

## Star Treatment

*Based on a true story*

*Dedicated to someone I never knew*

1.

Fucking amateurs. They're everywhere these days. They think they know something. They don't know shit. They've been out there for six months now walking the streets. They've been out there doing the interviews. They've got nothing.

They should have hired me. None of the families came to me. I'm a relic. I'm just a reminder of times long gone. I'm an old man. I'm an old useless man. Well at least they think so. If they would have hired me, this whole problem would have been finished months ago. But...of course they didn't. Nobody even called me. Nobody even darkened my office door. Nobody cares about me anymore. I'm a lost artifact. I'm a night terror of a bad memory. I am wrath. I am envy. I am annihilation.

Crystal Springs has had a rough few months. I'm being too hard on myself. They haven't forgotten me. I haven't been lost in the shuffle. At least that's what I tell myself. There's an old Latin proverb, "All hours wound you. The last one kills." The only reason I know that is because I read it in a fantasy book last week. Hey, don't chastise me! It's been boring around here. Anyway, that proverb is so simple yet so true. Sometimes time isn't the only thing that kills you. It does, believe me. I should know. Sometimes it's a spectre in the night. Sometimes it's a ghost with a massive blade that cuts you ear to ear.

There I go rambling again. They've been saying I'm losing it for years. I don't believe them or maybe I do.

There's a knock at the door. There was another knock, much harder this time. I hear the rain pounding outside. A clap of thunder rings. "COME IN!", I yell. The door swings open and a heavysset man in his late 40s steps in. "What can I help you with?" The man closes the door and wipes his shoes on the rug. "I need your help.", he said while walking over to my desk. "I'm Roger Stockwell. I'm a local PI. Three of the families have me working on the serial killer case, and to be honest, I've gotten nowhere."

2.

It's been raining for days. Seeing the Sun now seems like a forgotten memory. Stockwell is an asshole, but I think he's alright. He seems genuine. Who the hell knows why he came to me? God doesn't know. If he does, he's not telling me. Stockwell told me that he was looking for help with his investigation, and he'd pay me to do just that. I didn't argue. Im eating boiled noodles every night. My electricity is about to get shut off, and my ride is on the verge of collapse god dammit. Anyway, back on topic. He's gonna pay me. Im going to work on one of the cases he's not currently working on. Doesn't seem quite fair since he's paying me less than what he's making, but hey, that's capitalism. Stockwell told me to start taking a look at the Deane murder. Her body was discovered on September 14th. That was two weeks ago. She was found on the side of the road in midtown. She had been almost ripped in two. Im telling you there are fucking

monsters out there. They're peering in your windows. They're creeping in your doorways. This guy was going to be hard to catch. No evidence was even found on the scene. She was dead, and there were no signs anywhere of what might have happened to her. I might be in trouble.

3.

I could hardly see the road. My car was beat to hell. It was barely running, but I'm not complaining. I'm old as hell, but at least I'm alive. That's more than can be said for the young lady whose murder I'm looking into. I pull into the mother's home. It's a garbage heap. There's random junk thrown everywhere. And when I say everywhere, I mean everywhere. I finally made it through the maze and to the door. I knocked and a young boy answered. "Is your father home?" "I don't even know who that is" said the boy. "Go get your mother then". The boy ran back into the house. A woman in her early 40s came to the door. "What do you want?", she said annoyed. "I'm here about Sara Deane. Are you her mother?". "Who the hell are you ?", she responded angrily. "I'm looking into your daughter's case. The police haven't made any movement and someone has hired me to take a look." She let her defenses down and invited me in. Over the next couple of hours she gave me the full life story. I couldn't care less about the majority of it, but a couple of those nuggets of knowledge might come in handy. She does tell me one thing I don't know. She says the boy's biological father had actually stayed a couple of nights a few weeks before Sara disappeared. That could be a good start.

4. The amateurs had already burned bridges with most of the people I needed to talk to. Most of them didn't even bother coming to the door. I was still trying to track down the father of the boy I had spoken to earlier in the week. Fucking amateurs, I swear. They are killing me out here. This town is crawling with them, and they're coming up empty handed. There is a bar down on Main called The Serpent. I heard from the mother that the father in question had frequented it regularly. I open the door, and the place is vacant. The lights were low. The music was shit. It's just my kind of place. "What can I get you", the bartender belts out in a welcoming tone. "Just give me something on tap". I look around some more. This place stinks, and it's not the good kind of stink. This is something vile, something unsightly. This is how I imagine the darkest and dankest reaches of hell to smell. "You wondering what smells like shit, right?", the bartender says as he pushes a glass up to me. "Pipes are busted in the back. I got sewage running out. Don't tell the health inspector", he says as he laughs. Against my better judgment, I take a sip from the glass he gave me. As I figured, it tastes like piss. "What do you know about Robert Brown?". "Name doesn't ring a bell", he responds. I can tell he's lying. He looked up to the right when he said it. I can read people. I've been in this game a long time. I may be old, but I'm not stupid. "A woman I know says he hangs around in here a lot." "Look buddy, I don't know him all right. Now I think it's best you drink the rest of that and get the fuck out of here.", he says in an angry lowered tone. I drink the rest of what's in the glass and hit the road.

5.

Things were not looking good. I've been working on this a few days now, and I've gotten nowhere. I've got no leads except for the Robert Brown name and the fact that the bartender was clearly hiding something. I had tried the cops earlier in the weeks. Of course, they couldn't tell me anything. They were supposed to be finding this monster, but they weren't doing jack

shit. I imagine they're sitting around eating krispy kreme and bragging about what poor guy they beat up that week. They don't care. I'm not sure I would care either, but I gotta eat. Those noodles are going straight to my waistline. I wait until after dark and pull onto a side street next to The Serpent. It looks like it's a packed house tonight. It doesn't even seem like the same place I went into earlier today. There's a wide range of people I see go in, but I can clearly tell this is a biker's bar, probably a more welcoming one than your typical biker bar. Then I see it. A black SUV pulls up to the curb and two men get out wearing business attire. I see them walk up to the bar, and the crowd splits like they're Moses parting the Red Sea. Pretty sure that was Moses right? I don't know. I don't believe any of that shit. They walk into the light of the door and disappear. These people were not the kind of people that should be here tonight. I get out of my junker and head for the door.

6.

