunt had done its job. Seeing how none of the wranglers were too eager to become gladiators, they exchanged looks of resigned agreement and pushed the Panhallian unceremoniously in a new direction. The convoluted march through the labyrinth of passageways took a while, hence the earlier reluctance, but eventually the Panhallian was brought to a heavy wooden door in an alcove with the word "Tailor" painted above it and a large ring knocker in the center. After banging on this, the



lead wrangler rolled his eyes at his subordinates when the door didn't open immediately, but was half-startled while leaning with one arm against the adjoining wall when, seconds later, it did. The door vanished into the gloom behind it and was soon replaced by an impish face with thick bifocals.

"Ho!" the man said before adding a lone "Shirt?"

"Stitches," replied the lead wrangler, unimpressed.

"He could still use a shirt."

"Shirtlessness won't be what kills 'im," the man retorted.

"Guess so. Alright, come in."

They all shuffled onward, single file, with the Panhallian in the middle. It took a moment for them to adjust to the lighting in the room but eventually they were able to see with the flickering glow provided by a few dim oil lamps. The ceiling was oppressively low and the busy racks of clothing and armaments that ran in vanishing aisles increased the sense of imposition. Clutter had spilled out on to the floor too and made itself at home on the tables and countertop. Behind this the man who'd let them in, and who evidently wasn't the tailor, called out to an area farther in the back.

"You've got some folks here pa!"

After grunting in response, a man approached from the opposite end of one of the aisles who, at first, scarcely seemed human. Beginning as a silhouette, he shambled into view like some kind of reanimated corpse, lurching along with one arm hanging limply while the other was curled close to his chest. His bulging eyes, glazed with milky blue cataracts, squatted in their sockets like two frogs ready to leap in opposite directions, while his whole mouth was so flaccid and puckered it seemed to droop as if his bottom jaw was made of sponge. Add to this feverish skin reminiscent of a moon slug plus a disheveled doublet with a cobweb ruff and the man's general effect was quite ghastly. Despite that, he had a slimy cheerfulness about him that came across as an honest attempt at pleasantry.

"Ain't this a poesy congregation," remarked the new arrival in a gravel voice. "Truly the lord's men! An' a dog beside! Don't es'pect you's here jus' to have a gab though right? Costumes perhaps? Caught a bout of the old theatre maybe. Given to speech and swoon. Ha! I 'ear it's positively venereal."

"I swear they bury all the crazies down here," muttered the lead fighter wrangler in a whispered aside before he straightened up to address his cadaverous counterpart. "You the tailor?"

"Tailor, surgeon, barber, vet, taxidermist," they answered with a smile.

"We need you to take care of this fodder," explained the wrangler as he dragged the Panhallian to the forefront.

"Oi? Is it amputation?" the tailor and jack of trades asked offhandedly while squeezing and prodding the Panhallian's limbs; seemingly on the lookout for any excuse to dismember the man.

The wranglers enjoyed a chuckle at the injured's expense before the lead replied. "It's whatever you've got to just so his head don't bleed no more."

The tailor grinned and nodded thoughtfully to this as he motioned for the Panhallian to take a seat on a nearby stool. Once there, the man soon conjured up a needle with a cat gut thread. Chiding the gladiator pre-emptively in case he had any thoughts of being a difficult patient, the tailor first put the end of the needle in the flame of one of the uncovered oil lamps before dousing a rag with the contents of his drinking flask and rubbing this over the wound on the gladiator's head.

"Hell!" exclaimed the man with a wince.

"I know'd it," sighed the tailor. "Ah can always tell the difficult ones. Whining 'ill only make it go longer though. Spare yerself and grit 'em lad."

The Panhallian considered making a snide retort or even giving the old tailor a slap but thought better of it and resigned himself to the situation. Sensing that his canvas wasn't going to give him any trouble now, the tailor got busy with the sanitized needle by dipping it in a bowl of water brought by his son and then going

to work on the flap of flesh hanging off the side of the gladiator's head. Loop by loop he closed this up, humming in a dwarven fashion as he went, and doing so with absolute finesse, using only the hand of his one long arm; the other, still curled close to his chest, showing its sole signs of life in occasional fidgeting. The gash he had to work on was a decent size too, maybe eight or nine inches, so the stitching job took a while. Naturally the wranglers soon grew bored of waiting around but they jabbered amongst themselves easily enough and the tailor's son remained in the room but hovered on the peripheries quietly attending to whatever it was he normally spent his days doing. Given that the tailor was intently focused on his task, this left the Panhallian to preoccupy himself with private thoughts.

He pictured the islands back home. He pictured his wife. It was getting close to two years since he'd last seen her. She'd been pregnant with their first. For all he knew, he had a son at this very moment; learning to walk, growing stronger every day. Or maybe they were both dead. A thought which, surprisingly, made his captivity easier. He didn't expect to ever be free again. As a foreign mercenary who'd been captured privateering for an enemy power, it was unusual that he was still alive. The people of the lowlands though, and especially those in Alchemist City, were mercantilists of the highest order and there was little profit to be had in a summary execution. So he'd been sent to the mines. As forced labor. There however he'd both distinguished himself and made a lot of trouble for the syndicate with a series of incidents best described as pugilistic in nature. As a result of these, the authorities decided the appropriate thing to do was to sell him to a gladiator company and so, here he was, waiting to die.

"Well, if he don't be lookin' handsome all over again," mused the tailor when he finished his last stitch, snipping off the excess thread with a pair of tiny scissors. "Now gentleman, ye can say I waz braggin' but... please, tell me that's not the tidiest bit of reupholstering you've ever seen?"

"Ah thunk ish beher than he daserves, da git," grumbled the most junior wrangler. Perhaps he was an idealist who detested mercenaries.

"Masterly," interjected the lead wrangler, in an effort to head off any kind of unpleasantness. "Sheer craft," he added insipidly before turning to the Panhallian and speaking to them. "Go on then. Say somethin' fodder."

The gladiator gently felt the wound with his fingertips as he glanced at the lead wrangler and then the tailor. "Seems like nothing's missing," he replied with sarcastic enthusiasm. "Any chance I can get this vase wrapped?" The joke being that his head was some kind of valuable artifact.

"Bah!" muttered the tailor. "Sure is uppity fer a slave. Soon he'll be askin' for cigars an' newspapers, no doubt. Ah suppose I can bandage you though. If I didn't, it'd probably give you an excuse to come moanin' back here in a few days, so I might az well save myself tha hassle."

"Sometimes it's easier to just pamper the bastards," laughed the wrangler of middle seniority.

The tailor had evidently exaggerated his reluctance to bandage his patient's wound however since he took his time after his son brought him the items needed. For this a foul smelling ointment was dabbed over the spot on the gladiator's head before the poultice was completed with a few bands of linen wrapping. The effect was almost like wearing a wreath but, despite the Panhallian's earlier victory, he felt himself more a fool than a king. There was nothing he could do about it though. Giving those around him a look that indicated he was ready to be paraded elsewhere, the enslaved mercenary watched as the wranglers nodded to each other and the tailor before motioning for him to stand. With hardly anything more than a muttered farewell, the group filed out of the tailor's shop while the man in question proceeded to attend to some of his other affairs. Using his hand to brush off a suit of armor that still had a few dried scraps of flesh from its previous inhabitant, the tailor's face suddenly brightened as he turned to the assembly now disappearing out his front door and exclaimed.

"I'll put ah few shillings down on yer next one eh? What's the harm?"

\* \* \*

Days later the Panhallian was sitting on the floor in the gladiator dorms when a violent tremor shook the room. Immediately he and the other fighters were on alert. Many of them in fact got up from the benches and spots of the floor where they'd been lounging and went over to the barred window that looked out into the halls of their dungeon. The backs of several rival heads crowded this from the

Panhallian's perspective but his first concern was the ceiling. Glancing upwards he checked if there were any signs of this collapsing but, other than an initial shower of dust, there were no indications that anything had happened. Although the idea of the ceiling sagging and then bursting occurred with a special vividness, it was not enough to usher him to his feet. If that happened, they were all immediately dead anyways. The huge cobblestone bricks overhead would crush them as surely as a downpour of anvils so at least they had a swift end in store if it came to that. But what was it? An earthquake? It didn't feel like an earthquake.

Hours passed. Arena staff occasionally went by in the hall but they ignored the petitions of the gladiators for information. Sounds could be heard though. Shouting and heavy labor. At one point there was even the screaming of a man who was apparently wounded. An accident of some kind then. This was eventually confirmed when the chief fighter wrangler showed up outside the dorm with a retinue of half a dozen subordinates. Remaining outside, he shouted down the fighters clamoring for answers and began to explain the situation.

"Slaves! Listen up! There was an explosion. One of the steam engines had an issue with its safety valves. Hold on now! I don't know a damn thing more about it. The warders will send one of their detectives to investigate but in the meantime... just shut it already! I'm trying to tell you. Some of your comrades got the worst of the business. Yeah. When the boiler erupted it took out a good section of wall and sent shrapnel flying all over the place. Shrapnel? Deuce's rod! Giant shards of metal! Yes deadly! Obviously! We're down three now. A couple more are out with injuries for the foreseeable future. Which means... a lot of you are going to be fighting sooner than you would have been. So fair warning. You want to train? Get busy. There's not gonna be any more delays in the arena schedule."

Then, speaking individually to many of the gladiators at the window, the chief wrangler explained in an inaudible voice the details of some of the specifics. It made no difference however to the Panhallian. He fought only because it was demanded of him. There was no glory or profit in it. Glancing around the dorm, he confirmed that the same weariness was shared by several of his fellow warriors. Across the dimly lit room, the oil lanterns in the outer hall cast a dull ember light that adorned the chamber in long shadows equal to the general mood. There they waited; half in thought, half in darkness, all of them prisoners but some injured by this more than others. Not every man here had known freedom. Slavery, like wealth, was

often nothing more than an inheritance. Scratching his neck, the Panhallian turned his attention back to the gathering by the window. It was thinning out. The chief and one of his subordinates seemed to be going over a ledger though. Heads bent in scrutiny, they were staring at the book and talking animatedly between each other when the subordinate looked up and started searching the dorm with his eyes. Finally he stopped in the direction of the Panhallian and made a beckoning motion. The Panhallian pointed at himself for clarification and the subordinate wrangler made an annoyed gesture to hurry over.

“I’m filling in for someone?” asked the gladiator as he arrived at the window.

The two wranglers ignored him for a second as they sorted something out between themselves in truncated sentences. Then the chief made a show of looking over the Panhallian with a cool gaze. He was a man of stern appearance with sunken cheeks and thin eyebrows. A natural bureaucrat suffering constant impatience with his human chattel.

“Congratulations. You’ve been promoted. This coming Friarsday you’ll be fighting a duel in the arena. And you’re twice lucky too. I was going to use you as fodder in one of the re-enactments but my counterpart here says you’re actually pretty decent with a blade. So you’re fighting the number three contender.”

Since the current dueling champion was still recuperating from the injuries he sustained in his last fight, most of the contenders were being kept busy with exhibition matches. Some of these were little more than the ritual sacrifice of unworthy opponents. In other words; fodder. The blood-famished public however much rather preferred real contests so those who orchestrated the fights tried to arrange fair matches wherever possible without squandering capable gladiators in under-promoted events. This is where the Panhallian came in. He’d demonstrated his ability but hadn’t built up a reputation; therefore he was the perfect choice to be matched with one of the fighters awaiting their opportunity at the title. And yes, there was a chance he could win but, in truth, he was the preferred to die.

\* \* \*

When they came for him, he was pacing the dorm in a state of agitation. That was normal. It was like this before every fight. Despite his chaotic state of mind, he

complied when the wranglers ordered him and a few others to kneel down on the floor in preparation for shackling. This was common whenever the guards had to escort groups of prisoners. The first man would be handcuffed behind his back and these would be attached to a chain that was secured to the next prisoner's waist. Then the next prisoner was likewise handcuffed and the rest of the process repeated as many times as necessary. In all, four of them were going to the arena that day. Not a large group by any measure but other gladiators and victims would be brought from different cells and dormitories so theirs would not be the only blood shed that day. Once everyone was secured, they were quickly commanded into the hall and their march toward fate began.

The others stepped aside at their approach. Everyone knew where they were going and the sight of men walking towards probable death with grim resignation fostered a certain amount of respect. Also, gladiators were known to take the opportunity to avenge themselves on those they had grievances with when the sands of their hourglasses were nearly empty. As such they proceeded with considerable speed as they were led past the many sights along their way. The arena warrens were the result of centuries of haphazard expansion so travelling through them could seem like passing through different underground kingdoms. Here catacombs decorated with glyphs and inscriptions in the Imperial tongue, there cavernous passageways with dripping stalactites that had their own undying gloom provided by colonies of luminescent fungi. During a brief stop, the Panhallian found himself standing beside a stele half-embedded in the rock. In a scene crudely depicted on this, a mound of decapitated heads was piled next to an altar where a necromancer was raising his hands in exaltation. Knowing a bit of the language, the Panhallian tried to decipher what some of it said but was yanked forward by the chain around his waist before he could. Something from the history of a ruined city that had once occupied the same place most likely. Shambling ahead however, he quickly forgot about this as his group reached the threshold of the arena complex proper. Workers and their various beasts of burden were streaming in and out of the underground entrance as the business of preparing for that evening's events reached its climax. All of it dedicated to horror as sport and entertainment.

Those authorized to go inside were generally forced to wait a few minutes in a queue to have their credentials verified. The gladiators and their guards however had priority status so they were able to circumvent this delay and be let in almost immediately. Now in the underworks of the arena, the men could not help looking

around in deference at the immense scale of the preparations being carried out. Inside the towering vault of a ceiling almost cathedral in its proportions, winches and pulleys manned by large teams of slaves were hoisting an astonishing array of colossal props that would be used for staged battles and other massive set pieces. Ogres twelve feet high and giants twenty feet tall also assisted in this, sometimes in groups, and these transporting loads of lumber and panelling that cast shadows on those below them. The logos and labels of various guilds and companies were also evident everywhere. The pneumatic horse of Alder Technologies, the totemic drill-head and gem diadem of the Animatite Mining Syndicate, the anchor and its wreath of chain indicating goods transported by Fo'c'sle Enterprises. Large elevated tunnels perforated the walls on all sides and work details manned the openings of each of these and were kept busy, shouting to their comrades over the sounds of groaning cranes and background mayhem.

But they were not left long to gaze in wonder. Barking out his commands so they could be heard, the lead wrangler directed them to a hallway that turned into a long corridor ending in an industrial elevator. After one of the guards pulled open the collapsing iron gate, the whole group of them was ushered inside with room to spare and then they waited as the gate was shut and the engine powering the elevator slowly began to turn the gears and wind the chains required to lift them. Rumbling upwards several floors, they were dispensed soon enough and made their way to a holding cage in a waiting area adjacent to the arena stage. The gladiators, still shackled, waited idly in this as the wranglers disappeared in the meantime. More than one of them though turned their attention to a man in a black uniform kneeling at a religious shrine in front of them.

"Most holy and ancient family," prayed the man with his eyes closed and his palms held upwards. "Guide me in my work this night. Have these hands do your will and please you with their accomplishments. I am the instrument of your designs. I am your eager creation. Blessed Ert, give me the strength to do as your father demands. Blessed Fer, illuminate my heart so that your father sees the truth of my devotion. Blessed Aca, wash away the sins I gather upon myself so I may approach you and your husband in righteousness. Maker and Lord of All, do not despise me for my imperfections. I renounce those who defy you. I praise those who worship you. I am a glad slave unworthy of his master. Do as you see fit with my life but offer me the overflowing cup of your mercy. Correct me when I stray from your chosen paths. Heal me in my weaknesses. Utmost Lord, holy above the



imaginations of man. I beg you. I implore you. Forget not your wicked creature. Keep me in your grace. Forever.”

Finishing his prayer, the man in the black uniform slowly got up and made the sign of the triangle by tapping his forehead and each shoulder with his right hand. Then he noticed he was being watched and turned around to look at the gladiators in their cage. Smiling gently with a tilted head, he proceeded to put a black mask over his face. It was the reaping mask. The mask of a city executioner. Then he nodded to the gladiators politely before turning and walking away. In his new absence, the impaling shafts that had been leaning against the wall behind him suddenly became noticeable. Averaging about fourteen feet in length, these were sharpened iron skewers with two jutting blades at sharply acute angles three feet from the top. The idea being that the victim was impaled and then left to slide down, where they were halted on the second tier of blades which the weight of their own body thrust inside them. It was, by all accounts, a bad way to go.

“Getting bored?” laughed one of the wranglers when he and a few others returned. Not all of his colleagues found this joke as amusing as he did though, since some were nervous around gladiators on the precipice of death, and an uncomfortable silence followed this as the shackled men were ushered from their cage. It was time for them to be taken to the alcoves penultimate; to the last stage of waiting. And like wheat they would be gathered but not all together. Separated into pairs, the two gladiators who’d been manacled behind the Panhallian disappeared in another direction while he and his chain-linked comrade were escorted the opposite way. They were only taken down one more hallway however, where the noise of a vast nearby crowd began to reverberate around them, and then after a single additional turn brought to a room and unshackled. With the guards locking the door behind them, the Panhallian and his counterpart briefly glanced at each other before heading to the long narrow window slit to look outside. There lay the arena grounds and the the surrounding stadium seats in the distance. The Panhallian had no way to verify it but he’d heard that each of the six seating sections could hold eight thousand people. Forty eight thousand in total then plus however many patricians you could add in the balcony observation suites. Not all of these preferred to sit upstairs though and as the Panhallian scanned the crowd he noticed a delegation of some kind from Fleurin descending to the arena pit. Fleurinians were avid duellists, extremely prickly when it came to matters of honor, and it made sense that they wouldn’t be satisfied watching the action from the upper levels.