The light was blinding when I reached the entrance. It was like I was dying and being transported to heaven. This looked nothing like it did earlier. The neon signs were lit up dripping light into the rain puddles below. The music was loud now, but it was still shit. I don't know how people today listen to this garbage. Give me a guitar and a good beat any day. After my eyes refocused after being destroyed by the entrance lights, I was able to see the room. Almost all the booths seem to be filled. Every seat at the bar was also filled. They were taking home a good chunk of change tonight. I quickly noticed the two men that had gotten out of the SUV outside. They were entering a room behind the bar. I walked up closer to the bar. I'm not sure what I was expecting. It's not like I could hear anything over the excruciating dance beat that was being played. I notice something though. The smell from earlier was gone. They either got the pipe fixed and cleaned up the mess, or the bartender was full of shit and something much worse was going on here. I wait around the bar for a little bit, surveying the clientele. I see one of the bouncers and a younger woman head into the back where I saw the two businessmen go earlier. There's something not right about this whole scene. I've seen enough police procedurals to know that. There is something going on in the back of this piece of shit tavern. There's an evil lurking between its walls. The bartender walks up, and what do you know, it's the same asshole as before. "I thought I told you to get the fuck outta here old man", he says half smiling. He's had a few tonight so far. How else could you explain his jovial attitude? "Honestly, I thought you'd be off work by now. You work full operation hours?" "None of your fucking business buddy. If you're gonna hang out here, you're gonna pay for the privilege. What do you want to drink?", he responded quickly. "Same stuff you gave me earlier. It tasted amazing going down." "Who the fuck are you old man? You think you're funny? That stuff takes like shit. The frat boys love it though. It's cheap as shit too with a high markup. That's why it's always easy to recommend." He laughs. "How about I give you something good?" He turns around behind the bar for a minute and comes back with something foamy and dark. "That's gonna kick you on your ass old man. I can guarantee that ", he said as pushes the beverage toward me. I think about it for a minute, whether I should drink it or not. Fuck it! I'm no coward. I down the son of a bitch. I assume that's how the bartender intended it to be drank since no one could sip on that concoction and take it for long. It tasted like straight up bile, or at least how I imagine bile tastes. He looks at me and smiles. "You all right you old fucker. You look a little woozy". I suddenly don't

feel so good. My head is spinning. Where am I? How did I get here? Then everything went black.

7.

When I wake up, I can barely move. It's dark where I'm at but there's a ray of light coming in from up above. Something smells horrible. It smells like rotting garbage. Then I realize it. I'm in the can, literally. I push the dumpster top open and crawl out. It looks like the rain has stopped, but now it feels like I'm standing on the surface of the sun. Needless to say, it's hot as hell. Call me an old dumbass, but I'm no climate change denier. I'm not sure what happened. I seem to be okay other than being thrown in the dumpster. One of two things happened. I either was drugged and thrown outside, or I drank too much, as I normally do and had to be escorted politely. I'm just going to go with the more probable explanation and let bygones be bygones. I get in my rust bucket and head back to the office. After showering and putting on some clothes that didn't smell like shit, I kicked back in my chair for some good quality time with just my thoughts. I've actually been reading a lot lately to try to keep those prying thoughts of mine in the background. You never quite know you're going crazy until you're way past gone. At least that's what I'm told. I was actually writing a novel a while back. Of course I didn't finish it. I never finish anything. It was based on a dream I had a few years ago about a private investigator working a serial killer case. He was everything PIs like me wanted to be. He was smart. He was attractive. He was a master at the art of interrogation. He was everything I'm not and never will be. This case might make the news, but I won't. I'm an eyesore you only bring out to do the job and then put back in the closet.

8.

Sometimes the amateurs are good for something. One of them found a murder weapon a couple of days ago. I guess I should say possible murder weapon. It was a hatchet covered in the victim's blood so I assume it was. She was hacked to pieces. There are some fucking monsters out there. I just hope that this has all been the work of the same person. I pray to the non-existent Lord above that one sick fuck did all of this. Weird dreams have been coming back since I stopped taking my medication. Sometimes I don't even know what's real anymore. Nothing about reality seems real anymore. I'm driving down to see the weapon. I'm not really sure what I expect. It's going to be a hatchet covered in a woman's blood. I pull up the station, go inside, and that's exactly what it is. I take back what I said before. These amateurs didn't help me for shit. I turn around to leave, and I see an officer walking down the hall. I recognize him as one of the men who got out of the SUV the night before. He was already out of sight before it dawns on me that I better ask him some questions. I quickly go up to the front desk and ask about a cop with the description I'd seen, short brown hair around 5'11. She laughs and closes the little window on me. I walk outside into the blistering heat. Summer hasn't even got here yet, and I feel like I'm dying. God seems to like my city in two states: wet as the ocean or hot as hell. There's nothing in between. It's best I keep moving.

9.

Veronica was this girl I knew from a diner when I was younger. Her boyfriend was a total dick truck driver. He used to treat her like complete shit. Maybe Veronica wasn't her name. For some

reason I think it might have started with an 'S'. Anyway, sometimes I wonder what happened to her. Did she grow old and have a family? Is the asshole boyfriend still in the picture? A spider crawls across my desk in slow motion. I smash it. God damn bugs, how are they even getting in here? I've got to focus. I've still got nothing of substance. I've got a few strange coincidences and the name Robert Brown. I grab the phone book and look up Brown. There's more people named Brown in the phone book than I want to call, and there's only one Robert. I had called him right after I got the case. It was of course a dead end. Fuck it. I've got nothing else to do today. I call every name with the last name Brown. I was about to give up when the second to last name answered. "Hello", someone said. "Is this Bob Brown?" "No, that's my uncle." It was the young boy from before.

10.

I hang up the phone quickly. My stomach turns just thinking about it. Robert is either his uncle or his father, but the thing that worries me is that he's both. This world is fucking sick. It's a mad world out there. I don't even understand what's going on. Everyday, it seems like one more piece of my mind breaks and falls away. I'm probably losing it, but I can't do anything about that now. I'm too far gone. I gotta figure this mystery out. It might be my last one. I try to move my mind to another place. I think about the cop I saw in the station. Why the hell was he at that biker shithole that night, and who was the businessman he was with? Right now I've got more loose ends than I can handle. How does Robert Brown, or Bob, or whatever the hell his name is fit into all this? I don't know yet, but I'm sure I'll find out eventually. Everything in the universe is connected, but some things are more tightly connected than others. I think this net is getting tighter and tighter the more I think about it. I've got to get back over to the girl's mother's house. I need some more information about who Robert actually is. I'm thinking about what I'm going to ask the woman when the door swings open. It's fucking Stockwell. What does he want? "Well, what do you got?", he says demanding. "Not much at the moment, hoss". "Well, then what the fuck am I paying you for. You've had this case for over a week, and you don't have anything big? I should have listened to everyone when they told me coming to you was a waste of time and money. Fuck it. You're off the case. I'll go elsewhere", he almost screamed at me. "Now wait there Stockwell. I've got some interesting leads, nothing concrete yet, but very interesting. If you go hire another guy right now, he's gonna have to waste time doing what I've already done. Don't you think it's best you just stick with the tired old man in front of you?" "Fine, but you got 3 days. I better see something by then. I'll be expecting a call.", he says to me right as the phone rings. "Look Stockwell, I gotta take this. Beat it, and I'll give you a call in a couple days". Stockwell walks out, and I answer the phone. "Hello", I speak into the receiver. "Hey, did you just call here and talk to my son?". It was Sara Deane's mother. I hang up on her and head for the door.

11.

The place was still piled high with as much shit as possible when I arrive. I didn't expect any less. This place doesn't get cleaned up often, if ever. After I once again navigate my way to the door, I'm greeted by Sara's mother on the porch. "Look Lillian, I need to know what's going on with the boy's father slash uncle. What's the deal there?" "Why is it any of your business? I don't even know your name and you know my entire life story", she replied. "Well Lillian, seems like

you left some stuff out, some possible incestual stuff. Spill the beans. I don't have all fucking day." "What can I tell you. I have no idea who the father is, but yes, it could be Robert." "What kind of person are you that you would conceive a child with your own brother? He is your brother right?" "Yes, he is my brother, and if it happened I don't remember it. He says it happened, but I was in a bad place around the time I got pregnant. I had been around the block with many guys. I was strung out on pills. I didn't even know where I was most of the time.", she said ashamed. "Why didn't you go get a fucking paternity test to see if he's the kid's father?" "Well, I really don't want to know. I also don't want Trevor to know that his uncle and his dad are the same person. I don't know how either of us would deal with it.", she said while looking down at the ground. "Well, are you sure you even had relations with him? How would you know?" "He's the one who told me that we he had sex. I wouldn't have even believed him, but he told me I had a tattoo in an area that no one who hasn't seen me naked in the past 10 years would know about.", she explained. That got me thinking. I don't like thinking, but I gotta get my ass paid. I was actually able to afford a ham sandwich last night. I was eating like a king now that I had some coin in my pocket, and I don't want that to end, at least not yet. I gotta make some headway in this case. I bid Lillian a farewell. I faintly hear her ask what my name is before I start my shitheap and drive away.

12.

The Serpent isn't as rowdy tonight. It has about half the people that were here a few days ago. I walk up to the bar. There is some new guy tending. "How you doing, old man. What can I get you". "Scotch, on the rocks". "Sure thing", the bartender drops the ice in and pours the scotch. I sip the scotch and look around. The smell is still gone. "I notice that you guys got your pipes fixed in the back. That smell is gone". "Pipes in the back?", he questioned. "I guess if something happened I wasn't aware of it." he continued. Well, that's strange. You would think that someone who worked here would know if you had shitwater spewing from the back room in the last week. I look over by the door behind the bar that I'd seen the businessmen go into the other night. There are a couple of what look to be dog collars lying on the ground next to it. This is a strange place. "So, you guys have like gambling or something in the back?" "Not that I'm aware of." he replied. "They better not be gambling here. I've been running this place for 10 years. I've been running it clean." "I didn't know if you were running gambling or dogfighting or something like that." I point towards the dog collars. "Yeah, those must be Don's. He's got a couple of dogs. Must have left them here." he said. Well, that don't make any fucking sense to me. Did he take his dogs without a collar home? Did he buy new collars and for some reason leave those by the back door? I'm feeling uneasy and no longer welcome. I drink the rest of the scotch, pay the bartender, and head for the door. I turn around, just to grasp at straws, and ask if he knows a Robert Brown. The bartender looks me directly in the eyes and says "No".

13.

I'm having one of those dreams again. It's the one where I know I'm in a dream. Lucid dreaming is what it's called. I'm a detective working a scene. I'm amazing. I'm spectacular. I'm a golden fucking God. Usually my dreams fall apart and I wake up when I realize I'm dreaming. Usually everyone around me turns and looks at me like I'm some kind of intruder. That is not happening this time. I see a lovely blonde and equally lovely brunette staring at me from afar. Everything is

in black and white so I guess I couldn't truly give you their hair colors, but let's just pretend for now. They know how good I am. I am the fucking best there is. On the ground below me is a corpse so mutilated that it's hard to tell it was ever human. "Oh my God. " I hear a person beside me say. I'm actually not that shocked by it. I've seen a lot of sick shit, especially in dreams. I look up. The lights are blinding. I'm in Chinatown. You know what they say about Chinatown. I move my head back down, and I see an Asian woman standing in front of me. Her eyes flash, and I'm hypnotized. I see a smile creep across her face. She pulls a gun, points it at me, and fires.

14.

I wake up with my heart racing. My palms are drenched in sweat. I don't know what the fuck that was or what it means. Where the hell did Chinatown come from? I haven't even been down there for years. Who was that woman? I'm an old fuck, but I'd still really like to meet her even if she pulls a gun on me. It's only 4 AM. I get up, make some breakfast and just sit there. Stockwell wants some progress soon or he's kicking me to the curb. I look down at my cereal. If I don't find something out soon, I'm gonna be eating mayonnaise sandwiches again. That dream is bothering me. There's something about it that just seemed so real. I start thinking about the Asian woman again. I've seen her somewhere before. It's strange. It's like I knew her very intimately in another life, but I don't know why I feel that way. I doubt it means anything. I figure most of the things that Carl Jung and Sigmund Freud came up with was utter horseshit anyway. Dreams don't mean anything. They are just random bits of energy firing off when I'm sleeping. I've got to stop looking so much into things that have no evidence to back them up. I think about the tattoo that Lillian had said she had. I think about Lillian herself. I'm not sure how a person lives with what she may or may not have done. Unless she has no morals or empathy, it must be tearing her up inside to look at her boy everyday and where he may have come from. I know she had told me that she didn't want to get a test to see if he was the father, but what's worse: knowing or not knowing? I finish my cereal and turn on the TV. The top story is about another girl turned inside out and thrown by the interstate. I figure it's the same guy that's done all the rest. There are some fucking monsters out there. My daily dose of state propaganda comes on, and I immediately turn the TV off. I don't need to hear any of that made up shit. I've got one day left before Stockwell is going to retire me from my position. My lights are about to be shut off yet again, and I really need a steady stream of income. I could never get that lucky. I close my eyes, and I see a unicorn running through a dense forest. I've seen it many times, always when I'm dreaming or when I close my eyes and relax. It's running from something, or I could be wrong. It could be running towards someone. I open my eyes, throw the cereal bowl in the kitchen sink and exit my humble abode.

15.

I pull up outside the station again. It's only about 6 AM. I'm parked far enough away from the entrance where nobody is hopefully going to notice me. I need to find out who that cop was the other day. I think he might be the puzzle piece that could crack this piece of shit case wide open. A few hours go by with me just sitting there doing some crossword puzzles. Hey! What do you expect me to be doing? All the sudden, I see someone get out of a patrol car and start heading up to the station. It's the guy from a couple weeks ago at the bar. The memory of him

walking in was seared into my head for some reason. I guess my memory impaired old brain thought that was important information to be saved. After he's quite close to the door, I get out and follow behind. He goes into the station and heads for the back where I saw him go before. I walk up to the little window at the front again. "Who was that officer that just walked by here a second ago". "I'm sorry sir. I wasn't really paying much attention. Could you describe him for me?" the woman behind the window replied. I stood there for a minute wondering if I should even bother with this again. I'm pretty sure the woman behind the little glass window thought I was insane. I was an old man just standing there with a blank look on his face. "Do you need me to call you some help, sir" I hear her say. I stand there another thirty seconds and tell her I'm all right. I thank her for her help and head back outside. I get back in my glorious automobile and wait. This guy is one of the only leads I've got. This is the last chance I have to find something that Stockwell thinks is sufficient for keeping me on. I guess I'm going to play stakeout, just like the old days. The sun is blinding me coming through my windows. I lay my seat back, put my hat over my face and fall into a black hole.