Binoculars or not. His eyes lingered on their uniforms, glinting with military decorations, until a disturbance several rows above distracted him. It was the City Warders, the law, apparently ambushing one of the spectators in an arrest. Something that was a common occurrence actually. Fanaticism with respect to the gladiatorial contests was widespread and those with warrants out for their arrest often snuck in to see the circus anyways; sometimes ending up in the circus themselves as a result. Perhaps even as a ransom.

As the Panhallian thought this, the ransoming itself began. Trumpets made from minotaur horns rang out and the crowd that had been milling in their seats, humans primarily and many with body paint and placards and costumes and effigies, all stood up and waited with respectful attention. Inside marched the Custodians with their shining armor and elaborate finery, escorting with them the evening's offerings and the lone masked executioner who'd been praying earlier. The former of these belonged to groups condemned by the regime. Individuals like the new scourge of mutants who were appearing among the sewer-folk and heavy industrial regions of the city; a still mysterious phenomenon which dismayed the general populace due to its unknown causes. The majority of those ransomed however were criminals; particularly unionizers and pacifists. Once in a while a serial killer too maybe. Tonight there were at least a dozen sacrifices. Only one stood out. An Aulsanian. Religious zealots all of them; some were tolerated but several of the group's sects were now outlawed and the penalty for anyone being found guilty of participating in them was death. This Aulsanian seemed at peace with what was about to happen though. When the executioner unsheathed his sword and approached the shackled victims ringed in at the center of the arena, the Aulsanian raised his hands in prayer and shouted, "It's okay friends. You're sending me to a better place." One by one, they were all killed.

After that was over, the floor of the arena was soon transformed. In order to create different environments for the gladiators to battle in, an immense machine, partly magical in its construction, had been built under the arena pit. The Panhallian had heard that its main component was a regular dodecahedron, whatever that meant, but he understood this to be something not quite a sphere with several flat faces, or facets, which were moved by large piston-powered appendages. It was called the proscenium machine. Said machine would descend slightly, rotate into a new position, and then rise again to lock into place. To provide this function the whole contraption must have been as large as a palace but the wizards of the Supreme

Guild of Technomages had performed several other equally impressive feats of occult engineering so it was not without precedent. The actual set up and crafting of the specific battle environments however was left to teams of artificers and their assistants who kept ones that proved popular for long periods but were constantly experimenting with new designs in the hopes of pleasing the circus audiences. When the machine finished its loud transformation, the Panhallian saw that a naval battle was being prepared as an announcer made a passionate address to the impatient crowd. The present facet of the machine had a recess with multiple openings in it which quickly began to pour out water. When this was full, two teams of gladiators appeared from opposite ends of the arena, carrying longboats. These they'd launch into the the artificial lake waiting for them; where they'd then row towards each other and fight ship to ship. In the interests of entertainment, runt trebuchets also lobbed oil based incendiary bombs at both groups.

The other gladiator waiting with the Panhallian turned to him and spoke. "You see our two comrades out there? I'm almost sure neither of them have ever fought at sea before."

"You're right," said the Panhallian, noticing the two men they'd earlier been chained up with as a result of the prompt. "Probably why they were chosen. I hear the fight organizers usually make them imbalanced so that one side will be the clear victor. There's the scheduling too right?"

"Yeah," replied his counterpart in weary acknowledgement.

Presently the Panhallian turned away from the window, having no appetite for watching the slaughter going on, and he slumped to the floor with his back to a wall. Beside him he noticed the graffiti from past inhabitants of the same holding area. Some just names, some oaths, and others prayers of dedications to various loved ones. He almost searched around for a rock to do so as well but in the forming of this thought he pictured someone like himself casually reading what he'd wrote and then moving on indifferently. The seed of his words would not be carried away from here to any fertile ground. This was a place for the dead who had no future. No past even. They were coal being shovelled into a furnace. But that could also be said of the world itself. And the cosmos. Maybe it was all nothing more than a great engine that had been made to destroy that which was thrust inside it? A cauldron in which even the spirits of men were meant to be broken?

Before the naval conflict had run its course, the wranglers came again. Guards. Wranglers. They preferred the former so their captives called them the latter. True wranglers dealt only with animals and were part of the Tamers Guild but seeing as how their prisoners felt they were treated like animals, the wrangler epitaph had stuck.

“On your feet,” the leader said, looking at the Panhallian.

To this the man made no response but complied; although he did so with a distinct lack of deference.

“Good luck out there,” said the other gladiator.

The Panhallian laughed at this before replying. “All I can hope for now lies after death. What remains is to die with grace.”

“Well said,” interjected one of the wranglers with genuine respect as the Panhallian was shackled and escorted from the room. From here he was rapidly taken to some stairs that led down to one of the portcullis gates. Beyond this the arena floor lay before him but first he waited as the proscenium machine made one of its colossal rotations to provide a new battlefield. He would only be duelling a single foe yet they would still have the entire arena to fight in. Although as he stared past the gate he realized this would be something beyond what he could have anticipated. He and his opponent’s fight would be taking place in an entirely new environment and the roar of the audience confirmed this. It was... quite utterly... incomprehensible. A stage of massive revolving gears like the inner mechanisms of a clock tower, which were then supplemented by numerous death traps. Spinning blades, vents shooting flames, and yawning pitfalls were just some of the dangers he would soon confront. At least his opponent would be faced with the same challenges though. And now the announcer had appeared on the balcony where he would make both gladiators introductions.

“Citizens of Alchemist City! Distinguished guests! You are about to witness combat of the most spectacular variety! Two warriors, both tested and victorious in many trials, are ready today to give their lives for you in our sacred arena! Who will have the glory though? Will it be this man over here, this Panhallian, brought to our great

metropolis in chains as an enemy soldier? Or will it be his rival, a gladiator whose reputation has erupted like a volcano ever since he first stepped into the ring? Yes! You know him! A nightmare to his foes, a wonder for the ages! The wild stallion who murdered his way here from the badlands of Ildravir's Horn. I give you, your third ranked title contender... Sef-los the Cen-taur!"

When the portcullis arose, the Panhallian ran in and grabbed the weapons left for him from their customary rack. A pair of single bladed war axes. He would have preferred a spear or a halberd considering his foe but they were enough to give him a chance. Seflos meanwhile had gotten a flail and shield combo and was already trotting towards him across the shifting hazards of the clockwork arena. He too had to move; the initial entrance platforms were designed to disassemble themselves so if he was still standing in the same place in another minute, the ground would fall away from him. Running forward he swerved left around a geyser of flame and engaged his adversary with a whirl of blades. The centaur could not be made to recoil however on account of the base provided for him by his horse legs and the Panhallian quickly disengaged when it became clear the attack was thwarted. On the islands where he grew up, centaurs were more common than anywhere else, so he was familiar with what sort of strategy to use here. Feints, angled attacks; that was how he'd win. The centaur had the advantage of height, reach, strength and speed, but was weaker in maneuverability and defense. The environment too was a disadvantage to him. Provided the Panhallian didn't get careless and allow it to claim him first.

"You're overmatched human!" shouted Seflos as he reared up on two legs, his front hooves pawing the air and his humanoid arms stretched wide. This proceeded a charge but the Panhallian spun around an iron pillar and leaped down to a rotating gear. This would carry him back in the direction of the centaur and he stooped as preparation, getting ready to lunge in attack. He was all focus now. The chants and cries of the spectators were like waterfalls in the distance and the one thing on his mind was the thought of sinking his axe into his enemy. Seflos wasn't going to just wait to be assaulted of course. Scrutinizing his situation while his rival slowly revolved back to him, the centaur decided that he was in a bad position and clambered up to higher ground. To a dais like projection. From here he barely hesitated in judgement before leaping over and behind the Panhallian; Seflos doing an almost gymnastic twist in the air as his hind quarters swung around in a large arc. Surprised, the Panhallian had just enough time to pre-emptively keep the

incoming flail from descending on him by slashing at the centaurs hands. He couldn't parry the weapon though and he was wary of the likelihood his adversary would bash him with their shield so he retreated.

From the seats of those who were watching them, they were just two miniature figures clashing in near pantomime but, between the raging fighters themselves, it was an earnest and animalistic conflict. Muscles bulged, rippling; the pair of warriors heaving with exhaustion as the minutes passed. And the mania of the battlefield added drama to this but the energy that the scene held did not come from the storm of machinery around them. They were the heart of the arena. The beating heart. Beating with a savage insistence like the name of a lost god repeated in a mantra. Blood it screamed. Blood for all time; rivers of the red life force breaking the flood walls and gushing across an open desert. And all those who had ever died would rise up from this great outpouring in waves of levitation and gather in the sky to become a single swarm of celestial being. A revelation of the end where dawn and dusk dissolved into each other and the world was bathed in an everlasting light that no secret could hide from. What are the strivings of people measured against so terrible a destiny?

The Panhallian made a mistake. He tried to attack his opponent from the rear and paid for this with a bone shattering hoof to the chest. Collapsing on the ground he attempted to pick up his weapons again but could no longer find them. Then he gave up. It had been months since he'd felt the sun directly on his skin and, looking above, he sighed as he saw how late it was. The sun was already swallowed in its nightly occultation by the moon. So he belonged to the moon forever. Meanwhile, Seflos was waiting with his flail, searching the balconies for a signal. This came from the private box of The Lord Mayor himself. With its screen, the occupants inside were invisible, but a young man came out. A herald. And as he approached the railing to give the verdict, the arena patrons cheered. Maybe the Panhallian had fought well enough? But then the herald held out his hand and turned it palm down. Meaning this one would be returned to the earth. The Panhallian had not been favored; the mercy he suddenly desired would not be his. And that was all it was in the end. The gesture of a man. Deciding things.

## JAVIL AND SONS, MAGICAL EXTERMINATORS

When the last of the undead parrots a young delinquent necromancer had conjured were finally dispatched, the old gnome managed to convince himself that some gratitude would be bestowed on him. After all, the squawking cacophony that'd terrorized the wealthy residents of the Cypress District for weeks was now over. No longer would the well-bred ladies<sup>1</sup> out with their prams and poodles be subjected to the uncanny imitations of dockside wolf-whistles or ruffian slurs. Tranquility had been restored; all thanks to Sig and his two sons, Ovald and Fymn. Reality however soon intruded on this pleasant little fantasy. Nobody, absolutely nobody, was grateful when it came time to pay their bills. It didn't matter how bad their earlier sufferings had been; these were forgotten as soon as the moment of reckoning arrived. Each parted coin dislodging with a grumble.

The lawyer who represented the Cypress District Trust, a gristly buzzard of a man, looked at the contract papers before him from over the tops of the small round glasses pinching the end of his nose. Following a prolonged series of cryptic mumbles and dramatic exhales, he turned to the gnome Javil sitting across from him, nothing more than a small lunar head and top hat resting on the horizon of his desk, and began to unspool the misgivings that had been taking shape in his thoughts. All of which was pure craft of course.

"Dr. Javil," he began, addressing Sig with a formality that nevertheless carried no trace of genuine respect within it. "It's clear from my review of the terms in these

agreements, perfectly clear, that however admirably you may have accomplished certain tasks mandated by the contract, several stipulations within were not adequately carried out and, given the straightforward nature of the liabilities in question, there's now a great deal of doubt regarding to what extent, if any, the Trust is obligated to provide remittance. I'm sorry but we may have to put this matter under review before we can proceed with processing your request for payment. My sincerest of apologies."

Unseen by his counterpart, the gnome angrily clenched his diminutive fists while keeping his face placid. This was not a ploy Javil was unfamiliar with. Humans were among the trickiest of any folk when it came to business. Always ready with arguments grounded in an obscure loophole or some such. Javil of course was no gnomeling and had lived and done business in Alchemist City for over thirty years; he was therefore sufficiently battle-tested in the carnage of commerce to handle such a development.

"Mr. Lying ass," replied the coldly smiling gnome before he was interrupted.

"Lyngus," corrected the lawyer with a twitch.

"Yes. Well, whatever the case may be, when I negotiated this matter directly with your employer last week, there was a clear understanding. Thirty four odious birds, removed, in exchange for thirty four talents of bronze.<sup>2</sup> Which I generously agreed to, despite my usual rule, that my clients pay in silver or gold. Because I recognized your employer as a gentleman, sir, and wished to accommodate him on account of his reputation. As a gentleman. But if in good conscience you feel you must review this contract, fine. That's your own business. However, as a member of the Tamer's Guild and vice-president of the Chthonic Tradesmen Association, I'm obligated to report my commercial affairs to both these eminent organizations. Which unfortunately, given my reading of the contract, will have to consist of a notice stating that said client is defaulting. A most disagreeable burden for me, I assure you. It will certainly result in a great deal of unnecessary trouble for all parties involved but, like yourself, I too am under hard constraints.

Dr. Sig Javil bowed his head in mock apology and Mr. Lyngus nodded with equal insincerity. Both understood the subtext of each other's remarks even as they maintained the shared pretext. Why? Because that's how business is properly



conducted. You never show outright hostility. You keep your knives hidden right up until your best move is to stick them in your adversaries. And Mr. Lyngus' employer, although much wealthier and more distinguished than Sig Javil, would certainly have his financial interests negatively impacted if the gnome began to campaign against these. So despite the asymmetry of power here, it certainly wasn't in the interest of Mr. Lyngus' client to go to court over so small a sum of bronze. A settlement was inevitable and this was all just part of the negotiation.

Outside an hour later, in the busy afternoon streets of the Tower District, Javil exited the ornate front doors of the law citadel with a hefty bald manservant in tow. The gnome, with his brusque stride and snapping cane, as well as a billowing overcoat and affectatiously angled top-hat, commanded all the notice of the two, and this despite only reaching the height of the latter's knees.

"Come along sir!" barked the gnome with superb ferocity while the man behind him, carrying a small chest under his chin, struggled to keep up. "Your relief is soon at hand. Just around the corner now."

There a tidy plaza of marble emerged which contained a fountain with spiral waterfalls and a small caravan of wyverns hitched nearby. When the manservant went to head in their direction however, Javil looked over his shoulder and said "No. This way," before gesturing farther off with his cane. By such he indicated a modest airship, or air-jalopy to be precise, settled on the ground but also moored. A somewhat ramshackle vessel, it looked similar to a tugboat but with a sort of spidery parasol device protruding from it and bulbous vents that obviously related to some kind of steam powered exhaust system.

"Ovald! Fymn!" shouted the elder gnome as he approached the air jalopy and smacked its hull with his cane. "Get the furnace going! We're off!"

Two heads appeared at separate ends of the ship. One, a newly grown up gnome, probably just into his twenties, and the other still clearly an adolescent, noticeably juvenile looking even for a folk whose aging process seemed to go from infancy to elderly without any intermediary stages. The younger gnome, Fymn, appeared confused, and his face lingered in the port hole it had appeared in after his brother's swiftly disappeared.

“Where to father?” he blurted. Sig sighed, having abandoned any hope of improving his youngest son’s moon-headed ways. Before he could respond though, another voice jumped in.

“Fymn, you wart!” chided Ovald, first as a disembodied voice and then as a head and torso that popped out from one of the deck hatches. “What has father told you about bandying our affairs about in public!”

Sig Javil grunted and then shouted “Ovy.” Immediately gaining his older son’s attention, he gestured wordlessly with the top end of his cane towards the manservant now beside him, a man whose impatience was well-hidden behind a professional façade and, by doing so, communicated his desire for Ovald to take the chest of bronze talents. Meanwhile, the furnace that’d been engaged by Ovald down below was beginning to circulate hot air through the ship’s tangled hoses, and the various deflated blimp sacs attached to the parasol mast began to balloon as a result. Like a giant fungus swelling into bloom. Fymn attended to his duties then, wrestling the rigging with some apparent success as Ovald maneuvered around him rather precariously with the chest he had just been given. After the manservant gave Javil a hasty bow, he sped off, and the old gnome looked towards his youngest son who returned his father’s gaze with a notable wariness. The air jalopy was slowly rising from the ground and the ropes that kept it moored grew taut. Less than a foot off the ground but, for a gnome, no small distance.

Accordingly, old Javil stood in front of the three-step ladder used to board the ship and extended his hand towards his youngest son, making grasping motions to convey his meaning. Dutifully, Fymn tottered over and hauled his father on board; relaxing a bit after doing so. In fact, he adopted a cerebral expression as some purpose of significance seemed to take hold of him.

“We’re not going to see those centaurs again are we?” asked Fymn. “I can’t stomach the smell of them. And I don’t think...”

“Then don’t,” interrupted his father. “Untie the anchor lines and attend to your duties. And maybe pay attention for once. We’re off to the mayor’s hall you git! The mountain from where all the rivers of success flow!”