16.

I'm wearing my duster. I've got my fedora. I'm the real deal. I'm a true detective. It's raining like God himself opened up the mouth of the sea overhead. The entire world is painted in tones of gray and black. I move past the hustlers and the addicts. I'm looking for someone. I don't know her name, but she has a face I'll never forget. Bright lights from storefronts and restaurants shine down on me as I pass through the crowded street. Everything is eerily quiet. I feel something pulling me forward and in a certain direction. I keep moving north, dodging and weaving past all of the people moving against my path. We are like two patterns clashing, me and the crowd. With every step, I send a ripple through the fabric of time. Suddenly I'm in front of an apartment door. I'm not sure what happened between now and when I was on the street. I look at the door. It's an old door. It's a door that's been opened many times by many people. It's a door that holds many secrets. I see the number seven thirty two scrawled in dark black on the door. There is a soft glow coming from underneath. I reach out and turn the doorknob.

17.

I can feel the sunburn on my left arm as soon as I open my eyes. How long have I been sitting here? It was almost dusk. The patrol car that the officer drove up in is gone. That figures. My luck is total shit. It always has been. This is my last day with Stockwell. I've got close to nothing. I start the engine and start driving home. What the fuck am I going to do? This is it. Is this it? Is this all there is? These are big questions that probably don't ever deserve any answers. I pass a couple of convenience stores. This town is a dump. I could have been anywhere, but I wasted my life here. I'm driving through the rougher side of town. Hell, I live in the rougher side of town. I notice the neon sign of a tattoo parlor and pull into a parking space. I might as well look into the tattoo angle. I doubt there is any point in it, but this is really one of my last leads. I don't even know if this is the place where Sara got her tattoo, but I'm out of choices. I walk in the front door. I see a couple of guys doing some work in the back on a couple of pretty rough looking guys. One of them stops, puts down his tattoo gun, and walks up to the front desk. "How you doing, old man. You looking to get some ink? From just a once over, your skin doesn't look too loose. We should be able to do something with you" he says to me while he sits down in the



chair. I stand there for well over a minute just thinking. I'm not even sure how to ask the questions I want to ask. Fuck it! I'll just come out and say it. I've got nothing to lose. "Do you know Lillian Deane?" "Yeah, I know her. Why you ask?" he replies. "May I ask how you know her". "Yeah, a lot of Pythons come in here for their ink and her brother is one of them. He comes in here every couple of months for a touch up or a new piece." he explained. I look behind him at the tattoo chairs and the guy still lying on his stomach waiting for the artist to come back. "Thank you. I appreciate your help. You might be seeing me again. I'll make sure and give you some business next time." I'm not sure what this new information tells me, if anything. I still feel like I'm flailing. I think this kind of gig might be for the young. I know too much, and nothing surprises me anymore. I leave the tattoo parlor and drive home.

18.

I turn on the TV. There's some documentary about cockfighting on the channel that comes up first. I'm immediately reminded of a time I had a check bounce at a small grocery market. I was a lot younger then and living in the city. I only really had a couple of good male friends and a female friend back then. Now I've got no friends. I change the channel. There's a body horror movie on. The bloody scene reminds me of the women that have been found on the streets of my city. There are some fucking monsters out there. The world wasn't this dark when I was younger. The world is getting darker and darker every day. This country has no place for an old man. This world has no place for an old man. I lean back on the couch and take a deep breath. My phone rings. It's Stockwell. He tells me it's over. He tells me I'm done. He tells me I'm finished. He tells me my final payment is in the mail. I put the phone down and sit there. This was it. My last chance at some true redemption just escaped my grasp. Fuck it! Nothing matters anyway. There is no meaning to anything. Before you are conceived, you're in an abyss. After you pass away, you return to that abyss. I'm not scared, but I wish I could have helped bring these families some closure. I grab the bottle of opiates on the table beside me and swallow half the bottle. I lay back on the couch and seem to drift away.

19.

I slide off the event horizon and into trillion pieces. I play with geometry. I taste colors. I see sounds. I feel rhythmic souls colliding. Good and bad vibrations fight for control of my being of infinite shards. I see the beginning. I see the bright light that equals everything and the complete darkness of the unidentified. I am reborn in the fires of all creation. I am everything stars are made of and more. My view of time is from the outside and it moves in slow motion. I see stars turn into black holes. I see the future where beings don't look much like humans. This could also be the past. God and the Devil are real, even if they're only inside you. I feel them tearing me apart.

20.

It's dark outside when I wake up. The sound of cicadas is deafening. I'm still on the couch, and I've got vomit all over me. That cold bastard God, if he's there at all, doesn't want me dead yet. He's going to torture me some more I guess. I sit up and look around. Nothing feels real anymore. There's something just a little off about everything. I wish I knew what it was. The TV is still on. The news is playing. There you go. It's my daily dose of state propaganda. It's all

bullshit. It's all a big scam. It's pro-wrestling. It's two sides that are being paid by the same people pretending to fight one another. I gave up on politics a long time ago. "Senator Davidson has been arrested for insider trading" I hear come from the idiot tube. The rich get richer. The poor can go eat shit. I turn off the television. I look at the clock. I see 9:36 staring back at me. I stand up and go outside to my car. I may not be getting paid anymore, but I'm not giving up yet. I'm curious to see how this story ends. I'm curious to see how my story ends. I look down at my back driver's side tire, and it is flat. There's a clear knife mark through the rubber.

Division by zero error:

Hyperspace slides by like an ocean of light. The ship's computers plot the route to the next destination. Spiral galaxies creep by the side windows. The viral specimens are safely in their containers and ready to be planted. From their humble origins, entire civilizations will rise and fall. There will be no intervention by their designers. There will be no evidence of their true origin until it is time to reveal the invisible hand and pull back the curtain.

21.

I throw on the spare, and head for the tattoo parlor. An old tired song begging to be put out of its misery ends as I pull into the parking lot. Blue Harvest is pretty empty tonight. I open the door and am greeted by a man at the desk. I'm not feeling like myself these days. I ask him to give me an inverted Penrose triangle tattoo. He says all right and tells me to come take a seat in one of the booths behind the counter. I sit down. He puts on his gloves. "Where do you want it?" he asks. "Right forearm" I say. "About how big" he asks. "About the size of a silver dollar" I say. "Got it." He affirms as he gets to work. "So why you getting this tattoo" he asks. "I don't know. The world is a strange place." I'm pretty sure he thinks my brain is fried because he doesn't say anything else. A few minutes goes by, and he finishes. It's not a very complicated tattoo, and it's not very big but sometimes those are exactly what you want. It was the perfect puzzle piece for the moment. He tells me his name is Don and asks what my name is. He wraps up the tattoo. I pay and then leave.