\* \* \*

It was windy that day. Their air jalopy, named the Vast Frontier back when it was first custom built almost a decade ago, managed to stay on course and make decent time however through the thrust of its iron turbines and pressurized jets of steam, venting in punctuated bursts, which quickly evaporated in the ship's vicinity. An egregious shadow silently gliding over the streets far below, aboard the craft itself there was a relentless tumult of noise as the trio of gnomes attended to their stations. The senior Javil at the helm, his beardless face set in a pugnacious scowl as twin crests of frothy grey sideburns lashed about on either side. Ovald, running inside and out, upstairs and down, manning the lodestone navigational device and analog engine readouts between relaying updates to his father. Fymn, the least responsible, relegated to cranking the valves for the furnace and water tanks while inside each, artifacts of continuity,<sup>3</sup> one of Fer and one of Aca, fed heat and water respectively throughout the engine system. Above the islands of the scattered tower tops, the vessel chugged towards its destination, laboring in a long slow arc that would terminate in the region of the fortress style government building which served as the nexus of power in Alchemist City. Exoteric power that is. Because the Lord Mayor himself, however dictatorial his office, was still appointed by the Supreme Guild of Technomages from among their own ranks. And what internal system of hierarchy they had, few if any outsiders could say.

The layout and entrance of the building were a perfect example of the grand imperial style, with the usual emphasis on the hostile repetition of symmetry. This was meant to awe and intimidate. Which it did. Likewise the numerous oversized statues in solemn poses and the impeccably groomed grounds all expressed with tyrannical clarity the message that order ruled here. No cracks, no stains, no vermin; nothing that manifest chaos was tolerated. And naturally the bureaucrats and visitors arriving and departing reflected this too. In their dress and in their bearing they signaled to those around them that they understood their obligations. That they were part of the system. Obviously the machine called Vast Frontier did not meet these requirements. Like most objects of gnomish engineering it could best be described as a contraption. Meaning its mechanisms were weird, complex, and generally ambiguous in function and purpose. Your average dwarf might be able to figure them out after a bit of prodding and investigation, but most humans would give up after only a few minutes and elves, well, elves would get headaches just looking at the thing (But don't even think about trying to explain a gnomish gadget to an orc; that was a good way to provoke unnecessary murders)

Because of this, the gnomes made sure to land their unsightly ship east of the Mayor's Hall complex proper, between it and The Plebium<sup>4</sup> actually, just to the north of the main thoroughfare of Elven Way. On a small plateau looking down on this, where the burnt out skeletal remains of an old offending nomad camp warned the poor not to set up permanent residence there, and as a steady stream of carriages and steeds flowed by a few yards away east and west, they set down with a thud. Ovald and Fymn jumped out first, quick with the coils of rope they used to tie their ship to a pair of trees. Then their father clambered down, taking each of the three steps on the ship's ladder one at a time, an awkward sight but neither brother was foolish enough to anger the elder Javil by offering him help. Rather they stepped forward slightly in the anticipation that their father would have words to share with them. And, after he paused for a moment to examine his two sons, the older gnome began to speak.

"Both of you have lived among humans your whole lives. By now you should understand well enough their contempt for us. What you may not realize is why I brought your mother here and raised you in this city. Why I don't take us all back to one of our people's hamlets like the one I was born to.<sup>5</sup> Well, you see, whatever uh, tribulations we have to endure here, the fact remains there's nowhere else our family can hope to find better fortunes. The indignities we endure, the slights, the injustices, they are all costs of calculated opportunity. Dirt shrugged off in the midst of worthwhile labors. This city, and more specifically that building over there, is full of doors. And to what? Wealth! Power! Would you rather live solely among your own kind, in some shabby little commune deep in the earth, tinkering with trinkets and squalid schemes? That's not for us! Our future resides in the marketplaces of men, whatever their evils. They will always underestimate us small folk but that, my ingot sons, that will be our advantage over them."

After dispensing a couple instructions of a more practical nature, Dr. Sig Javil left his heirs to wait while he headed to his appointment at the Lord Mayor's Hall. When he was far enough away, Ovald pulled out a pipe from a leather pouch and went to find somewhere to smoke it. Fymn though continued to watch the shrinking figure of his father for a while. A lone soldier marching towards battle. And in the same direction but more distant, the city's gleaming Aeroport where zeppelins and flying chattel converged in ever increasing droves.

\* \* \*

The waiting room was uncomfortably sumptuous. Baroque wooden chairs with plush velvet cushions. And none of it was designed for someone of his stature. Javil had to resist the urge to take off his hat when he came in and, even after he'd spoken to the secretary at the desk and climbed into a seat, the urge to do so still lingered. It wouldn't be right to be seen that way though, thought the gnome. He would take his hat off at the introduction. Not before. To do so earlier would appear diffident. Weak. Similar concerns vexed him while he waited in the refined and spacious foyer of the municipal administrator's office. At the same time, a somber grandfather clock at the other end of the room ticked with disagreeable lethargy while the scratching of the secretary's stylus added its own irritation to the air. A mixture of relief and anxiety swept over him when the door of the office finally opened and a man in a tailcoat and breeches approached.

His first concern was to get down from the chair as quickly as possible, which he did, but not entirely gracefully. Then Javil took off his top hat with his left hand and extended his right high above his head to shake. This was soon enveloped in a human equivalent that unenthusiastically reciprocated.

"Dr. Sig Javil? Sorry for the wait. I'm Mr. Cirrisi. Please. Step inside."

Javil nodded and followed, taking the time to scrutinize Mr. Cirrisi as he did. The man's name indicated he was a West Lowlander and his general appearance seemed to confirm this. The prominent nose and cheek bones, even on a face without a strong jawline or other distinct features. The fish like lips, nearly blue, in a firmly set mouth. Hooded eyes with conspicuous bags underneath. And the more relaxed and style conscious bearing that characterized a culture who held a positive attitude towards hedonism; perhaps the single biggest difference they had with their industrious and reserved eastern neighbors. The gnome felt like he had a good measure of the man but was disturbed when, entering the office behind him, Sig discovered someone else seated at the desk there. Plus he could tell right away that this was the senior official. A pale judge in black, aged and cruel. He did not rise to greet the gnome or introduce himself; instead Mr. Cirrisi gestured at Javil to take a seat as he himself sat down in an opposite chair. Mindful of his hatlessness, and how his intentions had been thwarted by chance, Sig Javil made his way over to the forbiddingly high chair.

“Should I... call someone in to assist you?” asked Mr. Cirrisi with a hint of embarrassment. Was this whole meeting going to turn into a farce?

Sig shook his head and, exhaling, grabbed the seat with one hand on either side and wormed his way up. This only lasted a few seconds but he could feel their eyes on him and it was excruciating. Forcing away the heat that had been creeping into his face by sheer willpower though, the gnome turned around towards his counterparts with as much dignity as he could muster. When a moment passed with no one else saying anything, Sig cleared his throat and spoke.

“Gentlemen,” he began. “I... appreciate your arranging this. I trust it’s fair of me to ask now for more details about the contract. The notice I read regarding it was rather vague on the specifics.”

Mr. Cirrisi, who had been looking at Javil as he was talking, pursed his mouth and turned to the senior official in black for guidance. This resulted in the man behind the desk opening a ledger and looking over it.

“Dr. Javil,” intoned the senior official with crisp professorial pronunciation. “The reason you’re here is because we’re considering you for a job. Something that requires a certain discretion. Given our assessment of your previous work and the quality of your proposal, you’ve made it to the final round of the vetting process. But there are still unanswered questions. By which I don’t mean yours; I mean ours. Amongst the decision making committee, there are those who do not believe that you and your sons are the right choice for this particular task. There are suggestions that what might be required of you is beyond your abilities.”

“And how am I supposed to answer this sir?” asked Javil. “Your notice only indicated that an unusual infestation was at issue. I have given your office a thorough account of the resources, the equipment, I command and all the foul incarnations of magic my sons and I have vanquished. Our history is bare sir. Our successes speak for themselves. Are... are my credentials in question?”

“No. Not at all,” replied the black-clad man.

“Then what is this about?”

“Character assessment.”

Javil snorted air out of his nose and crossed his arms as he pondered what he’d just been told. Character assessment? Really? Were they just humoring him? Indulging a meeting so they could write a report saying they’d thoroughly reviewed all their options before giving the contract to a personal acquaintance? But no, that’s not what this felt like. There was something else going on here. Javil wasn’t sure what it was but he had the strong suspicion it was something else completely. Something to do with all the secrecy.

“It’s hard to respond to a statement like that,” the gnome said with manifest thoughtfulness. “And I suppose that’s the point. Character of course is a mercurial thing. Tough to assess. In my trade, getting the measure of others is also important though. So the question of character then is... something I’ve given considerable reflection over. And likewise in the raising of my sons. Yes, it’s an important matter that any gentlemen ought to clarify for himself. Which I’ve done; forming my own opinion quite carefully. It then amounting to this; that I esteem diligence to be the greater part of character. Indeed. For if character defines the quality of one’s virtues then it will be, generally speaking, the substance of these. Their fortitude. Therefore, when I must judge a person, I seek to determine how they have fared, and will fare, in adversity. Well, if you gentleman are like me in this, then I trust my character will be obvious to you. I came to this city a pauper and, frankly, an outcast. And now, here I am, in the hall of the Lord Mayor himself. A gnome. Less than half a man to many but made more through fierce work and a reputation that has remained solid so many years. Because I deliver what I promise. Because I honor my debts. And because I do not betray confidentiality.” Here Javil paused to breathe and suppress his emotion before continuing.

“Gentlemen. I do not think there’s more to say.”

Mr. Cirrisi and the senior official had both been listening to him attentively and, when he finished, the former of these looked towards the latter. Slowly, the man nodded and then Mr. Cirrisi turned to Javil solicitously.

“Dr. Javil. It would appear that you are precisely the individual suited to this task. Please confirm that you accept this assignment.”

“Yes. Of course,” blurted the surprised gnome. “I mean, I do. Very good. Excellent. Shall I provide you with my signature and seal now?”

“Well,” replied Mr. Cirrisi with the faintest wince. “There won’t be any official record of this, you see. It’s a sensitive matter. We’ll have someone contact you at a designated location.”

“Who?”

“We can’t say.”

“You mean you’re unable? Or unwilling?”

Mr. Cirrisi smiled. A smile that furthermore seemed to conceal a wealth of esoteric information. Javil could not discern its purpose and, especially, whether it signified sympathy or amusement. Contemplating it was like a trance but this was punctured when the man offered his parting guarantee.

“You’ll recognize them using a password,” said Mr. Cirrisi but, when Javil here glanced towards the senior official, he thought he saw something briefly crawling underneath the latter’s skin.

\* \* \*

As it turned out, Javil hardly had need of the password. His contact was so conspicuous, he noticed them approaching down the street from a mile off. Well, what he saw first were four obsidian golems. Identical in their vaguely humanoid design, these eight foot tall titans moved as one mechanical unit while conveying a strange palanquin between them. With eyeless faces devoid of features, they seemed oblivious to the surrounding urban traffic as they directly approached Javil and his sons. The gnomes had been waiting at a street corner in the Forge District for several minutes and, full of curiosity regarding their mysterious assignment, they watched the group of golems intently while the latter drew closer. Obviously it was the palanquin that held their contact but scrutinizing this only increased their perplexity as to who could be inside.



The unusual apparatus, supported by the twin lacquered bars that rested on the inward shoulders of the front and rear pairs of golems, had an icosahedron chamber of pure crystal that was obscured by an amethyst colored translucent curtain hung from a coiled slide rail circumscribing it. Only the faintest gap at the bottom of the chamber's glass wasn't covered but, more than this, the discernible shadow of the passenger within seized their attention. It was clearly a humanlike figure. Not as large maybe. About the size of a waifish elf. There was significant difficulty in making an assessment here because the figure seemed to be slouching or sitting in a meditation pose. The whole chamber itself was hardly four feet in diameter, while the bars themselves were perhaps fourteen feet or more in length, so it was a rather small litter compartment in comparison. And each of the golems, no doubt possessing strength many orders greater than an average human, could have transported it by themselves in a rickshaw. Having four golems however provided a formidable bodyguard and, since few citizens could afford such a cohort of servants, it was a clear status statement as well. On the one hand, this pleased Javil; it meant the contract was likely to be lucrative. However, the promise of great fortune usually entailed increased risks and these had not revealed themselves yet. He was therefore feeling uneasy when the group of golems halted in front of him and his two sons. Close enough to the golems now to be recognized as part of their group, the other pedestrians passing by no longer walked carelessly close to the gnomes and they felt themselves in a kind of river eddy that had formed amid the normal traffic of the street. A sense of expectation hung in the air too.

*jealous believer... come closer*

Javil glanced around at hearing the password and instruction but he quickly realized the words he'd perceived were psychically implanted in his mind. Here too the golems folded the palanquins bars at previously unnoticed hinges, turning these into legs, and then proceeded to stand at sentry around the transformed device while one of them beckoned for Javil to approach.

"Keep a discrete eye on our surroundings," whispered Javil to Ovald before adjusting his coat and walking over. Here one of the golems pulled the curtain aside just enough for Javil to get a decent view and his breath stopped when he saw the lone occupant. It was The Merman.

*we can bypass the introductions then I gather*

The Merman's words suggested his mental powers consisted of more than the ability to project speech, so Javil did his best to not have any compromising thoughts while he grappled with what was happening. The Merman, it must be said, was not a real merman, since mermaids were the sole sex of their kind.<sup>6</sup> Rather, and this was a story familiar to anyone with dealings in the occult economy, The Merman had been a porcelain puppet commissioned by a wealthy merchant and then awakened into sentience by a wizard. An error in the spell however left The Merman in a conscious but paralyzed state; the truth of which was attested to by what Javil saw. Said contact was leaning with their forehead against the glass of their crystal compartment, fully immersed in water, maintaining a vacant-eyed look like a catatonic held in a lunatic asylum. Yet the manlike creation, with their pale delicate features and long golden hair hanging straight and thin, was only a prisoner in body since they commanded their four golems, and many others, telepathically. In fact, The Merman was a feared broker of power in the underworld and Sig Javil knew this. The androgynous qualities of The Merman, their scarlet lips and intrinsic eyeliner, contrasted with the twin serpent heads they had instead of legs and these together made them all the more menacing in appearance. Also disturbing were numerous snails inside the crystal chamber, most suctioned to its glass, idly roaming their enclosed aquarium and over The Merman also.

*i know much about you doctor javil... my sources inform me that under the duress of authorities you resisted incriminating a mutual acquaintance of ours... for that reason... and at my sole discretion... i've decided not to dispose of you after this task is completed... i trust you will not make me regret this kindness*

Javil swallowed. "Your trust in me will not be betrayed," he murmured. "I can assure you that I..."

*you do not need to articulate your words out loud*

(My apologies, conceded Javil. I trust there is little I need to say anyways)

*you are correct doctor*

(Then I will defer to your instructions)

*good... these are straightforward... you will meet with an employee at the north sewer station who will provide you with access below... do not discuss or otherwise inform this employee of any prior or subsequent information pertaining to this contract... you will then proceed to investigate an infestation of unknown kind... use extra caution... payment in gold will be commensurate with the quantity and detail of the information provided on top of a premium for any individuals you eliminate... your report will be expected tomorrow morning*

(Unknown kind? he wondered. Haven't there been any prior efforts to obtain intelligence on the situation?)

There was a pause before The Merman answered.

*one investigator was dispatched last week with limited precautions... nothing has been heard from them subsequently... a lethal event is suspected... hence our suggestion that you utilize extra caution... we trust you know your own business though and have the adequate means at your disposal...*

(I see, thought Javil. And by individuals you meant?)

*anything infected*

\* \* \*

The North Sewer Station was located at the northern edge of the Forge District where it began to transition into the semi-independent neighborhood of Pilgrimborg. Here factories and guild studios vied for prominence with old jigsaw apartments<sup>7</sup> and the general ambiance was rough and industrial but with some concessions to commercial modernity. Streets and sidewalks tended to be rather wide but, when the gnomes eventually found their destination after circling for a while in their air jalopy, they landed this in the alley behind the building and walked to the front. There they were surprised when, knocking at the designated entrance, a blind dwarf woman opened the door.

"Evening madam," intoned Javil. "I'm Dr. Javil and these are my two sons Ovald and Fymn. We're the contractors who've been sent here for the maintenance survey."

After saying this he was about to produce the paperwork The Merman had provided for the cover story when he stopped, realizing his mistake.

“She knows who you are,” answered the female dwarf with smacking lips. “She was told to expect you.”

“And her good name?” asked Javil.

“Vama it be. No madam, mind you. Just Vama. Plain Vama. A city custodian. And a fair worker she is, bother the sight. Better you come in though. No use gabbing much here at the door.”

The three gnomes entered as she stood aside and looked around while she dealt with the heavy door herself and its screeching piston lock. The room was dimly lit by a single gas lamp on the ceiling and consisted of uniformly smooth cement walls and a pair of narrow hallways leading in perpendicular directions. Once she was done with the door, Vama proceeded to shuffle in the other direction with her right hand and stubby fingers probing in front of her. Fymn, feeling guilty for not helping with the door, came up beside her and tried to guide her with a gentle touch. This was not appreciated.

“Ai! Stop that!” chided the dwarf woman. “She wasn’t blinded yesterday! She doesn’t need your worrying after her!”

Chastened, Fymn pulled away and his father gave him an unimpressed look while Ovald smiled and mimed sarcastic applause. They then followed in single file while their blind guide led them through a series of identical corridors to a large open area with huge columned machines and a descending ramp leading to a half cylinder gated-tunnel where shallow water flowed in from feeder pipes. Although not repellent enough to constitute a stench, the air emanating from this was distinctly unpleasant and had a thick slimy texture to it.