0x16

Change is a beautiful thing. Evolution is the most beautiful thing that can ever happen or will ever happen. Blackness will beget blackness. Darkness will beget darkness. Nothingness will beget nothingness. I can still witness all the things that come in between. I see the trees burst into being from the small roots. I see the animals scream into existence from the tiniest single celled organisms. I see the animals change and grow. I see the birth of man. I see the birth of the traveling man. I see the birth of the carnival man who is well aware of the things that happen behind the scenes but lives as if they don't. I see middle school classrooms comprised of bored students. I see school buses half full. I see life lost in a moment. I see the flow of information coming into every person every day all day until the last neuron collapses into the black void.

22.

I am walking through Chinatown and it's empty. My arm still hurts a little from the tattoo. A couple of kids on bicycles ride past me yelling at each other. Those poor bastards have no clue what lies ahead for them and their life. I want to find out if the apartment from my dream exists. I

need to know if it means anything. I'm lucky though. The first apartment building I see has an outside that looks very familiar. That must be a good sign. There's a hotel that mirrors it on the other side of the street and overlooks a small lake. There's a buzzer on the front door. I wait around for about 30 minutes. Someone goes in, and I grab the door and go inside. After a couple of minutes of squabbling with the guy I had just followed in, I gave him a couple bucks to go away. It was all I had. There are four floors. I begin to walk past the doors on the first. After having no luck on the first two floors, I hit the jackpot on the third. I find a door with the exact graffiti I had seen in the dream. I knock on the door. Nobody comes. I knock again. Nobody comes. I know people are in there. I can hear muffled voices. I even hear what sounds like "old man has been looking around". I sit down in the hallway. I sit there for over two hours until a super comes and tells me I need to get gone.

23.

I know there was someone in that room. I know it was the same room from my dream. That mystical dream bullshit is starting to not seem so far fetched. Either that or my brain is permanently fried. I hear the smooth roll of the pavement underneath me as my car creeps into oblivion. I turn on the radio. Through the speakers, I hear the same old tired song. It's a song that has gone through a million speakers. It's a song that has been tuned out uncountable times. I make my way back to the serpent. The house is about half full. It's a pretty laid back vibe tonight. I walk up to the bar, and it's the guy from the first night I came in. "Give me something light. Give me something fucking cheap. I'm broke." "All right old man, you watch yourself tonight though" he says as he passes over a mug. I drink a little of it. It's not as bad as I remember, if it is the same beer I had last time. "You know a guy named Don?" "The only Don I know is a friend of mine that works down at Blue Harvest. Why you ask?" he says. "Is he a good tattoo artist? I was thinking about getting some more ink. I just got this one a few days ago." I show him the triangle I have. "That's kinda weird man. What would make you want to get something like that?" he asks. "What is so weird about it?" "I don't know. It just doesn't seem like something an old person would get. It's just fucking weird. You're kind of a nut though aren't you?" he says. I sit there and think about it for a minute. I can see how someone from the outside might think it's a little weird. I'm probably losing it a little bit too. My best days are over. This is it. This case or non-case, since I'm not even getting paid anymore, might be my last chance to make a positive mark on the world. "Yeah, it's weird. I'm losing it. Anyway, before I lose my train of thought. What do you know about Don?" "Is this an interrogation or what, old man? He's a friend of mine I've known forever." he replies. I just need to come out and ask the question. Fuck it! I'm doing it. "What is going on in the back of this shithole?" I demand. He looks at me and gives a little bit of a smile. "Come on back old man. I'll show you what goes on" he says as he motions me to come to the back.

\$buffer\_overflow

Stars glimmer in a pond on the galactic ocean. The breathing machines inhale and exhale. The beep of life-giving sustainability transcends the hum of the hyperdrive engine. Footsteps echo off the steel walls of the chrome corridors, creating music that will only be heard by a solitary listener. Tiny computers inside a mind come alive. They search for patterns. They transcode memories across vast landscapes of grey matter. The keypad gives birth to a string of

characters on the screen. Billions of neurons flash and bring forth poetry translated into cold hard logic. A confirmation message fades into existence indicating that life systems are at peak efficiency. More footsteps ring out as feet make their way back down the hallways. The click of the pod closing can be heard as someone crawls back inside.

24.

The back of the bar is completely trashed. As I figured, there's definitely been some illegal dogfighting going on back here. I see blood on the floor, presumably canine blood. I see a circle, presumably where the poor dogs go to war. There are some fucking monsters out there. "Well old man. This what you wanted to see? You wanted to see what pieces of shit we are? Well, here you are. Take it all in." I'm unsure as to what to say. It's definitely not legal and it's definitely some really unethical shit, but I don't know how this connects to anything as far as the murders. I stand there for a minute and start to walk out. "Where the fuck do you think you're going, you old fuck? You think I'd bring you back here and show you this and I'd just let you go? You think you're going to get out of here undamaged? You think you're going to get the fuck out of here alive?" he says with a demented smile. I stand there. This might be it. Oh well, everybody has to go sometime. He must be making quite a bit back here if he's willing to kill me over it. It doesn't matter. Nothing matters anymore. I failed the girl. I failed her mother. I failed myself. I failed this world. The bartender laughs. "Get the fuck out of here old man. Nobody is going to do shit to me. You wouldn't believe the kind of people I've got stuff on. Nobody is going to touch me." He looks right at me. I stand there for another few seconds. "What the fuck are you waiting for. Get your god damn stupid looking old ass outta here! Don't come back! Ever!" he screams. Well, you don't gotta tell me twice. Today must be my lucky day. I jet out of there like a bat out of hell. Something reminds me of some meat loaf I ate the other day. I start the car and get the hell out of there. Halfway home, my car gives out. I pull over on the side of the road and start walking.

25.

There's an overcast sky above. I thank the non-existent God above for that. It would have been hot as hell otherwise. As soon as the thought enters my mind, the sky opens up and drops an atomic bomb of water. Well, this figures. Thanks God. The rain keeps coming down, and I keep walking. My clothes are soaked. It's funny though because I don't really care. I feel like I just escaped death back there. Grim death is always right behind me, but he was at my throat back there in that shithole tavern. I'm not sure why it scared me so much. I had just tried to end it all a couple days ago. What has changed between then and now. Have I changed? Do people change? Cars drive past and muddy water sprays up at me. One car pulls over. I can tell it's a woman and a young boy in the car. It's Lillian. "Do you want a ride?" she asks. I climb into the backseat, and she pulls off.