“Mrs. Vama,” said Javil, blinking and waving the air away from his face. “We have a vehicle parked in the alley with some of the equipment we’ll need. What’s the best way to bring that here?”

“I’ll show you our loading bay,” she replied. “Over here.”

It took almost an hour to cart in and set up everything they needed but, when all their preparations were finished, this consisted of Ovald buckled into a hermetic hard-suit with a copper bell helmet, toting a flame thrower in one hand while a telegraph device, embedded in the other, ran its wires through the air circulation hose the suit utilized for safe breathing. Said device would be their sole means of communication and involved the suit occupant tapping a transmitter on their index finger with the adjacent thumb. The wire then ran to an auto-typing machine that translated the binary code of the telegraph into the modernese alphabet. All four of these impressive items represented state of the art technology and all four had been engineered and patented by Dr. Sig Javil himself. And the doctor was a gnome of his times; meaning, if asked, he'd answer plainly that he thought his inventions were by far his greatest legacy. Something he made no compunction about saying even in the presence of his two sons.

"Test the line Ovy," grunted Javil as he re-adjusted the auto-typist he'd set up on a tripod in front of him. Ovy responded with a slight tilt before issuing a series of taps and clicks with a single gloved thumb that then swiftly unleashed a clacking mechanical outburst from the print stamps of the translator. After the short flurry of metal arms and a couple gear shifts to unroll a few inches of paper off the drum, a message in still wet ink was legible.

...r good sir

In response, Ovald's father shook his sleeves away from his wrists and sent out a reply through a pair of rotary dials on an attached panel.

...u receiv?

...y

Vama, who was doing her best to hide her intense curiosity, was sweeping on an elevated platform nearby but understandably couldn't figure out what was happening just from the sounds of the odd devices below.

“Forgive an old blind woman,” interrupted the dwarfess as she leaned on her broom, practically hugging it at the same time. “But it sounds like you’re fussing away at some unholy mischief right now.”

Javil didn’t conceal a slight scowl but Fymn responded with a sympathetic smile and cleared his throat before trying to clarify things.

“We’re passing messages to my brother. Electro-statically.”

“With what?” asked the female dwarf shaking her head. “Clocks young gnome? In cuckoo talk? Oh, her ears must be deceiving her. They really must.”

Since Vama immediately returned to her work, Fymn offered no further explanation and he and his father assisted Ovald towards the tunnel gate. The bulky hard-suit made its wearer move like they were underwater so the younger brother hustled to open the lattice grate door while Dr. Javil ensured that the air hose didn’t get caught on anything and was properly threaded through the gap between the gate and the floor. This accomplished, Ovald shifted to face them and raised a forwardly clenched fist in a gesture of resolution and team spirit. His father patted him on the shoulder and then gently pushed him onward while Fymn offered a somewhat stiff salute. With no more reason to delay, Ovald began to disappear into the entrance of a subterranean labyrinth thousands of years old in some parts and extending far and wide across the city; the pilot light on his flamethrower now serving as an increasingly lonely source of illumination in the large dark tunnel that was gradually swallowing him.

\* \* \*

Check in was every five minutes. If Ovald didn’t abide by this, a surly string of taps and clicks was guaranteed to erupt the other way. He didn’t need extra encouragement though. The sewer tunnels beneath Alchemist City were a warren of murky occult niches, territories where eldritch creatures spawned in all manners of horrendous shape, so a solitary young gnome, however bravely he might present himself, was still eager for the minor reassurance that the telegraph messages provided. That he was not entirely abandoned. And even uneventful exploration of the tunnels provided an abundance of information for him to relay. Accordingly, Ovald passed along his many eclectic observations; the dripping black stalactites of

ancient mold colonies hanging from the ten foot high ceiling in wispy tendrils, the calcified corpse of a hog-sized rat he stumbled upon at a dead-end turn, the occasional parts of the tunnels where stonework and pillars had collapsed, the albino leeches that swarmed at his boots searching for flesh to latch on to, the odd items of remarkable garbage such as the giant rusted drill-bit and the overturned anvil he found. But, most notable, was a quintuple-barred iron door which had a sign that read "Mutant Outbreak: Keep Contained." Having not been told by his father of any specifics regarding what was infesting the sewers, he first assumed this was what he'd been sent down to dispose of. After being informed that the mutants in question were already quarantined though, Ovald moved on.

What he had been aware of was the rumor that sewer workers had seen unusual movement in the northern sections of the city underworks. Things that seemed to be avoiding them. His father only telegraphed him some additional details about this after the misunderstanding with the abominations. Reports had described the encountered entities as multi-limbed and spindly in appearance; descriptions which didn't match any known species of vermin, magical or otherwise. Then a municipal inspector had disappeared and the city officials had turned to outside experts for assistance. Why not send in the City Warders or the Lord's Militia though? Ovald supposed that the bureaucrats probably just didn't want to escalate things unnecessarily and risk irritating the Technomages. Bloody thing about wizards; all that power meant even their slightest irks and displeasures could end up resulting in fantastically disproportionate punishments. Literally. Ovald had heard of blight-curses placed on plebs for accidentally stepping on a sorcerer's shadow. So ordinary folk lived in constant terror of higher-level magic users. Which explained why they'd been hired. A trio of gnomes after all made for the perfect canaries. Being equally cheap and disposable.

...mid reel now

Ovald telegraphed a quick "thx" to his father for informing him he'd reached the half-length of his air hose but otherwise didn't give it any thought. There wasn't anything he could do if he ran out other than to turn back and explore one of the tunnel branches he'd passed by earlier. He was starting to get bored now too. There was still the underlying layer of his previous fear but, with well over half an hour of not encountering anything, he was starting to incline to the belief his worries were going to be for nothing. Although it would be quite the horrific joke if, in a luckless

spell of nonchalance, he was suddenly surprised by some deadly monster and killed in the brief height of arrogance. One of Ansant's<sup>8</sup> famous quips was that "the wall between tragedy and comedy is only knee high," and that seemed pretty applicable here. Plus, as a gnome, it had an even more tragic connotation. No diabolical beast leaped out of the darkness to maul him however. There were not even any eerie sounds for him to be anxious over. The tunnels seemed cleared of all their larger denizens and, for several minutes after this realization, he continued his slow investigation in a perfunctory way. Because nothing was going to happen. Finally, almost with a sense of relief, he heard a curious shuffling noise while he paused to wipe away some sludge splatter that had drizzled on his arm.

It was coming from the darkness ahead. He raised the pilot flame at the end of his weapon a little higher to see better and carefully began to advance towards the sound. He suspected it was probably just a small animal but when he got his first glance of what it was, he could tell right away this wasn't something natural in origin. Its movements were too bizarre. Appendages like tentacles but almost liquid and splashing at twisted angles. Splintering members bulging with protoplasmic antennae; the splayed body parts projected from a shimmering mass of organs collected together haphazardly. Not insect or sea creature then but even more alien. And it scuttled away, recognizing his presence. Ovald gulped. At least it wasn't that big though. Telegraphing a quick "...saw sumthin," he proceeded to follow after the creature, catching vanishing glimpses of it as he pursued it into a winding corridor. Soon this widened into a small enclave and here he found that the thing was no longer fleeing him. To the contrary, it was creeping closer. And it wasn't alone. Similar contorted shapes were swarming the ground and walls around him, converging on the shocked gnome in a single nightmarish tide. He could see their teeth now too. The rows of pulsing fangs.

In the sudden panic of rapid breathing and a furiously beating heart, Ovald squeezed the trigger on his flamethrower. That instant, everything disappeared into its brightness. The flash from the torrent of flames seemed to engulf the whole tunnel for a moment before the roaring funnel of fire was a thing glowing in contrast to the red walls and ceiling. And the fiends, shrivelling and disintegrating at the touch of his inferno were dying madly as they desperately tried to clamber over one another. Despite how pathetic and excruciating their deaths were though, the gnome felt no sympathy for them. The terror he'd just felt seconds earlier hardened him against any pity. In fact, he refused to release the trigger of the



flamethrower until he was sure that every last one of the creatures had been thoroughly roasted. Even then, pools of their dead crackled with flames that provided ample light to scrutinize the carnage. The heat had virtually liquefied their corpses though so there wasn't much to ponder. And he didn't. Ovald only made sure nothing was still moving and that there were no avenues from which he could be ambushed. He had just finished this when the tapping and clicking of his telegraph started and he had to make a greater-than-normal effort to concentrate on translating the message in his head.

...status?

His chest heaving up and down, Ovald paused before he was able to respond with an adrenaline-spasming thumb.

...still fine - nrly wasnt

He didn't go into too much detail with his father due to the limited means of communication but he gave them the gist of what'd happened. Simultaneously, he began to advance again, taking a route across a miniature bridge that led to a huge cavern with an area of imposing brick terraces. He came across a few more of the fiends as well but these were quickly incinerated and by the time he reached the vicinity of the terraces he felt confident he was once more alone. There he stood and squinted upwards, having trouble seeing in the dim light, but at last confident in what he saw. At the top of the slope of terraces, there was something like the dome of an organic membrane projecting from a wall and a few juvenile members of the infesting species congregating around it. He'd found the nest. It was too far to reach with his flame thrower however so he began to search for a means to get closer. A few minutes later he found something but quickly telegraphed a message to his father in irritation and disgust.

...dscvrd infest point but bad news

...what

...gated stairs - cant reach - too hi - sry

...no other way?

...n

...ok - stay - we come

\* \* \*

Ovald passed the time waiting by making various observations about the cavern. An apparently natural concavity, it consisted of an irregular silt bed from a now drained underground lake with a few islands of projecting rock. The terraces of course were artificial; built no doubt to allow access to the previously existing waters while these were at various levels. The lake then had probably been fed by rainfall. Why this was no longer the case, Ovald had no idea, but he was grateful that there didn't appear to be any indications of recent flooding. Despite that, he was still seething at the simplicity of the obstruction impeding him. A gate blocking a set of stairs that led up the terrace slope. A gate with a pin lock on top. Perfectly accessible to a human but to a gnome, weighed down by a heavy suit they needed the aid of others to remove, it was insurmountable. And frustrating! To be defeated by an obstacle that was nothing more than a garden gate to humans. The lurking sense of embarrassment. But that's how it was living in a world designed for tall folk. Every day it was a constant battle.

Soon enough though his father and brother arrived, following his air hose to find him and riding in on a generic pair of hex animated hobby-steeds. These were constructs in the vague shape of little ponies that, when fueled with a magical elixir, came to life until said fuel ran out. Both gnomes had breathing masks and tanks on their backs too; not so much for air but rather, like with the hermetic suit, to safeguard against hostile spores and toxic miasmas. Sig Javil furthermore came toting a flintlock revolver and dagger while Fymn brandished a stunted trident. And they had a step ladder. Ovald waved to them in recognition and the two other gnomes galloped directly towards him before coming to a violent stop.

"Saw the cookout you had without us," smirked his father as he dismounted. This was only slightly muffled by his breathing mask. "I don't suppose you counted 'em all so that I know what to bill the city?"

Ovald's arms and shoulders drooped in chagrin.

"Yeah, didn't expect it," badgered Javil. "Come on then. Show your brother and I where these stairs are."

Ovald turned around while simultaneously waving for the other two gnomes to follow. The gate was only a few yards away but with his hermetic suit on, the short distance seemed to take an agonizing amount of time. A few feet from their object now, Ovald unscrewed a valve on his helmet so he could speak through a small opened hatch.

"It's right here," complained Ovald. "A stupid device is all. Obviously if I wasn't wearing the suit..."

"Please," interrupted Sig Javil sarcastically. "Glitter us up a campfire and we'll sit around while you tell the whole tale. No? Alright. Fymn? Yeah, grab the step ladder and be your brother's hero for once."

Fymn dutifully did as his father ordered and had the gate open in seconds. When he climbed down and folded the ladder up however, his face was more apologetic than triumphant about helping where his brother couldn't.

"Okay boys," intoned Javil to his sons. "Looks like there's only a couple of the littler bastards lurking around the nest area right now. Which means save your fuel Ovald. Who knows what's inside. Beyond that slime bag there might be millions. I'll deal with the ones on the outside. Fymn! You protect our rear and flank."

Both Ovald and Fymn nodded at this and the trio of gnomes began their ascent of the terraces. The steps were fortunately much more gradient than these so it was only as difficult for the gnomes as double-sized stairs would be for humans. Which could have been much worse. Gnomes average around two feet tall so an individual stair for them can sometimes reach the height of their waist. That said, Ovald's suit meant he did have to strain a bit and rely on Fymn but eventually all three of the Javils made it to the walkway running along the top of the brick slope. There the eldest of the group had to test his pistol against an encroaching fiend but his initial shot was on the mark and the thing exploded like a pumpkin. Passing the pale remains of the creature, all three gnomes noted its long slender appearance and

profusion of spiny legs. Reminiscent of a centipede. The looming dome of the membrane swiftly drew their attention however and it seemed to be pulsing ever so slightly when they got near. A queasily hypnotic sight. But this didn't stop Dr. Javil from dismembering a few more monsters with some well-aimed shots and, by the time they'd reached the threshold of the dome, the last of the infesting creatures on its outside had been eliminated.

"No different than gutting a strung up pig," grunted Sig Javil as he took his dagger and stabbed it into the membrane high above his head, before pulling down on this, opening a rend tall enough for everyone to walk through.

"I can go first if you want father," offered Fymn nervously.

"Nonsense," replied the elder Javil. "Ovald. Close your yap hatch and scout ahead for us. If it's safe around the corner, stomp your boot and we'll follow after."

Ovald mumbled something in the affirmative before sealing his helmet again and pushing his way through the opening in the membrane. Beyond this he soon vanished into a rectangular stone corridor carved out of something resembling volcanic rock. Sig and Fymn of course were expecting him to immediately signal them or hear the ignition of his flamethrower so, after a full minute where neither of these things transpired, the patriarch of the family grew discontent.

"Boy! I ain't hearing stompin' or burnin! And if you're dead you better let us know! Come on now!"

There was no immediate response however. Dr. Sig Javil was really getting ready then to lay into his son when some belated stomping echoed from up ahead. It sounded rather uncertain though. The elder Javil, rolling his eyes towards Fymn, exhaled and slithered through the membrane opening before his youngest son gulped and did the same. Making the turn in the tunnel together, they saw Ovald's pilot light in front of them and walked up next to him on either side. But he acted like he didn't notice either of his kin and they followed his stare to look at what lay in a massive pile at the center of a mausoleum-like room. No ordinary chronicler could adequately capture the true horror of what they saw. It was the most grotesque and dreadful sight any of them had ever seen.

Surrounding the creature were her egg sacs. Teeming bulbous egg sacs stretched to their limits with sinister hatchlings on the verge of bursting free. Disgusting enough then. But worse still, the egg sacs themselves were the bodies of missing citizens from above. Completely devoured from within by the brood that had been implanted in each. Except one figure who was distinguishable as the city inspector due the remnants of a torn uniform; his face was still undistorted enough to be recognizably human and the fevered agony on this, and the foam bubbling at his mouth, conveyed his tortured state with lurid eloquence. Yet he and the other victims were only the bed on which she lay. And she was a vile demon similar in appearance to a giant white centipede. A seventeen foot long centipede with a humanoid head and a torso profuse with a carpet of swollen milk nodules and two branch-like arms with perhaps eight claws on each hand. Fortunately for the gnomes, she seemed to be incapacitated by some kind of weakening delirium related to her condition as an expectant mother. But this did not prevent her from speaking and her sibilant voice seemed to crawl out of her rancid lips.

“Intruderss? Gnomesss? Ha ha. Asstrologersss perhapss. Did the signss bring them to pay homage? No. Poor fellowsss. Losst. They did not expect to find themselfss the witnessssssess of sssuch glory. Ah. But can they keep a sssecret? They must. Oh yesss. Why would any of the little folk be eager to sssave their oppressssorss? Let the ssscity fall to ssome black luck for wonssse. My children will feasssst in sssweet revenge. Thesse sssewerss... they’ll overflow with blood.”

Both sons concurrently looked to their father and noted the stern expression that was etched onto his face. Never before had they seen him appearing so aged. It was as if all his years had caught up with him in the span of the she-demon’s speech. It was a mystery though what he was going to say. Eventually, with no attempt to hide his weariness, he placed a wrinkled hand on the arm of his eldest son. Then he shook his head as he spoke.

“Ovy. Forget the count. Just torch it. All of it.”

And all too gladly the flames obliged.

\* \* \*

The Merman sent him a telegram the morning after the events in the sewers. Dr. Javil was instructed to come alone to Pilgrimborg proper this time at the street corner where the infamous Ogre's Grotto and Eighty Goblins pubs competed for the money of swill-drinking hooligans. He did not have to wait long after stepping out of the zebra-pulled hansom cab he'd hired for a golem to approach and lead him to a rear door in a trash-deluged alley. Entering this, he was led down some rickety stairs to an apparent laboratory of some kind where he found The Merman in his previous icosahedron tank. Next to him however was a set of flayed human skin and Sig Javil observed with surprise that this had previously belonged to the senior official he'd met with at the hall of the Lord Mayor. Not that this turn of events bothered him in the least.

*would you like to know why you were chosen?*

(Please, thought Javil)

*they assumed you would fail... and then i agreed to their choice because i knew they were wrong*

(It's a good thing when one's enemies cannot judge the truth)

*yet truth makes a poor whip because those who most deserve a scourging tend to be shameless liars on whom this has no effect*

(Odd that you would quote Mr. Ansant. We just attended one of his public lectures the other week)

The Merman did not immediately respond to this and Javil observed a snail crossing the fingers on one of his flaccid hands. In the dingy light provided by the lanterns in the laboratory, this was unusually unsettling.

*i know you only received thirty talents out of the cypress contract*

(Everyone has to bend the knee once in a while. Even when the folk are so small that a bent knee is utterly meaningless)

*i never bend... ever...*

(You are not everyone. Obviously)

*very good... you have a talent for people javil... and i have a feeling we could do more business together... but there are things you should be aware of*

(Your confidence in me has my humblest gratitude)

*then listen well... i was created to be a plaything for a wealthy merchant and his harem... then, after the wizard's magic failed to animate me properly, i became little more than a curiosity he kept on the shelf... but i found friends among his household... and in time we managed to find a way to correct me... and i asked him if he would release me... what do you think his response was?*

(Barely any man I've known was willing to give up what he felt was his)

*exactly... and when he found out about the druids who were going to help me, he hired a witch to make my curse permanent... even though i was nothing to him anymore, he still wouldn't allow me to be free... it was only years later that i finally secured the means for my escape*

(But that wasn't the end of it was it?)

*no... the man who cursed me is still alive... decades later... i keep him in a cage no bigger than my tank... and many nights he has begged me for death*

(It would seem that sometimes a man's life does end up being defined by his merits. But I trust you are generous to your friends)

*i am... thank you javil, you may go... but do me a favor before you leave*

(Of course)

Here one of the golems picked up the skin of the flayed official and stooped down to present this to Javil like a piece of old clothing.

*get rid of this for me*

## Annotations

1. In Alchemist City at the time, the upper class society doesn't trust the lower classes with childcare responsibilities due to fears of corruption.
2. Most commerce in the Landing Countries is still done with hard assets because its independent city states lack a central authority, despite the abundance of trade between them, and this has led to a prevailing skepticism regarding paper currency. In the current year there is economic agitation for this to change however.
3. Artifacts of continuity are enchanted devices that produce a steady stream of magical output. Usually elemental in kind because substances and things of greater complexity become exponentially more taxing on their enchanters.
4. When the city was founded in 833 oe, 303 years ago, The Plebium was created as a political counterbalance to establishment interests; an institution to serve the interests of the broader public. But it was quickly infiltrated and coopted.
5. The average lifespan of a gnome is 120 years, which is twice that of a human, and they tend to live outside of human cities; often in subterranean hamlets with around a hundred other denizens.
6. Mermaids, like the other female-only species Nymphs and Harpies, reproduce by procreating with elves and humans. In the case of Mermaids and Harpies, this is almost never consensual and involves the injection of a venom that causes blood coagulation and forced erections. Something referred to as parasitic mating.
7. Buildings of distinctly irregular construction.
8. From a much celebrated collection of essays he published, re-evaluating the merits of Imperial art. Specifically while discussing the later dynastic-dramas of the orthodox era and the poetic ideal of universalizing.



## TIME SCHEME

### DAYS

Sunday  
Lunesday  
Twinsday  
Woesday  
Heursday  
Friarsday  
Satyrday

### MONTHS (28 days | 4 weeks)

Tide  
Perspis  
Vox  
Juvenas  
Mirth  
Ulto  
Lulle  
Reap  
Glooming  
Yule  
Ghaster  
Froud  
Hexen

## **SEASONS**

Sprang (28th of Hexen – Aca’s Eve) 1st day  
Somme (7th of Juvenas – Fer’s Day) 91st day  
Aume (14th of Lulle – Ert’s Day) 182nd day  
Vint (21st of Yule – Vand’s Day) 273rd day

## **ZODIAC**

Horse  
Mole  
Badger  
Wolf  
Chimera  
Hydra  
Manticore  
Griffin  
Pegasus  
Unicorn  
Deer  
Otter  
Dragon

# Zen Essays

## The Secrets of Zen Revealed

The prospect of unravelling mysteries has a natural appeal to those interested in profound knowledge. Regarding Zen however, if a seeker of truth here is sincere, they will have to grapple with two disappointments: the first being that Zen has only one teaching and the second being that this teaching is just that Zen has no secrets. Zen is the recognition that nothing is hidden. Nothing of fundamental importance anyways. Why? Because Zen has no meaning beyond recognizing one's own nature, one's self as one is; in other words, Zen is the perception of what is completely and continuously manifest in every moment of our very own being. Our ordinary life. And more often than not the primary purpose of the intellectual and spiritual preoccupations we invest ourselves in is to actively obstruct this; instead of confronting the person facing us in the mirror and all that is obvious and challenging about that encounter, we look elsewhere for distractions to delay this. Because as long as there is some instinct for falsity within us, this instinct will prioritize the concealing of its own existence; the mere recognition of a falsity still dwelling within oneself is already too honest for falsity (Even this much truth in itself is an atmosphere poisonous to delusion)

The Zen tradition then is an illuminating response to an interesting obstacle: how do you teach something that cannot be taught? The desire to be honest is not something that follows from an intellectual demonstration and the individual self-nature is not something that can be given to us since we alone have access to the truths of our own motives and character. The secrets of Zen therefore do not belong to Zen; they are your own secrets you keep from yourself.

So what's my authority to teach these secrets? Fortunately, I have no authority. No, I am just someone else wandering the path. In fact, I am not an exemplary traveller. Instead of pressing on to the end I often stop to gawk at things and amuse myself; sometimes I even go off on detours or undo my progress by going backwards. And though the path is perfectly clear, I still get lost. What I will say though is I haven't seen anyone pass me by on the path so far. I have observed others who are diligent travellers, more or less, but none that awed me with their determination or prowess. And those who call themselves gurus and masters are the least impressive of all; each of these fell off the path a long time ago to seek the diversions of eminence and admiration. None of them are going anywhere. But what about you? Do you want to see your own nature? The path is right in front of you.

## THE PROFOUND AND TRIVIAL ARE EQUALS

Those who privilege one over the other are like a bird trying to fly by only flapping one of its wings. And yet dividing things and grading them is the dominant attitude of the world. Why? If the heart is full of partiality, it will necessarily impose this partiality on its environment by covering reality in a pleasing veil; just as someone embarrassed by some piece of immovable furniture in their house might cover that in drapery to hide it, the partial heart, disturbed by the fundamental equality of all forms of being, generates illusions to hide the truth of this from its own awareness. Lying to oneself is a defensive sickness: it's the natural instinct to protect oneself being corrupted into a self-diminishing behavior. When the self and the world are continuous, there is no sense of alienation and so fear cannot take root; when the self and the world have been distorted into opposites though, a spirit of adversary transforms the heart into an all-encompassing battlefield and the individual is then compelled to choose some allegiance. The proud will raise themselves above the world, the timid meanwhile will place themselves beneath it; both choices though are succumbing to the same delusion.

Getting past this involves its own jeopardy however because in conceiving the situation as something to be bypassed, one is just capitulating to a more subtle variation of the same error. Even the mere contrast between the correct and erroneous is itself in error; by conceiving a fundamental dichotomy, the individual creates a perspective that necessarily requires both aspects of said duality. Viewing things as being correct or being in error then amounts to perpetuating the power of error over one's existence. In Zen conversely, truth and falsity are no longer like two titans clashing in a cosmic contest; they are merely twin puppets operated by a single set of hands. The individual's own. But this is naturally quite difficult to accept for minds conditioned by the biases of the world so perhaps there is an easier entrance to be found elsewhere?

Consider the profound and trivial: a similar dichotomy. In general, people esteem the profound and disparage the trivial; their perception of knowledge being guided by a deeply rooted sense of unreal values. For them the profound is precious and rare, the trivial is useless and commonplace. Even where the individual can intellectually renounce this, inferring the inadequacy of such a framework by contrasting it with some more persuasive belief in the holistic nature of reality, that belief remains nothing but a superficial exercise in intellectual indulgence. Truth

here hasn't yet penetrated into the heart. With the aid of the ancients who gave us the gift of the Zen tradition however, a way through the labyrinths of this predicament has been provided. Many ways in fact but any one of these is more than enough so I will only focus on one here:

*Yunyan said, "Non-sentient beings are able to hear it."*

*"Can you hear it, Ho-shang?" asked Dongshan.*

*Yunyan replied, "If I could hear it, then you would not be able to hear the Dharma that I teach."*

*"Why can't I hear it?" asked Dongshan.*

*Yunyan raised his fly whisk and said, "Can you hear it yet?"*

*Dongshan replied, "No, I can't."*

*Yunyan said, "You can't even hear it when I expound the Dharma; how do you expect to hear when a non-sentient being expounds the Dharma?"*

*Dongshan asked, "In which sutra is it taught that non-sentient beings expound the Dharma?"*

*Yunyan replied, "Haven't you seen it? In the Amitabha Sutra it says, 'Water birds, tree groves, all without exception recite the Buddha's name, recite the Dharma.' "*

If non-sentient beings can expound the dharma, it follows that they are the equals of all the Zen teachers who have ever lived; after all, whatever they express must be the pure fulfillment of their own undefiled nature. Unlike us, they cannot waver in their conduct. That is why one such as Nanyang could equate the mind of the ancient buddhas with wall tile and rubble. So while we may esteem human beings who embody the teachings more, this is only our affinity for things more similar to ourselves being manifest; at best, we might say that said judgements are forgivable because people who truly expound the dharma are doing so in our own language, in a way more easily accessible to us, but that is a self-exculpatory indulgence. Furthermore, the enormity of Zen cases where inanimate objects or random events provide the stimulus for realization make this a pastime only the wilfully negligent can sustain. An honest person here will soon be bothered by the discrepancy of admiring the Zen teacher for their profundity while disparaging the triviality of the stimuli that brought this profundity about.

So this is our entrance: trivial things are profound because all of existence participates in the fundamental nature, profound things are trivial because there is nothing in their nature that goes beyond the fundamental. Any disparity in discernment here is just an arbitrary expression of our own partiality and nothing we should ever build upon. But by seeing the world as an eternal harmony, it becomes easier to allow that we too participate in this harmony and that our participation is as natural and effortless as that of insentient beings. After all, we ourselves continuously act out of instinct and hidden causality and it is this, this very unconsciousness, which guarantees the ultimacy of Zen in our very own lives regardless of whatever state we find ourselves in. That insentient, encompassing the whole of the profound and trivial, is embedded in the essence of our nature. Everything in that nature arises and returns to this. It is immortal, imperishable, and completely ours; requiring nothing, providing everything.

## SOME THOUGHTS ON THE ZEN USE OF SHOUTING

Anyone who begins to study the teachings of the Zen ancients will soon notice that they have many curious customs. Unlike most spiritual communities, where a heavy presence of decorum prevails, Zen always had an unrepentant wildness about it from the very beginnings of its formative years (A wildness now alien perhaps to our own age) and, in it, brief outbursts of chaos were generally regarded as not just benign but healthy and essential. The custom of shouting for example falls into this category. Traditionally regarded as an innovation developed by Mazu Daoyi to liberate his students from – well, what can we call it except a poisonous attitude of comfort and relaxation? – it was readily adopted by later generations of Zen communities and became especially prevalent under Linji, where it evolved into a wider practice whose individual occasions depended on subtle contextual cues in order to parse their meaning. Here is Linji himself explaining this to a monk:

*“At times my shout is like the precious sword of the Diamond King. At times my shout is like a golden-haired lion crouching on the ground. At times my shout is like the search pole and the shadow grass. At times my shout doesn’t work like a shout at all. Do you understand?”*

*Here the monk started to answer but Linji interrupted him by shouting.*

The most obvious inference to make from this exchange is that the monk should have shouted at Linji as their response instead of trying to answer; that this was the very thing Linji himself was trying to lead the monk into doing. In fact, Linji encouraged shouting among his students as a means of response but in doing so he had clearly moved beyond the applicability of shouting that the narrative associated with Mazu maintains. If your Zen teacher shouts at you in order to obliterate your distractions, that’s obvious and simple. But why would you shout at your Zen teacher in response? Their Zen Mind presumably requires no assistance from you. This later shouting practice then is worthy of a little investigation.

Where I have found some insight in this matter, that came from relating it to the use of shouting in standard military training. In the United States Marine Corp for instance, recruits are conditioned to respond loudly in general (Recall for example the first act of Full Metal Jacket if you’ve seen it) but also to shout “Kill!” as a substitute for ordinary affirmations. Acknowledging that some of this is just the



result of a military conditioning its members for battle, I think there is, beyond just that, a deeper affinity with the Zen shouting tradition. Clarity is singular, and as such, a kind of focus. Where clarity arises, the individual is not being pulled between competing points of attention. Their sense of resolve is settled. Shouting then can be understood as a means to concentrate the mind in purpose. In resolve. This is one of the uses it serves in military training, emboldening the warrior, and it only makes sense that it serves a comparable purpose in Zen training as well. This is the sword Linji wields but it is the common property of all who give themselves honestly to the Zen way. Consider the case of Jianshan:

*A monk asked Jianshan, "How is it when getting rid of the dust to see Buddha?" Jianshan said, "You should directly swing the sword. If you don't swing the sword the fisherman stays in the nest."*

That's pretty clear isn't it? The fisherman is you and your fellow human beings. The nest is your attachments and biases. The one who can shout properly can blast these obstructions into pieces. But wait. The case continues:

*Then the monk then brought this up with Shishuang. "How is it when getting rid of dust to see Buddha?" Shishuang answered, "He has no country; where will you meet him?" The monk now returned to Jianshan and reported this exchange. Jianshan here went up in the hall and remarked, "In the establishment of method and school, he does not compare to me: in profound talk entering the principle, I am still a hundred steps behind Shishuang."*

Before relating this to the shouting issue, I can't help but offer some tangential commentary. It's interesting to note the contrast Jianshan is highlighting here. What he's saying is that as a teacher of others, he exceeds Shishuang in being able to communicate something of the essence of Zen to others and to make this impactful in their lives. But, as to actually comprehending Zen and expressing it, Shishuang is in fact Jianshan's superior. We have in this example then something like the situation faced by mathematical researchers: the most insightful of them may not be the best equipped to communicate these insights to the public. That sometimes a mathematician of less mathematical brilliance but greater social eloquence is required to convey the importance of said research to others. It is to Jianshan's great credit thought that he could speak with such humility and I think

it's fair to say that subsequent students of the Zen tradition owe him a debt equal to whatever they may also owe to Shishuang.

As to the matter of shouting, if it's anything like a sword it has its appropriate and inappropriate uses. Shouting after all didn't always protect Linji's students from being thrashed by their teacher. Shouting, like every other method in Zen, is only expedient and meritorious within the right contexts. Like many other medicines, it becomes a poison when used indiscriminately. But for those still susceptible to rambling and equivocation, learning to shout (And to shout with the full force of your lungs) is a good step in the realization of one's self-nature. Shouting as such is a mirror. A way to see oneself differently, to add this difference to one's sense of identity, and then to dissolve said difference into the whole.

## HOW TO DEFEAT A GOD AT CHESS

The teachers of Zen are not the pawns of deities and the former's victory over the latter is concluded even before the game has begun. Consider the case of Nanquan:

*Once Master Nanquan planned to visit a village on the following day. During the night the God of Earth informed the leader of the village that the master was coming and consequently preparations were made. When the master arrived, he was surprised and asked, "You have set up everything well. How did you know I was coming?" The village leader replied that the God of Earth had informed him. Here Master Nanquan proclaimed, "My achievement hasn't been high enough; my mind was observed by the spirits and gods." A monk immediately asked him, "Master, since you are a man of great virtue, why would you be watched by spirits and gods?" Nanquan replied, "Go and give an offering of food to the Earth God's shrine."*

So what actually happened here? Nanquan, minding his own business, had some mundane intentions about going to visit a village. Where was his error? Although people might not see it, the God of Earth sure did and so they laid a trap for the old monk. It was a hopeless ploy however. As soon as Nanquan saw the bait he knew a trap had been laid for him. How many when confronted by the attentions of a god though wouldn't succumb to the temptation of self-aggrandizement though? It is a testament to the teachings and to Nanquan's fidelity to them that he was completely immune to the disease of the world honored ones. Not seeing the difference between enlightened and ordinary, he becomes like a mountain that no god or demon can find a handhold in. The old man cannot be climbed. One realization was all it took to acquire this invincible armor, one moment of humility:

*"My achievement hasn't been high enough; my mind was observed by the spirits and gods."*

Why is it so important to avoid esteeming one's own greatness though? If Nanquan's humility here isn't convincing enough, we need only consider Yunmen's attitude to the idea of an infant Buddha proclaiming their greatness; the attitude that would establish any kind of special authority for someone, regardless of whether this is for oneself or for another, is inimical to real Zen. Because no one has direct access to anyone else's self-nature; so we can't be an authority here for anyone else and no one can be an authority here for us. Everyone has to do their

own work. Everyone has to wash their own bowl. We must each confront the self-nature as we find it within our own lives; but this is not the same as saying that the self-nature has no objective reality or properties susceptible to discussion. The essence of the self-nature in fact is given by the totality of the self-nature (As is the essence of everything else; what is essential is, by definition, the set of shared commonalities across a whole spectrum of variations) This is why even the admirable and wonderful is rejected where it is upheld to the exclusion of the mundane and trivial; identifying with any particular (exclusionary) subset of phenomena is to lose one's grasp on the fundamental oneness that provides the foundation for all phenomena. Hence the exhortation to stop picking and choosing. This is also why specifying forms of practice (Chanting, meditating, koan study, etc) will inevitably be tainted with some degree of error (Even if incredibly subtle) since no matter how much they can encompass, the insistence on particular methods is a partiality that eclipses the holistic reality Zen is grounded in. To the extent that Zen can be suggested by words (Again, such an approach is ultimately inadequate since nothing finite can fully capture the infinite; and yet, like an imprecise drawing, it can still suggest something of its subject matter to us) we can characterize Zen as as a fully rooted and final form of liberation. Zen is obviously not a stage to some further achievement so, in as much as we can even speak of achievement here, it is an achievement in itself. But then this freedom is not simply a goal to be reached through confinement. Teaching freedom through rituals of rigid discipline and renunciation is like teaching swimming by shackling someone's legs to an anchor and throwing this in the deep: it may keep the person in the water but it sabotages the whole enterprise.