26.

"You're soaked. I'll take you home to change clothes, and then let's go grab some dinner. Pardon my honesty, but you don't look good." she says to me in the backseat. The boy is up front looking out the window. The rain creates a chaotic symphony on the windshield. "Yeah, that sounds good to me". She pulls up in my driveway, and I get out. "I'll be right back." "We'll be

waiting right here for you." She smiles as she says it. It was nice to see someone smile for once, especially after all she has been through. I smile the little that I can muster. I go unlock the door and go inside. It's dark inside, and something doesn't feel right. Then I see him. He's sitting in my recliner. He's got a pistol in his hand. "Sit down" he says. I stand there. "Sit the fuck down. I said" he repeated. I sat down. He looks straight into my eyes. His gun is pointed right at me. "What do you know about Li Chen?".

#### A Shanghai Mind

The lights are low in the apartment off the main block of Chinatown. The television is playing a rerun of a show that was long ago put into syndication. The same old lines have been repeated more times than anyone who wrote them has ever taken a breath. An Asian woman in dark glasses sits in a wicker chair in the corner. She drinks from her glass. She's still got her sunglasses on. There is a knock on the door. She keeps looking at the television. "I will deal with him. Do not worry." One of the men in the room get up to go to the door. "Sit down. I will deal with it. I told you." she says to him. He sits back down. He passes her something. She inhales from the opium pipe, passes it back to the tattooed man next to her, and slides down in her chair. Two young girls are tied and gagged lying on the floor.

27.

"Who is Li Chen?" "Don't try to fucking pretend you don't know who I'm talking about. You were at an apartment I know she's at just the other day. What the fuck were you doing there, and what do you know about her?" Her? Is it the woman from my dream? Is that who he's talking about? "It's a long complicated fucking story. I have no idea who she is. I was there trying to get some information about a case I was working on." "What case?" he asks. "It was a case involved with the murders that have been happening around town." He sat there for a minute. Finally he speaks. "You're coming with me. Come on." he tells me.

#### A Casual Chain

A gun goes off in Sarajevo. Cause triggers event. Cause triggers event. Cause triggers event. All wars should come to an end with this war. This will be the war to end all wars. After the war, all is quiet. An artist paints. An artist is rejected. An artist with an ideology that runs counter to the nature of the human condition gives rise to an evil empire. A nation enters a war late in the game, and along with its allies is victorious. A new empire arises out of this nation. It is an empire that will soon be the most powerful force in the world. It is a nation of surveillance. It is a nation of imperialism. It is a nation of internment. It has become the very thing that it fought against so long ago. A writer thinks grimly of what is to come.

28.

It's pouring down rain when we reach Chinatown. We headed out the back. Lillian is probably still sitting out in front of my house. I don't see myself coming back alive. This is bad. This fucker means business. He made me drive his car, his gun pointed at me the entire time. We pull up to the apartment building and get out. The neon lights of the storefronts down the street are bright. They make my eyes hurt even this far away. I wipe the rain from my eyes. "What the fuck are you looking at old man. Get the fuck in the building." my guide says to me in a forceful tone.

Fuck this guy. He took me at gunpoint from my own home, and I was about to have a nice meal for once. I reluctantly go inside the apartment complex. We walk to the elevator. He is always right behind me. The elevator has a sign on it that says 'Out of Order. Use Stairs'. "Go to the stairs old man" he says to me while pushing his gun to the middle of my back. He pushes harder as we head up the stairs. I'm walking to my own fucking death here. There's no way out for me. There's nothing. Why the fuck didn't I just sit at home eating my noodles and watching the idiot tube. If I had done that, I wouldn't be on my way to greet the reaper. We get to the third floor and arrive in front of the same door I had come to the other day. The number was still scrawled across the door. The man with the gun still pointed at me beats on the door. "Open up! It's Che!". The door opens. It's dark as the deepest cave on the darkest moon inside. "Come in, and close that door" I hear a woman say. We both step inside and the person I assume is named Che closes the door. It is pitch fucking black until she turns the light on. There she is. The woman from my dream is sitting in a chair in the corner. She doesn't seem very pleased to see me. "Che, get the hell out of here" she says to the man still pointing his gun at my back. "I don't know if it's wise to leave you alone with this guy. We don't know....". He gets cut off. "GET THE FUCK OUT OF HERE, I SAID" she screams at him. He lowers his gun and walks into the other room. There is blood on the carpet I'm standing on. I can tell it's pretty fresh. "Now, it seems like we have much to discuss, Ronin" she says as she looks deeply into my eyes.

helloWorld

Strange noises permeate the universe. The entirety of everything moves and shakes. There is something that feels new. There seems to be something else. The universe is blind to what lies beyond it. There is a universe outside a universe. There is a universe outside a universe outside a universe outside a universe. There is movement. There is more movement. The whole universe is coming to an end. There is more movement. The universe is collapsing. The universe is falling on a single soul and opening into something else, something bigger, something more complicated. There is a final huge burst of energy and movement. There is a blinding light that can be seen through closed eyelids. A child opens its eyes into a universe that no one understands and where no answers to existence will ever be given.

29.

"Look, I know you've been poaching my girls. Question is, why were you over here the other night? Also, how did you even know about this place" the woman in the corner asks me calmly. I don't even know who Ronin is. I've never even heard of him, but I've got nothing to lose. I'm probably dead no matter what. Well, I guess that's true for everyone. I decide to ride it out, and see where this thing takes me. I need to find out what's happening. "Yeah, about the girls. I didn't know." "You didn't know what! You didn't know who you were fucking with!" she yells angrily. "Everybody in this game knows that you do NOT fuck with Li Chen. You got that, you goofy looking motherfucker? These are not plays you want to be making!" I'm standing there stiff as a board and scared as hell. "Look Mrs. Chen, I didn't know they...." I get cut off. "Che, get the fuck back in here and teach this piece of shit some manners." Che comes back in and before I know it, I'm greeted with the strongest punch I've ever taken to my stomach. I immediately fall to the floor. He starts repeatedly kicking me over and over. "For Christ's sake, I'm an old man" I plead. "You look like you can take it to me, you dumb sonofabitch" Che

replies. He eventually stops. That's when the pain really sets in. I think he might have broken a rib or something. I sure hope not. The lady in the corner speaks again, "You were saying..."

30.