It's not that there's anything wrong with the particular activities in question, chanting and meditating and whatever can all have positive effects, it's that misidentifying them as an intrinsic means to anything beyond them (Including enlightenment) is fundamentally harmful. The difference is like the difference between claiming that some food item is healthy and claiming that it cures cancer; by calling something healthy a panacea, we transform it into a poison. Because now the delusion we've manufactured kills. And here the inferences offered lead to the same conclusion Baizhang once expressed:

*"True words are false words in so far as they give rise to opinions. False words are true words insofar as they cut off the delusions of sentient beings."*

So truths that imprison are false and falsehoods that liberate are true. And to give some examples of this, one can consider statistics used in propaganda as instances of the former and the fables of Aesop as examples of the latter. But then this also means that all the teachings of the patriarchs of Zen are equally devoid of absolute value; if they used to support dogmatic ideologies and politically motivated institutions, they too are falsified. The truth about Zen is that other people's Zen is just a whetstone for you to sharpen your own knife on. That's all. And once that's done, you yourself can cut away the mildewed ropes that bind you.

## THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN ZEN BUDDHISM AND ZEN

In my neighborhood there are non-automated pedestrian traffic lights: meaning you have to press a button at the cross walk in order to get the signal to cross the street. If you don't do so, you can still try to cross obviously, but you won't have right of way and there are plenty of reckless drivers in a rush to get where they're going who are unmindful of anyone they might accidentally run over in the process of getting there. So, it's a bit of a nuisance but it also inspired some stimulating reflection on my part. In fact, my reaction to this trivial thing made me see a parallel between what distinguishes Buddhism from Zen and what sort of attitude I might adopt in relation to a minor inconvenience. Here's how I'd put it.

Zen Buddhism: I will not run to press the button because striving for things unnecessarily is wrong. I need to follow an ideal of action. If I fail, I need to make a greater effort to follow the ideal. Symbols and rituals are essential.

Zen: If I'm going somewhere in a hurry, there's no problem sprinting to catch the light. If I'm not, I don't have to not rush either but it doesn't make a big difference either way. If something happens here that frustrates me or brings up attachments, I can use a teaching or insight to dispel these. But the opposite of each teaching or insight can also be useful; there is no ideal here except what conforms to the demands I impose on myself. The self is always what it originally was and always fundamentally free. Symbols and rituals are neither gateways nor obstructions. Discriminating in their regards though can be.

That said, Zen Buddhism will also echo the non-absoluteness sentiments that Zen allows but this tends to be mostly hollow rhetoric; they still want to sneak rules and explanations into a privileged room through the back door. For them, the idea of mystery may be denounced but they still want to keep it alive with the poisonous water of revelation. Ah! But what about the precepts? In Zen, the precepts are kept because they foster clarity: if one has achieved the clarity that comes from truly keeping them (And even the briefest genuine keeping provides the full benefits of clarity) then one can also break the precepts. Hence events like Nanquan's expedient cat killing. Zen Buddhism of course may also adhere to the precepts but always with some additional conviction or concern beyond the realization of the self-nature, and this tends to result in new rules to augment the old teachings.

To be clear, I'm not anti-Buddhist. I like some Buddhist literature a lot (The Tibetan Book of the Dead is excellent) although, as a whole, not as much as Tang and Song dynasty Zen. And obviously the two traditions have a strong interrelation (Like Judaism and Christianity; but who here conflates these?) Two different flavors need not combine into something enjoyable right? Even if both have their own merits. I like Buddhism and I like Zen but I think mixing them together produces a spoiled concoction.

From the Treasury of the Eye of True Teaching, Case 18:

*One day when Zhaozhou was in the latrine, he saw Wenyuan go by. So he called to him. "Wenyuan!" When Wenyuan responded, Zhaozhou said, "I can't explain Buddhism to you in the latrine."*

Comment Poem:

Dry dirt is wiped off easily  
While pure water is refreshing and clean;  
Combined together though,  
They can create quite the mess

## STUDYING DHARMA COMBAT

### [EPISODE ONE – GO WATER MY PLANTS]

When two serious practitioners of Zen meet, they often engage in an open confrontation to test each other's insights and responsiveness. Unlike in the hierarchies of normal social environments where the individual's relative positions usually determine how the relationship transpires, Zen encounters are purely the result of a direct interaction of the complete self-nature of each individual. In true dharma combat, nothing is held back.

Dharma combat however needs to be distinguished from lesson cases: the latter involve people subordinating themselves to an authority of their own creation (The Zen Master) and then placing the burden of clarifying the truth on said authority. They don't get that their own mind is already a perfect mirror for seeing the self-nature, and maybe they're afraid of what they might find, so they try to hand this mirror off to others and ask those to tell them what's in it. But the mirror can't even be handed off.

What's been said now should provide all the needed background information on the nature of dharma combat. Enough with the preliminaries then; let's get to the fight:

*The Venerable Guanxi Xian came during his wanderings to Mo Mountain in Yunzhou (Jiangxi, Gao'an) and began by saying to the nun Liaoran of Moshan, 'If mutually acceptable, then I will stay. If not, then push over the Chan seat!' Then he entered the Dharma-hall.*

*[Liao]Ran sent the attendant to ask him, 'For what purpose is the elder come to this mountain? Is it for the Buddha-dharma?'*

*'For the Buddha-dharma,' was Xian's reply.*

*Ran then mounted the Chan seat and Xian came to formally greet her. Ran asked, 'From which place did the elder come today?'*

*'From the crossroad,' replied Xian.*

*'Why not conceal this?' asked Ran.*

*Xian had no reply, but started bowing and said, 'What is Mo mountain like?'*

*'The peak is not exposed,' replied Ran.*

*'What about the master of Mo mountain?' asked Xian.*



*'Without characteristics of male or female,' replied Ran.*

*Xian then shouted, 'Why not a further transformation?'*

*'Being neither spiritual nor demonic, transform into what?' asked Ran.*

*Thereupon Xian submitted respectfully, staying and working as head gardener for three years.*

### Play-By-Play Commentary:

Xian throws down the gauntlet. Ran asks if he dropped it or if he wants to do battle. Xian clarifies he came to fight. Ran accepts his challenge and gives him a gentle strike from her sword. Xian over parries, exposing himself. Ran makes the gesture of a killing blow over his vulnerable opening and worry sets in for the challenger; from now on Xian is fighting for a draw. Still guarding himself, Xian throws out an exploratory high jab to test Ran's defensive skill. His attack amounts to nothing so he tries a low jab. Again, it's like punching a monolithic iron wall. Exasperated, he takes a wild swing at his opponent's face. She simply dodges this and then invites him to throw another. Instead, seeing the inevitability of his defeat, Xian offers honorable surrender.

### Post-Fight Analysis:

When you learn the art of fencing, one of the first things you should know is how and when to say "Touché." There's no substitute for integrity, no short cut that can get around seeing yourself honestly. Kudos should be given to Guanxi though for initiating the confrontation, for not pretending he was a lamb while believing he was a lion, and further kudos for how quickly he recognized someone else's superior skill. Seeing oneself as the light is darkness. Seeing oneself in darkness though is the horizon at dawn. Take care.

## Annihilating the Emptiness: Zen and Meaning

The word 'Zen' is like a trough that anything can be shovelled into; including of course the most rancid garbage imaginable. But even the horribly ignorant won't try to dump just anything into the pit called Zen; various corrupt traditions and outlooks have specific distortions they prefer and one of these is the concept of nihilism. Some people associate Zen with nihilism (Mostly, but not always, pejoratively) because they correlate it with ideas that promote the extinction of the self and beliefs of a similar nature. Which is as far from the reality of authentic Zen as any other lie that's ever been perpetuated about it.

What is Zen? Ultimately it is beyond words but, if you wish to enter through words, that will be a journey up a mountain and one of the stairways here begins at the step of recognizing that Zen is True Freedom. The following goes quite some way to clarify the matter:

### Treasury of the Eye of True Teaching 369

*Zhu Shiyong, Edict Attendant, once asked master Zhenjing in a letter, "The teachings of the Buddha are extremely subtle - how does one concentrate in the midst of daily affairs, how does one study? Please be so kind and compassionate as to point this out."*

*Zhenjing replied, "The ultimate subtlety of the Buddha's teachings is non-dual, but until you have reached this subtlety there is comparative superiority and inferiority. When one reaches the subtlety, then the person who understands mind actually knows one's own mind is ultimately originally enlightened, is actually independent, is actually at ease, actually liberated, actually pure, and in daily affairs just uses his own mind. If you can take hold of the transformations of your own mind, then use it, without asking if it's right or wrong. If you set your mind to thinking, already you don't know. If you don't take on an attitude, it is naturally real in every particular, clear and sublime in every particular, in every particular like a lotus blossom to which water does not adhere. The purity of mind transcends that, so if you're confused about your own mind you are a common creature, while if you understand your own mind you're a Buddha. So common creatures are Buddhas, and Buddhas are common creatures - it is due to confusion or enlightenment that they are one or the other.*

*"Now many people who study the Way do not trust their own mind, do not understand their own mind, and are not able to use the clarity and subtlety of their own mind, and do not attain the ease and liberty of their own mind. They mistakenly seek Chan and the Way externally, mistakenly set up wonders, and mistakenly create grasping and rejection. Even if they cultivate practice, they fall into the nihilistic states of outsiders or the two vehicles. So-called practice may fall into the pit of annihilation or eternity. Those with nihilistic views extinguish the original-subtle-clear nature*

*of their own mind - they just stick to voidness outside mind, and remain in meditative stillness. Those with the view of eternity do not realize the emptiness of all things, and cling to the existent elements of the world as realities, considering them ultimate."*

A quiet pond, unstirred by any interfering hand, is perfectly reflective. So too, the myriad things and the void equally reflect the harmonious reality when they are unstirred by conceptions and desires. Taken as is, the world does not present itself with any philosophical conflicts. In another teaching, this equanimity of mind and heart is likewise related to truthfulness; or, as Yunmen puts it:

*The Master one day held up his staff and mentioned a teaching that goes:*

*The ordinary person in all sincerity says that this [staff] exists, [representatives of] the two vehicles of Buddhist teaching explain that it doesn't exist, the pratyeka buddhas say it exists as an illusion, and the bodhisattvas empty it as it is.*

*Then Master Yunmen said, "When a patch-robed monk sees this staff, he just calls it a staff; when he walks, he just walks; and when he sits, he just sits. In all of this he cannot be stirred."*

If you keep a window open in the place you live, any cold breeze or foul stench or irritating insect can come along and enter your home. So too the masses of humanity allow themselves to be disturbed by events and inclinations because they fail to do the simple business of closing their own windows. Which is what to Zen? Nothing more than seeing clearly that these things have no inherent hold over us; that their power is directly in proportion to the amount of influence we artificially attribute to them. If something is good or bad, you can always ask why. Then that reason can be subjected to the same inquiry and so on and so on. It never ends because we are the one's constructing our own prisons. We expand them and collapse them at will; all the while deceiving ourselves regarding our own authority as the architect here so that our convictions of weakness and imprisonment can be fulfilled. We are condemned then by our own fundamental choices; ones that slip into our lives more often than not beneath our notice. We are writing a story about ourselves and then falling into the constraints of said narrative. Ultimate freedom though is also ultimate responsibility; it's all in our power.

For the one who truly embodied the principle, even droplets of rain are a stairs between heaven and earth and said individuals can come and go freely up and down these. Nothing can impede them because they can dispel anything which creates obstacles: any desire, any conception, any internal strife. Zhaozhou said he could use a sixteen foot tall golden Buddha as a blade of grass and vice versa. How?

For one, by seeing the artificiality of both and therefore the artificiality of the difference. Whatever we lock up in the cage of our thoughts is our captive and yet most people will find their masters among these captives. Don't make even this guillotine your king though; mind itself is no less an illusion. If everything is just an aspect of the mind, then the mind itself is an aspect of what? Of itself? Here the jewel of the mind crumbles into dust. Yunmen explained that he could take his staff as just a staff, that he could wield it without philosophical occupations. Can you now make use of your own mind without surrendering to the injunctions of the superfluous? If so, you will have greater freedom.

Zen is a city with no residents and few visitors; a place with ten thousand unlocked doors and a hundred roads in and out but not a single window to be seen. Because only participation, not spectating, admits entrance; and having clarity in regards to one's own self-nature is to see this vitality in action regardless of transforming conditions. In all extremes, the true self-nature is unaffected. How different then is this from nihilism! Nihilism after all desires fulfillment but, finding none, embraces meaninglessness as its consolation. Zen conversely finds fulfillment and unfulfillment equally hospitable; there is no ongoing search and therefore no disappointment. Zen finds its end in its beginning: the self-nature. For it, meaning is just another path to travel back and forth over; with Zen we are wholly freed from the burden of finding an ultimate destination. The dreaded emptiness of any possible failure here is thoroughly obliterated. Again, Zen is true freedom because it remains undiminished in all places and all forms of being. It pervades the entire world. Everything expounds the dharma. Take care.

## Tile Polishing Factories: Sitting Meditation is Sufficient for Enlightenment...

That's because literally every form of ordinary being is sufficient for enlightenment; sitting meditation adds nothing. Reading koans, looking at peach blossoms, getting slapped in the face, etc have all stimulated the realization of the ever present and complete self-nature. No one form of special practice is required; it's whatever approach suits those particular obstacles the individual in question needs working out, not some generic commitment to an orthodoxy or ortho-praxis.

Since every person's situation is unique, each individual has unique impediments in their lives. Hence the sheer variety of enlightenment cases and the emphasis placed by the ancient teachers on interpersonal teaching styles and individually tailored approaches. Functionality may be uniform in some senses but anyone who has to fix problems or otherwise deal with them on a regular basis knows that dysfunctionality transpires in endlessly different ways. So too, the illusory obstacles we place between ourselves and the Zen realization of the self-nature are manifold and mutant. Consider what Baizhang said about cures here: it takes unreal medicine to cure unreal diseases. But every unreal disease is similar to real disease in that both require specific cures; doctrines that elevate sitting meditation to the status of a general solution then represent a claim to panacea that has no basis in reality. And while anything can be part of the conditions that stimulate our realizations, anything can also be an impediment to these. And everything will become an impediment as soon as we accord it some special significance since this falsely divides the holistic unity of the enlightened and ordinary. But let's clarify the issue of meditation even further by referring to the historical records of Zen:

*Meditation master Huang first called on the fifth patriarch; though he sought for certainty, he followed gradual practice. Later he went back to Hebei, built a hut, and sat constantly for twenty years, never evincing any slacking. Later he met a disciple of the sixth patriarch, Chan master Ce, who had come to the area on his travels. He heard that Huang had studied with the fifth patriarch and had been living in a hut for many years, considering himself correctly attuned. Ce knew that Huang's attainment was not consummate, so he went and asked him, "What are you doing sitting here?" He said, "Entering concentration." Ce said, "You say you are entering concentration - mindful or mindless? If mindful, all creatures would have attained concentration; if mindless, all plants and trees would have attained concentration." Huang said, "When I actually go into concentration, I don't see the existence of any mind that is there or not." Ce said, "If you don't see the existence of any mind present or absent, this is constant*

***concentration - how could there be coming out or going in? If there is exit and entry, this is not great concentration."***

***Huang was at a loss. After a long while he asked, "To whom did you succeed?" Ce said, "My teacher was the sixth patriarch of Caoqi." Huang asked, "What did the sixth patriarch consider meditation concentration?" Ce said, "My teacher says subtle clear mental calm is completely peaceful, essence and function as such; the five clusters are fundamentally empty, the data of the six senses are not existent. Not emerging, not entering, not concentrated, not confused, the essence of meditation has no dwelling - detachment from dwelling is the peace of meditation; the essence of meditation has no production - detachment from production is meditation contemplation. Mind is like space, yet without the idea of space."***

***When Huang heard the essentials of the teaching, he left his hut and went to call on the sixth patriarch. The patriarch was sympathetic to him having come from afar, and gave him instruction at once. Huang was enlightened at his words. The state of mind he'd attained over the previous twenty years had no more influence at all. That night his patrons in Hebei, gentry and peasantry, heard a voice in the sky say, "Meditation master Huang attained the Way today." After that he returned to Hebei and taught monks, nuns, lay men, and lay women.***

If meditation master Huang was truly a meditation master, this must mean he had mastered the art of meditation. And yet the case states with total clarity that this mastery availed him little since he was easily reduced to speechlessness by one who truly embodied the principle and, when his own true realization was forthcoming, he completely abandoned the mental outlook he'd spent twenty years cultivating through his meditation practice. So this is as decisive a refutation as there can be of meditation as any kind of means to enlightenment; where is there even room for honest equivocation? **Wuzhou Xuance** has skillfully pointed out the contradiction Hebei Zhihuang's conceptions lead to: **"If there is exit and entry, this is not great concentration."** Why? Because concentration in this sense means focus, so singularity and unity, which the fluctuations of exit and entry are simply incompatible with.

So too, meditation practices involve exiting said practices and entering said practices; as such they are utterly incompatible with the great concentration of realizing the self-nature in all its fully encompassing singularity. True meditation, and all true practices, pervade every aspect of daily life; they are as continuous and immutable as the self-nature itself because they reflect it without fail. There is no partial attainment, no vacillating enlightenment when it's genuine. Or, as Mazu succinctly put it: "Sun faced Buddha, Moon faced Buddha." Regardless of what transpires between the extremes of alteration, the true nature of the Buddhas

endures. Consider any Buddha or teacher of Zen you like; would they become more enlightened if they artificially concentrated their minds in meditation or were they supremely concentrated at all moments and in all things? If the former, how could their realization of the self-nature be authentic when said nature is continuously perfect? If a vase wobbles, it cannot be surely placed.

What is ineffable however cannot form a stable basis for religions and ideologies; they require easily summarized beliefs and forms of conduct that can be proselytized to meet the needs of recruitment and control. Those who realize the Way however have no need for followers; Nanquan for example ignored the world for thirty years and various other members of his peers behaved in similar fashions. Those who realize the truth of the self-nature are thoroughly sated by this and don't lust for any of the power or prestige that tends to corrupt social institutions; spiritual or otherwise. And because the superficial emulation of a thing tends to prevail where no deep affinity sustains itself, what happens with said institutions over time is that they become increasingly divorced from whatever real vitality provided their initial impetus. In short, they become tile polishing factories.

How is sitting in meditation to become a Buddha like polishing a tile to become a Buddha? Both are equally impossible means towards the same end. Because Zen and Buddhahood are beyond any and all means. Beyond means itself; they can only be directly realized. But they are also already fully realized in the existing self (Your very own self right now!) regardless of its condition. The essence remains throughout all the contortions of transformation; you can shape gold into a hideous statue of monstrosity for instance but it doesn't lose any of the real properties of gold. So too, nothing we can do can fundamentally diminish ourselves; we can only be trivially distracted. But if we just turn our heads it's right there! The thing no immortal has ever succeeded in surpassing. Ours. Instantly.

## HOW TO GET ZEN WRONG

Bold words to some maybe but it won't kill anyone to consider them. Recently I came across a quote by Shunryu Suzuki that really clarified the matter. *"Zen is not some kind of excitement, but concentration on our usual everyday routine."* Pretty much as soon as I read these words, an emphatic counter-thought occurred. "He's simultaneously so close and so far off." However, this opinion of mine obviously doesn't demonstrate the certainty of its conclusion so let me elaborate.

Various Zen teachers and paragons are recorded as affirming that there is no meaningful enlightenment experience which is distinguishable from our usual everyday routines. Zen is not an outwardly transformative experience that must manifest itself in some form of particular action. So in what sense is Suzuki wrong here? Notice now the particular object of stress in the second part of his statement: concentration. Here we have an entrance into a whole delta system of polluted rivers and something that seems to have been widely prevalent not only in the history of Zen in Japan but also China from at least the time of Huineng onward. That is to say, Zen as something which is obtained by means.

Are there counterexamples to this view in the record? Yes. And not simply counterexamples but unambiguous declarations across lineages and eras. The following instances can be taken as representative:

*Master Shitou asked Layman Pang one day, "How are your everyday affairs since you met me?" He replied, "If you ask about everyday matters, there's simply no way to say." Shitou said, "I knew you were thus; that's why I asked."* **(Treasury of the Eye of True Teaching, 292)**

*Followers of the Way, the teachings of the Buddha leave no place for exerting effort; it's just being without issues in everyday life, dressing, eating, excreting, lying down when tired. Foolish people laugh at me, but the wise know this.* **(Linji, Treasury of the Eye of True Teaching 274)**

*The Scripture of Perfect Enlightenment says, "At all times do not produce delusive thoughts, also don't try to stop and annihilate deluded states of mind; in realms of false conception don't add knowledge, and don't find reality in no knowledge."* **(Book of Serenity 45)**

*The only essential thing in learning Zen is to forget mental objects and stop rumination. This is the message of Zen since time immemorial.* **(Foyan, Instant Zen 16)**

*How to not stir? Uttering a few sayings does not amount to talking of mysteries and marvels, or explaining meanings and principles; sitting meditation and concentration do not amount to inner freedom.* **(Foyan, Instant Zen 34)**



*If in the midst of all things you are utterly without any defilement by greed, so your aware essence exists alone, dwelling in exceedingly deep absorption, without ever rising or progressing anymore, this is the demon of concentration, because you'll be forever addicted to enjoying it, until ultimate extinction, detached from desire, quiescent and still. This is still demon work. (Record of Baizhang 3)*

*Aeons of striving will prove to be so much wasted effort; just as, when the warrior found his pearl, he merely discovered what had been hanging on his forehead all the time; and just as his finding of it had nothing to do with his efforts to discover it elsewhere. Therefore the Buddha said: 'I truly attained nothing from complete, unexcelled Enlightenment.' (Huangbo, Transmission of Mind 10)*

*The monk asked, "Master, do you practice the Way?" Zhazhou said, "I put on my robe, I eat my rice." The monk said, "To put on one's robe, to eat one's rice are ordinary, everyday things. Master, do you practice the Way?" Zhaozhou said, "You try and say it then. What am I doing everyday?" (Record of Zhaozhou 160)*

*Layman P'ang was sitting in his thatched cottage one day. "Difficult, difficult," he exclaimed, "[like trying] to scatter ten measures of sesame seed all over a tree!" "Easy, easy," retorted Mrs. P'ang, "just like touching your feet to the ground when you get out of bed." "Neither difficult nor easy," interjected [their young daughter] Ling Zhao. "On the hundred tips of the grass blades, the great ancestor's meaning." (Record of Layman P'ang 51)*

*Lingyun became enlightened on seeing peach blossoms. (Empty Valley Collection 16)*

Each of these cases is saying essentially the same thing: recognizing the self-nature requires no specific contrivance. It is like noticing something unobscured that is already in your field of vision; only involving even less effort than that! Any effort at all is to already place the self-nature in a vessel and, however translucent said vessel is, this will always introduce a superfluous opacity. The mind itself is an awareness that can also be aware of itself but how does it actually become aware of its own essential nature? Every single moment that nature is manifesting itself in all experiences because what is truly fundamental to the mind never fluctuates. Because the true nature of reality is omnipresent and pervasive, any concentration will inevitably exclude something and every discrimination will inevitably mutilate what was already perfect and whole. Buddha awareness is seeing that.

The concentration that Suzuki speaks of in the earlier quotation is just such an error; the introduction of a superfluous discrimination. One does not need any artifice to be natural and trying to be natural is the most unnatural thing of all. One might even call this the paradigmatic error in the Zen tradition: in all the ways that Zen is distorted, those responsible are doing so to fit Zen into the confines of some personal attachment. But in all such incidents, Kashyapa's flower dies instantly.

To be wrong about Zen is to always be infinitely wrong. Why? Because Zen encompasses the infinite, the whole of reality, and so even the smallest deviation

here veers away completely. Consider the nature of trajectory. Whenever you aim at something and miss, the degree to which you miss is determined by the initial error and the total distance of one's object. The farther away one is aiming, the wider the deviation will increase along the trajectory over time. Since those who aim at Zen are aiming at something that extends to even the infinite reaches of the cosmos, missing here means falling completely into the perdition of unreality. Fortunately for us, many ancients have pointed out the way with perfect accuracy. The fourth patriarch, Dayi Daoxin, for example gave it to us completely:

*The fourth patriarch said to meditation master [Niutou Farong]: "The hundred thousand teachings revert alike to the heart; wonderful virtues as numerous as sand grains in the Ganges River all abide in the wellspring of mind. All methods of discipline, methods of concentration, methods of insight, spiritual powers and manifestations, are all inherent, not apart from your mind. All afflictions and obstacles of habit are originally void; all causes and effects are like dream illusions. There is no triplex world to leave, no enlightenment to seek. Humans and non-humans are equal in essence and characteristics. The Great Way is empty and open, beyond thought, beyond cogitation. Now that you have gotten such principles, you lack nothing anymore; how are you different from Buddha? There is no special doctrine beyond this. Just let your mind be free; don't do contemplative exercises, and don't try to settle your mind either. Don't conceive greed or hostility, don't think of sorrow or worry. Clear and unobstructed, free as you will, not contriving virtues, not perpetrating evils, walking, standing still, sitting, lying down, whatever meets the eye, in any circumstance, is all the subtle function of Buddha. It is called Buddhahood because of happiness without sorrow."* **(Treasury of the Eye of True Teaching 255)**

## HOW NANQUAN CURED MY MILD CASE OF SIMULATION THEORY INFLAMMATION

One of the most personally impactful cases I've come across in the Zen record so far was the one where Nanquan is confronted by the Earth God. Here it is:

*Once Master Nanquan planned to visit a village on the following day. During the night the God of Earth informed the leader of the village that the master was coming and consequently preparations were made. When the master arrived, he was surprised and asked, "You have set up everything well. How did you know I was coming?" The village leader replied that the God of Earth had informed him. Here Master Nanquan proclaimed, "My achievement hasn't been high enough; my mind was observed by the spirits and gods." A monk immediately asked him, "Master, since you are a man of great virtue, why would you be watched by spirits and gods?" Nanquan replied, "Go and give an offering of food to the Earth God's shrine."*

I go into this elsewhere in an essay titled 'How to Defeat a God at Chess' but there I focus on Nanquan's accomplishment rather than how this case actually influenced my thinking. So that's not the priority now. Basically, my realization was this: what is beyond my power doesn't really matter. Even supernaturally powerful entities would just be totems on the hierarchy of cosmic powers; becoming enamored or subservient with them wouldn't be fundamentally different than acting that way towards any usually powerful human being. It's an empty fetish then. But if that's true in regards to specific entities, how does it not apply to the whole of the world itself? The nature of the world doesn't change the nature of who I am at an experiential level. In fact, since the essence of consciousness doesn't change when our eyes move from a tree to a pond, it wouldn't change regardless of what the esoteric reality of the world really was. For good or bad, I am still me. And the question of the self-nature, of what can be perceived by me regardless of my condition, still remains the imperative.

Nanquan's example though showed me the proper attitude one should have when facing the extraordinary. One should not be awed by it. That's just getting caught up in the superficiality of phenomena. And Nanquan's not alone here; the Zen records are full of this attitude. When Xuansha and Tianlong were in the mountains one day, Tianlong exclaimed "Master! A tiger!" Xuansha just responded, "It's your tiger." Well, that's where I'm at now with simulation theory and other esoteric speculations. They're not my tigers.

## XUEDOU CHOPS DOWN THE SHIKANTAZA TREE WITH A SINGLE AXE SWING

**“Within heaven and earth, in space and time, there is a jewel; hung on a wall, for nine years Bodhidharma did not dare to look at it.”**

[Xuedou quote, Book of Serenity case 92, Wansong’s Commentary]

You hear that? That’s the sound of a tree falling in the forest even if there’s no one around to hear it. Xuedou, probably while blowing on the nails of his free hand or otherwise distracted, singlehandedly overturns the Ch’an seat with a casual aside. Because if Bodhidharma’s exertions had no real involvement with the mind jewel, the one true treasure of the dharma, if literal wall gazing isn’t fundamental to the essence of Buddhahood, then any tradition built on that is just piling pig shit on dog shit. Of course those who have a singular appetite for illusions won’t be sated by any amount of reality but, to counter the notion that Bodhidharma’s not-daring-to-look here is some kind of admirable practice, we only have to be honest enough to acknowledge that cowardice is always pejorative in the authentic Zen tradition. Xuedou’s pointing out a lack of boldness then unambiguously highlights the incompleteness of Bodhidharma’s attainment at this stage. But let’s put it in a more amicably intellectual way for those who are so adverse to short cuts that they’ll refuse the one and only direct path that instantaneously arrives at the all-pervasive self-nature: perceiving thusness without mediation.

Here...

Associating or identifying the process of disposing of one’s personal obstacles to enlightenment, with the actual necessities of enlightenment, is like a fly confusing the struggle to escape a spider’s web with the condition of genuine freedom; and, by doing so, succumbing to the delusion that freedom demands flying into spider webs and working one’s way out of these. Gautama and Bodhidharma’s bouts with seated meditation were simply manifestations of their own personal obstructions and do not express anything essential to the Way. Those who had their realizations through sayings, sounds, and objects demonstrate the inherent immediacy of true enlightenment and its complete independence from all practice. But who’s going to be your slavish disciple if all you teach them is that?

Whoever sincerely seeks though must fell the standing tree or stand under the falling tree. Those are the choices.

## ZEN AND THE UNHIDDEN ROOT OF ENLIGHTENMENT

Following the river against its flow takes you to the top of the mountain. So too, retracing our desires in the opposite of their direction leads us to their source. This is simply the general nature of origination and branching finding its expression in the physical environment and the mind. Likewise, one can consider the subject matter of Zen itself and clarify its scope by turning towards its principle incarnation. Although the historical beginnings of Zen are somewhat obscure, the story of the Buddha's Flower Sermon has been upheld since the later classical period (By Dahui Zonggao and Wumen Huikai for instance) as the first imparting of Zen realization between a teacher and student. Regardless of anything else, this at very least demonstrates that the Flower Sermon does express the essence of Zen; or how else could it be convince those who embodied the principle? Therefore, any confusion regarding the nature of Zen can appropriately turn towards said sermon:

*Once when the World Honored One, in ancient times, was upon Vulture Peak, he held up a flower before the congregation of monks. At this time all were silent, but Venerable Kashyapa alone smiled. The World Honored One then proclaimed, "I have the Eye of the True Dharma, the Secret Essence of Nirvana, the Formless Form, and the Mysterious Gate of the Law. Without relying upon words and letters, beyond all teaching, and as a special transmission, I pass this all on to great Kashyapa."*

The Gateless Barrier, Case 6

If you see something, there is no inherent confusion in it; confusion only arises as a result of your personal questioning. Zen realization in fact is just the fundamental pervasiveness of truth. Unperturbed by attachments or concerns, it perceives reality without the distortion of conceptual filters and so doesn't succumb to the errors of bias. Kashyapa's smile then was the smile of someone who had finally glimpsed the thusness of reality. Seeing this, he surpassed perception, serenity, non-duality, and all the precepts all at once. These things, being at best illusory aids for enlightenment, become as useless after enlightenment as scaffolding once a building is completed. Kashyapa's accomplishment, if anyone wants to call it that, was just an act of self-recognition. Nothing more.

*Master Yangqi said to an assembly: "When body and mind are pure, objects are pure; when objects are pure, body and mind are pure. Do you know what I'm getting at? The coin that was lost in the river must be retrieved from the river."*

Treasury of the Eye of True Teaching, Case 161

If you lose yourself in the worldly, you must find yourself in the worldly. So too, wherever you've entangled yourself, that's where you need to disentangle yourself. Contrary to the teachings that emphasize methods like seated meditation, chanting, etc in the pursuit of enlightenment then, it should be acknowledged that these practices can only serve to distract from the business of finding and liberating oneself. How could it be otherwise? If the things that bind you to suffering are your attachments, how could activities which don't even address these do anything to help you? Obviously they can't. To see the self-nature you must also see how it is manifesting itself in your own life: you must look directly into the mirror and confront the person that you are actually living as. And only when you become as obvious to yourself in all your motives and capacities as your most immediate other perceptions, will you really know what you are. But of course the self-nature is not reducible to any specific manifestation; rather it is the essence of one's own being. And an essence that is entirely shared by all other forms of being since all things participate in the same reality merely by existing.

That is to say, what is real in you is what is essential in you; and this essential reality is shared by all. It is also what is beyond revulsion and attachment, which is why said attitudes can serve to hinder an individual's enlightenment; being preoccupied with the superficial, the true nature of reality is proportionally obscured. That said, because illusion itself is also a manifestation of reality though, and every manifestation must be essentially equal, there is no real fundamental difference between illusion and reality and only the arbitrary preference for reality turns illusion into an obstruction. This is why the flower the Buddha held up could inspire realization even though sensory impressions are themselves illusory things. Like Yin and Yang, reality and illusion interpenetrate and can only be fully separated from one another by those under the thrall of delusions. Because, in reality, there are no

barriers to realization: *“Water birds, tree groves: all without exception recite the Buddha’s name, recite the dharma.”*

Nanquan talked about seeing things as if in a dream. But one can only awaken from a dream within a dream and if one achieves true lucidity within a dream, this state is more awakened than someone going through daily life as if they were sleeping. Again, the coin is found in the river where it was lost. Being thoroughly awake of course means seeing the illusory within the real and the real within the illusory; it is undiminishing wakefulness regardless of circumstance and condition. This is why those who embody the principle are so capable in responding to conditions; not ensnared by expectations, their inherently dynamic quality is always fully in harmony with the environment around them. It is like water responding to water, not overwhelmed when immersed, not constricted when surrounded. Their bodies and minds, fluent in the language of thusness, converse agreeably with everything they meet and the unity of the ultimate remains like a bottle of wine shared by all. In this state, nothing has any secrets.