I tell her I don't know anything. This has all been a big misunderstanding. She doesn't believe a word of it. "Tie him up and throw him in the corner. I'll deal with him in a bit" she motions to Che. He zip ties my hands behind my back and throws me in the corner. "Say a fucking word, and I'll break your jaw old man" Che says as he's walking away. The woman turns on the TV. All the lights have been turned off again, and only the glow of the TV brings light into the room. The woman turns up the television volume. The news is on. "All charges pertaining to insider trading were dropped against Senator Davidson this morning. The prosecution released a statement explaining that there was insufficient evidence to proceed with the charges....". The woman, Li Chen, throws the lamp sitting next to her at the television. The television screen breaks and the room is engulfed once again in darkness. "MOTHERFUCKER! HE CUT A DEAL. CHE, THAT DIRTY MOTHERFUCKER JUST FUCKED US" Li Chen screams angrily. She flips on the lights, and looks right at me. "What you looking at, you dumb bitch" she says to me. She then kicks me right in the face, and believe me, it hurts like hell. I can tell I'm bleeding, but I can't tell how bad. "Che, what the fuck are we going to do about this situation. Davidson probably just sold us out, and we've got this dumbass over here to deal with too". Che walks back in from the other room. It's getting hard to see because now there is blood in my eyes. "Well, I'll tell you one God damn thing, Davidson is not going to live. You do not fuck us over and survive" Che says as he looks over at me. Li Chen suddenly smiles and also looks at me. "You know what Che? I have an amazing idea."

In Power

"You know those bastards are going to come for me, right?" a man says to another man in a business suit. "They know I've sold them out. I'm a dead man. I need to get out of the city, NOW!" he yells. "Get me on the first plane to Denver. I gotta get out of here". The man gets in the back of the black sedan. The driver turns the radio on. "Senator Davidson is a crook! This is what corruption looks like! There was plenty of evidence to put him away...". "Turn that fucking shit off. You think I want to hear that right now?" the businessman yells at the driver. The driver turns it down. The upset businessman turns to the other businessman sitting right beside him. "You going to call or what? Hurry the fuck up. I've got to get out of here now." The other businessman pulls his phone out. After a few moments of silence, he turns and let's the upset businessman know that he's got a plane ticket waiting for him at the service desk. "Take us directly to the airport" the upset businessman tells the driver.

31.

I'm sitting in the back of a car. My hands are still zip tied behind my back. Where the fuck are they taking me? Why am I still even alive? I just assumed I would be dead by now. "Where the hell are we going?" I ask Che. He's sitting beside me, looking angry like he has been this entire time. "Oh you'll see" I hear Li Chen say from the driver's seat. She laughs. "How do you know he'll be at the airport" Che asks. "Oh, he'll be at the airport. He knows that we know he sold us out. That bar is probably crawling with Feds by now. They're probably already at the apartment

too.” Li Chen says back. “Why the fuck am I even involved in this. Why are you keeping me alive? Just shoot me or something. I don’t understand what’s going on.” I plead. “Shut the fuck up old man. Your key to this operation now. You just stepped into an unknown world full of unknown variables.” Che slaps me in the back of the head as he says it. “Hey, don’t be doing that shit. We need him alive for a little bit.” I hear Li Chen say from up front. “We can’t send him in there looking like this. He’ll be grabbed by security as soon as he walks in.” Che grabs a hoodie from the floorboard. The blood has dried on my face from that kick earlier. He spits into the hoodie and starts rubbing the blood off my face. A black sedan flies by us doing at least twice the speed limit. “As soon as I walk in where?” I ask. “You’re going in the airport, and you’re going to put a fucking bullet in Davidson’s fucking head. If you don’t, Che told me about the woman and the boy outside of your house. They will be fucking dead by sunrise, and it won’t be quick. We will fucking gut them and hang them up to bleed out.” Li Chen says to me in a deadly serious tone.

32.

We pull up into the unloading zone. Che takes the glock and puts it in his waistband. “What if he’s already inside the terminal?” Che asks. “Well, if he is, we’re fucked. You’ll never get in with the weapon. Che opens the door and gets out. He pulls me out with him. We walk up to the airport entrance and get on one of the moving walkways. “You’re probably wishing you’d never seen that fucking apartment aren’t you old man?” Che says to me with a smile. “Don’t think we are fucking around either. Li Chen never goes back on her word. If she says someone is dead, they are dead. There’s no doubt. It’s like 1+1. It’s always 2. You’re about to die for us and you don’t even know why. There’s something poetic about that. You’re fucking clueless about what all of this is about, but you’re going to die for it. It’s kind of like life. Everyone fights for things that don’t matter in the end. Nothing matters in the end, but we fight anyway.” I never thought this cold motherfucker was a philosopher, but I guess I was wrong. We get off the walkway and move toward the terminal and the metal detectors. I see Davidson. He’s already been through the airport body scanners. Well, there goes their plan. “FUCK!” Che looks at me. “Well, time for a new plan. Take this phone.” He gives me his cell phone. “Get the fuck in there and follow him. Get a ticket and get on the plane he’s getting on. Call me after you get the ticket and tell me where you’re going. If you don’t, the fucking girl and the kid are dead.” He pushes me toward the body scanners. I get through the security checkpoint, and start running on the moving walkway to try to catch up to where we saw Davidson. I finally see him. He’s waiting in the boarding area for a flight to Denver.

A Private Space

[Translated via the Galactic TalkBack App]

“Welcome to the members of the Galactic Federation. We would like to welcome our newest members, the Locusts of Santari IX. They will be invaluable to the Federation in our fight against the Velmore threat. As you all know, the War of Andor VI has been going on for over 4,400 years now, and it is finally coming to a close. We are in the process of signing a peace treaty with the Andorians. With the signing of the treaty, the Reptiles of Andor will also be joining us in the fight against the Velmore. We must have as many allies as possible in this battle. The fate of the entire universe hangs in the balance. We have never seen such a threat. They have



weapons that are beyond our comprehension. Their technology is so beyond ours that it borders on the magical. This is why the Velmore are known as the Space Wizards of the Galactic Front. We are currently surveying more allies to join us in our fight. One of the planets where we might recruit help is a young planet in the arm of a small spiral galaxy. We have agents invisible to the local lifeforms there right now retrieving information. They call their planet Earth."

33.

I run up to the service desk to buy my ticket. The woman behind the counter asks for my ID. "Is that really your name? Wow." she says. I confirm it is my name, grab my ticket, and start to board the plane. Upon entering the cabin, I begin looking for my seat. I know this is going to be a fucking cramped flight, but aren't they all? These airlines are ripping people off, but the government always bails them out when they need it. Corporate Socialism, because you know, corporations are people but somehow people aren't. God, this country sucks. Anyway, get your mind back in the game old man. I keep looking for my seat. I finally get there, and you'll never fucking guess whose seat is right beside me. It's some Hispanic guy. What, did you think it was going to be Davidson? Nah, he was up in first class. I passed him when I came in. I'm too fucking poor for first class, and Che didn't offer to pay. My luck is shit. I've been taken hostage, and somehow I'm also paying for it with my own money. Anyways, I sit down. The guy next to me is playing on his phone. I guess I could play on the phone Che gave me, but I don't even know how to work the damn thing. We take off. I lean the seat back and crush the knees of the person behind me because I'm an asshole like that. I pull my hat down and fall asleep.