*Lingyun awakened to the Way on seeing peach blossoms. He then composed a verse on the occasion:*

*For thirty years I sought a swordsman;  
How many times have the leaves fallen and shoots sprouted!  
But since seeing the peach blossoms once,  
I have never doubted anymore*

*When Lingyun quoted this to Guishan, the latter said, “Those who gain access through objects never backslide; keep it well.”*

*Xuansha added, “He’s quite correct, but I’ll bet he’s not done yet.”*

*Dahui also commented, “When something comes up in one house, a hundred houses are busy.”*

Again, seeking is shown to be an obstruction. Why? Because this is shutting oneself off from the totality of things as they are. Thusness is not something that can vary from one incarnation to the next; in the least sliver of existence it is already fully realized. Thusness is precisely that which is not defined by gradations; therefore, in order to realize thusness, one must realize it instantaneously in all things. Whatever might serve as a gate or portal, that is still just an entrance into a complete and thorough harmony within the universe. Indeed, the whole universe itself is given all at once. This is why enlightenment leaves nothing left to achieve and why it itself also achieves nothing. Realizing thusness, nothing is actually attained. There is no transference of any discernible property and the individual is exactly alike in all characteristics after as they were before. Like empty space, nothing can be added or taken away. There is just nothing in the way anymore: true enlightenment is a transformation not of the individual but the world itself. It is not that anything really changes but merely that the world is no longer an obstacle.

*When Xiangyan was in the community of Baizhang, his natural intelligence was brilliant and swift, but he couldn't attain Zen. After Baizhang passed away he went to Guishan. Guishan questioned him, "When you were at our late teacher Baizhang's place, you had ten answers for every question, a hundred answers for every ten questions. This was your brilliance and mental acuity, conceptualization of intellectual interpretation, the root of birth and death. Try to tell me something about before your parents gave birth to you." At this one question, Xiangyan was simply at a loss. He went back to the dormitory and looked over the writings he used to read, looking for a saying to use for a reply. Ultimately he couldn't find one, and lamented to himself, "A picture of a cake cannot satisfy hunger." He respectfully went up to the hall and begged Guishan to explain for him. Guishan replied, "If I explained it to you, later on you'd revile me."*

*What I say is mine, and has nothing to do with you." Xiangyan finally took all the writings he'd collected and burned them. Then he said, "I won't study Buddhism in this lifetime; for now I'll work as a perpetual servant monk, and avoid belaboring mind and spirit." Then he tearfully took leave of Guishan and went straight to Nanyang; seeing the ruins of National Teacher Zhong's abode, he stayed there and built a hut. One day as he*



*was clearing away weeds and brush, when rubble hit some bamboo and made a sound, he was suddenly awakened. He went right back, bathed, and lit incense; bowing to Guishan from afar, he said in praise, "The master's great kindness surpasses that of parents; if you had explained for me back then, how could this have happened today?" Then he said in verse:*

*At one impact, I forgot what I knew;  
I no longer depend on practice.  
My conduct upholds the ancient path,  
Not falling into passivity.  
Everywhere there are no tracks or traces  
In manners outside sound and form.  
Those who arrive at the Way  
All call this the supreme key.*

*When Guishan heard of this, he said, "This fellow is through." Yangshan, who was standing by, said, "This is composed by mental machination and conceptual consciousness; wait till I have personally tested him." Subsequently Yangshan met Xiangyan and said, "The master has praised your discovery of the great matter. Try to explain." Xiangyan then recited the foregoing verse. Yangshan said, "This comes from memory of earlier learning. If you have truly become enlightened, let's see you give another explanation." Xiangyan composed another verse, saying:*

*Last year's poverty was still not actually poverty;  
This year's poverty is poverty indeed.  
In last year's poverty I still had ground to stick an awl;  
This year I'm so poor I don't even have an awl.*

*Yangshan said, "I'll grant that you understand the Chan of Buddhas, but you still haven't even dreamed of the Chan of patriarchs." Xiangyan composed another verse:*

*I have a device;  
It's seen in the blink of an eye.  
If people don't understand,*

*Call a novice besides.*

*Yangshan then reported this to Guishan and said, "Happily Xiangyan understands patriarchs' Chan."*

*Dahui said, "Guishan in his later years was good at directing plays; he made this set of live puppets admirable. But what was admirable? Each watched the movements of each other's hands and feet; how could it be known the speech was in someone else?"*

Treasury of the Eye of True Teaching, Case 305

Before your parents gave birth to you: what's that? It's like silence; we cannot say anything about it. If we refrain from saying anything though, that too is also profoundly unlike silence. Silence in itself doesn't withhold anything. Just as much, those who truly embody the principle don't restrain themselves; and restraining oneself is not a means to attaining enlightenment. When both Gautama and Bodhidharma affirmed on separate occasions that they had obtained nothing through enlightenment, this was not a nothingness produced by effort. It wasn't a barren earth produced from an inferno. Again, being and emptiness are not separate things. They interpenetrate like Yin and Yang. To erase anything is always an adding of that, just as much as adding anything is an erasure of what was. The way of emptiness then is the true emptiness that doesn't fluctuate as existence and non-existence contend with each other.

True emptiness, being devoid of all characteristics, cannot even be experienced. True emptiness as such cannot be differentiated from plenitude. Those who strive to make emptiness into an object of focus or particular attainment then suffer its immediate loss in the present totality of everything around them. What those who realize through objects perceive is really the absolute unity of thusness, whereas those who glimpse something from various contrivances at best only conceive said unity in conceptual form and so easily descend into backsliding. Even the whispers of the patriarchs begin to drown the music of the mind jewel but the dharma song of objects is sung in perfect harmony with mind. Pure mind is independent of any conception of itself and, being mindless, the dharma of objects is just as pure. True emptiness, finding true emptiness, meets it without meeting; there is no frontier or substance so they fuse seamlessly together. Realizing through objects in fact

exhausts experience, it is the experience of true and complete fullness so, like poured water rising to the brim of a cup, it has nowhere else to go except to spill over. Meaning said experience flows out beyond experience. And this is how true emptiness can be reached by the fact that it cannot be experienced.

Enlightenment as such is not something to be experienced. If it could actually be experienced, that would be a contrivance placing it into a separate category and thereby fracturing the holistic reality of thusness. This is why it's emphasized that real enlightenment is fully pervasive. The roots of enlightenment pierce all things and because of this there is nothing that is not itself fundamental reality. The truth is completely in the open and seeing this universal truthfulness, this great chanting arising from the trees and rocks themselves, is living in the complete realization of one's own Buddhahood. When you finally see it this way, following the river back to its source, and scaling the peak of the mountain, you discover that the mountain itself was simply you all along. You were your own adversary. And now, with the height of a mountain, its peak is your peak; its roots, your roots.

## ADMIRING THE BUDDHA IS ANTI-ZEN

He's actually your enemy. And Bodhidharma too! Look! Look!

*Master Guoqing Feng was asked by a monk, "What is the great meaning of the Buddha's teaching?" He replied, "Shakyamuni was an ox-headed minion of hell, the founder of Chan was a horse-faced minion of hell."*

Dahui's Treasury 524

Those who revere the enlightened fundamentally misunderstand enlightenment. Unless your attitude is wholly reverent to all things in the world, including even the most odious and horrific, reverence here is just setting up useless categories and distinctions. In fact, the Zen record shows ample irreverence towards the Buddha as the above quote demonstrates. But it doesn't demand irreverence any more than it demands reverence. At best, the life of a buddha is a model that can take you a certain ways but not all the way. And really it can only bring you to the timeless threshold of actually perceiving your very own self-nature. Everything is preliminary except the complete realization of your nature as it truly is. And to do this you don't have to build up anything or adhere to specific dogmas.

It's the opposite. Letting go of attachments. Emptying oneself. But really going all the way with that! Because nothing is essential that isn't inherently essential; if it's easier to give up than breathing, it's not Zen. And realizing emptiness here is not purifying oneself of things but rather realizing their own inherent and immutable emptiness; like being in a crowd of people while not actually involved with anyone.

*Master Daning Kuan said to an assembly:*

*No thought is the source, no dwelling is the basis; true emptiness is substance, ethereal being is the function. That is why it is said that the whole earth is true emptiness, the whole universe is ethereal being.*

Dahui's Treasury 168

In the ordinary world, you could clear away the dirt and encrustations from some clod and you might find a jewel. In Zen the jewel is realizing that trying to clear away dirt and encrustations is itself dirt and encrustations. But this doesn't mean just wallowing in any form of behavior; really seeing the emptiness of things results

in a natural shift in conduct. Here one perceives the true jewel that is luminously present in all things; if you live with closed eyes conversely, how will you see this?

There is no need for there to be obstructions but we create obstructions for ourselves out of our own desires and conceptions. Indeed, every useful thing is only useful finitely so to perceive the complete realization is to perceive the ultimate uselessness of everything (Including buddha words and buddha actions!) Our lot, our hope, is of the serpentine variety. A snake that never stops shedding its skin stays eternally young; a snake that stops shedding conversely soon dies in the bag of its old skin. Until we can see the profound reality that requires no alteration, our best practice is to observe where we have preoccupations and neutralize these with an awareness of their arbitrariness; including whatever methods proved most helpful in neutralizing any past preoccupations.

If all you want is just the skin or flesh, you stop. If you want the bone, you go a little farther. But if you want the marrow, you cleave right through everything! You don't

## Recent Poetry

## AUTHOR

Response poem to 'Last Resort'

That there might be something special in the words,  
A momentum to transmute this mundane life  
Into the essence of instruction or entertainment or  
Vitality

Complications of schemes and the innocence  
Of naïve dreams, wedded  
Into a single monolith of ambition

Our books written into existence like the brochures  
Arrayed at the entrances of travel agencies;  
Each page another plane  
Taking off to transport us elsewhere,  
The destination of a new self  
Where the antennae of merit and optimism  
Assume a holy electricity

Or are we not original enough?

Scraps of experience and education, cobbled together  
Into unwieldy creations maybe; inventions  
Too inelegant to praise,  
However truthful they barely function

The plodding machines of crude hands, language  
Chained in sentences to serve  
Bourgeois hungers

But beauty too and passion and freedom

Delicate as mist, each sprite of human honesty  
Tangled up with the brambles of pride

Surviving somehow, admirably  
I'VE NEVER SEEN A WONG KAR-WAI FILM

Philistine me, saying  
You should seat your attractive customers  
Up at the front, by the windows

And the lighting is an arsenic green, almost  
Unnatural but the cityscape  
Of a soft focus Hong Kong gives it  
A certain plausibility;  
Rain dramatized at an artful frame rate, inspiration  
Precipitating the story's worn finale

Close up of a cigarette cherry, brightening  
At the inhale, and then the swirl;  
Smoke curling with octopus-shaped inflections  
Fading ever so finely

"As long as I'm nice on the outside, I'm fine;  
The unhappiness cannot enter me."

The door a philosophical door, a weary one where  
Sentry is beyond surrendering;  
Because I am so strong, I was not broken  
By the one who did me wrong  
But, *there is* the fiend that refuses exorcism:  
A monument in the mind of my identity  
As a survivor

It feels empty although not literally so,  
Like the cold streets  
Where things still exist but  
Without warmth

The emptiness of impenetrable surfaces



## LIKENESSES

Shaped from the clay of sloughed skin,  
The former self a grey thing  
Bound in trade and artifice; our thoughts  
Our selves, scorpions upon the frogs, full of so much  
Subconscious destruction

Brighter than cameras though, the eye  
A device to transform

Warping the limp of imagery into whatever  
Offers better; flattery and fortune  
Equal offenders where  
Matters of true greed occur

Lumber to termites unencumbered by the interference  
Of any ethos, foes none more formidable  
Can be found: calamities

As ideas impale the organs of experience,  
Blades letting loose  
The deluge of leaking reality,  
Coherence spirals into the whorl of a snail shell;  
Outer protection, the basis  
For a principle of ordinary fraud

Algorithms sorting the index of humanity;  
Not so different from us

## MANUFACTURING DEFECT

Puzzle piece without a puzzle; I, the form  
Unaligned with the open spaces set aside to inhabit

Life, so concerned with its availabilities,  
Is just fragments without

The void alone, the one place where everything fits;  
No body too strange to engulf

To farm a sea and the mouth of the universe  
Closing on the pill of your shy being

Poison without authorities, foreign substances  
Tainting the purity of our oneness

In the prototypical condition of anyone born,  
No guarantee besides the dark and fatal

But, where please, is the outlet made to let me continue?  
Where can I plug myself in, for power?

## MIND: THE GAP

It's always paranoia if it doesn't make sense;  
That doubt which doesn't trouble itself  
With the obligations of fact, is a species of dogma  
Bred privately for its abominable qualities

Of course, the homage to ego, the ludicrous  
Kowtow to obvious absurdities because  
These assure us of our inestimable worth, our grandeur,  
Even where we are not bold enough to exclaim this

Self love and self fear, two intimate dancers  
Inside the ballroom of the warm skull;  
Speechless, they let the venue speak for them, echoes  
In the auditorium of solitary congratulations

## NADIR SO EARTH

Bloodless pale, the light of winter  
And a *suf'a kit'* cold on nature's monochromes

Once many birds, but instead here  
Droop the conjurations of icicles, wizardry  
In palatial armature; not  
Pent up anymore, broken really;  
Though shattered into a prismatic sand, leech with  
What is left of life

Some tremendous negation aroused such  
Tenebrous emptiness, forlorn legate  
To the end of all machinery since even that doesn't  
Satisfy its entropic hunger

Winter has a pleasant mask for death; the beauty  
Found in her pristine face  
Substitute to an actual encounter

We hear the prophecy again, the depravity  
Repeated like a drum though  
Soulless, still the stain of malice, a  
Predatory instinct  
Or simulacra of this, stalking  
Its own pure wastes

Wild now but sober, the eyeful atavism of  
White owls, from their lineage of Eleusinian sages,  
Are our oracles for our demise  
And our demise foregone with orbit agony;  
Stars spinning beneath

This is a season without flower or insect, sanitized  
Through primeval technologies

That I might hand you a bouquet of gods  
Instead of these rubble fossils;  
That I might reach out my hand to trace your cheek,  
Not leaving a scar of frost

We are where no flesh is though: forever now

## RECIDIVISM

Wintry the path to ruin, a culture deluged  
In the glistening creep of ice  
As the always famished cold devours  
The last heat  
Of a failed civilization

Nominal principles beget nominal laws  
And nominal people *overall*;  
The puppeteers themselves, marionettes too

The powerful, utterly weak; cyclopes  
After a vengeful trickster  
Has turned their behemoth might  
Into awkward travesty;  
Nobody today is really a sheep though, citizens  
Of ordinary kind are assured, yes  
In daily affirmation  
Of good governance by the heralds of those  
Who own the government

Congratulations to them then, and merry Christmas  
In this age of empty vicissitudes  
Though my existence, my own personal reality,  
Seems to intrude, indeed,  
On the happiness of the bacchanalia

And though I am no Jesus, neither am I  
Friend to Pharisees or  
Other lawgivers; Draco being the last honest member  
Of that tribe perhaps and, even for him,  
I have no hat to throw, being  
Myself a foul creature of anarchy  
Incapable of appreciating the blessings of my  
Generous serfdom

But how ungrateful is *this*!  
When so many can reconcile themselves  
To lives they hate, it is unconscionable for anyone to  
Require anything more

Such needs must themselves be illegal  
Or deranged, diseased

As a former ward of the Crown though, I was  
One of the dead queen's pet children but, naturally  
Without inheritance, so there is  
Some fun in the agents of her beleaguered son  
Forgoing due process for this little bit  
Of business, both  
More personal and less

Offer grain to the wolf, offer blood to the lamb;  
What monstrous feast of injustices  
Awaits humanity once  
The machine of the new sun rises?

Far be it for me to prognosticate however,  
That clever task belonging  
To those who are not my peers; an exclusive bunch really,  
Although whether they actually wear the masks  
Or the masks wear them is a question  
Said luminaries have so far  
Been too bashful to attempt an answer;  
So now let me ask them  
Something else in the meantime

You who see so much, surely you  
Saw this coming...

And doing nothing, did you not approve?

## STATUS REPORT

The ship is on fire and it's sinking but  
The ocean will put out the flames and there's  
No danger of collateral damage

The whole crew's going down to the abyss;  
Fortunately, the crew is just me



## THE MONSTER AS VICTIM

A creature under the ice, wondering at an airy realm  
Bright but mysteriously unreachable

Though dying, born forever;  
Said abomination a thing embedded like purpose,  
A flaw conceived by some deeper art  
Guarded in the divine

To exist as a monster is no less to be used  
In the business of ultimate ends

As the author writes a villain, so too  
What is the story of nature without her broken works?  
Cruelty would not exist without some hunger  
To give it animus first, but this  
An original cruelty then; that cruelty  
Would exist at all

To taste such bitter wine  
From a forsaken land: *knowledge*

Walls of solid divide are the luxury of those  
Who've lived without ever being alive;  
Some kind of dream world graced to those who  
Sleep eternally

While the awakened startle to this by  
Ugly nightmare



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