#### A Distant Thought

There's a barn with people working. They are loading up boards onto the back of a horse drawn wagon. These are modern people that seem to be living in a world long past. I stare at them from the tree line. They are working as a well oiled machine. Everyone has their place. Everyone knows exactly what they bring to the table. Everyone takes care of everyone else. They are many, but they are one. Time seems to speed up as I'm being a voyeur onto something of which I'm not a part. I see houses built. I see gardens cultivated. I see goods and services exchanged, but I see no money. This puzzles me. This is a world I do not understand. This is a world I was taught was not possible. Time slows back down. I start walking into the small town. I walk up to a man crossing the street. He smiles and reaches his hand out to me.

34.

The damn stewardess wakes me up when she bangs my knee with the drink cart. "Would you like something to drink, sir" she asks. "Yeah, give me whatever cola you've got." My knee is really starting to fucking hurt now. I look to the front of the plane and see Davidson going into the bathroom. The stewardess hands me my drink. It tastes like flat piss. Do they shake this shit up before serving it? I sit and look at the back of my seat for awhile since we'll, what the hell else am I gonna do. Then I remember something. I was supposed to call Che before I got on board, and I was in such a hurry that I forgot. Those dirty motherfuckers better not do anything to Lillian and the kid. They are just innocent bystanders. I see Davidson leave the bathroom. He must have been making a substantial deposit since he was in there awhile. He is walking back

up to his seat when I hear the captain come over the PA. "We'll be landing at Denver International in about fifteen minutes..."

35.

The passengers begin exiting the plane. I keep a close eye on Davidson. I don't follow too close. He already keeps looking behind him every couple minutes. I call Che and tell him where I'm at. He tells me to keep an eye on Davidson. They will call me back with further instructions. I ask of Lillian and the boy are ok. He tells me to keep doing what they say, and they will be. I hang up. He keeps looking back. Does he fucking see me? What is he looking at? What do I do? He's coming toward me. HE'S COMING TOWARD ME! "Why the fuck are you following me, you old motherfucker? Do I know you? What the fuck do you want? You've been following me through the airport for at least ten fucking minutes. I've been walking in a god damned circle, and you continue to follow me. I'll ask one more time, who the fuck are you?" he yells at me. I look at him for a little too long. "What the fuck are you looking at. SAY SOMETHING!" he demands. "I'm Ronin". "Ronin? You're Ronin? I wasn't expecting this. An old fucking piece of shit is the mighty Ronin. I don't believe it. You lying to me old man?" he asks. "No, I'm definitely him." He smiles and looks directly into my eyes. "You're the one whose been shuffling the girls in and out huh? You're one sick fuck. You're one old demented piece of shit. You think you can blackmail me motherfucker. You've got no proof of anything. You've got nothing!" Of course I have no idea what he's talking about, but I'm knee deep in shit here. He thinks I'm some guy called Ronin, and he's talking about some girls. I don't even know what is going on. I'm losing it. How did I even get in this situation?

Ic4rus

The light of a star shines through one of the viewports of the fast moving unidentified flying object.

[Translated via the Galactic TalkBack App]

"Commander, we're coming up on Terrian IV, the planet that the locals call Earth. We've spotted our two existing ships already in orbit, b407 and r112. I've been in contact with them for about the past forty light-years and they've been telling me they had some issues sending some scientists down to observe. A few of them became stuck in organic matter when they materialized. Other than that, I have not heard of any more issues. We are about to send a couple of our scientists down as soon as we enter orbit. We are anticipating a verdict as to whether we should make contact in the next few planet days. This is x1Q signing off."

36.

"Slow down old man. This the first time you've eaten in a week?" Davidson looks in awe at the speed with which I've devoured my food. Damn. It's felt like a week since I've eaten. It feels like I haven't eaten anything good in years now. It's sad when airport terminal food is fine fucking cuisine. I'm in over my head here. I've got a corrupt politician sitting across from me, and he thinks my name is Ronin. "Look Davidson, you caught me following you. What exactly do you want?" "Well, you still haven't told me why you're following me. I have some doubts that you're Ronin. You don't look like the strong silent type. You look like an old fucking kook. That's the only reason I'm sitting down for lunch with you. You need to tell me who told you to follow me,

and then you need to go the hell home old man." he says to me in a tone that's just a little too polite. "Look, Mr. Davidson, I assure you I'm Ronin." "OK Ronin, I'll bite. What business are you in?" he asks. Fuck, he's caught me. Well, it was a good run. What business would Ronin be in? I doubt it's drugs. I doubt it's the dog fighting. "Human Trafficking, of course" I say to him confidently. "You don't know shit old man, you're not Ronin. You're not shit. Tell me why you're following me!" he demands. "I'm in over my head Davidson. I was told to follow you. You've pissed some major players off apparently, and they want you dead. They said they would kill some innocent people I know if I didn't follow you. They were going to have me kill you before you entered the terminal, but you had already gone through security. I don't know what to say. I fucked up somewhere, and here we are." Davidson looked at me for a minute before he spoke. "I know you have no weapon on you. We just got off a plane. You're coming with me for a little bit until I can get this shit figured out." "What if I don't?" I ask. "I've got friends in high places, and you won't survive for long." he replies back. I didn't ask him why his friends in high places didn't just take care of his little problem.

#### Mother

A cheetah bolts like lightning across the African savanna. Evolution has made it a devastating force to be reckoned with. The sun is setting on the motherland of all humanity. It is peaceful because the humans haven't destroyed it completely yet. The cheetah looks to the horizon with new eyes. The grasslands sway gently with the wind. Somewhere deep within its soul, the cheetah knows that someday soon this beautiful piece of Earth will fall like the rest. Nothing gold can stay. The fruit of the vine will ripen and fall away. A serpent whispers sweet nothings into a young woman's ear. A novel idea takes hold.

37.

I wish that we could be real too. I always wanted to tell people who I really was inside. I always wanted to belong. I never did. I'm at the edge of death. I know I never will. "Come on old man, there's somebody I want you to meet." Davidson says as he gets up from the table. "Don't you want to know my name so you can stop calling me old man?" "To be honest, I'd rather not. In the circles I run it, it's better to just live with an alias. You know I'm a senator, but also in some corrupt shit. This life is a game, and I'm merely a player in it." Davidson responds to me. I follow him out of the terminal, and he hails a cab for us. We get in. "I should probably check in with the people that want to kill you, just to make sure they haven't done anything stupid yet" I say to him. I open up the phone that Che gave me and dial the number. "Where are we going anyway..." I cut myself off when Che answers the phone. "Why are you calling me dumbshit? I told you I'd call you when we knew what we need you to do." "Well what am I supposed to do? Just continuing following him? He's going to leave the terminal eventually?" I lie. We've already left the terminal of course. "Just stay there. We'll find out where he's headed when we get there. We're on the next flight out. Don't try any shit either. We've got people here who will rub out the woman and the kid. Don't fucking forget that." He hangs up. "What did they say?" Davidson asks. "They say they are flying to Denver on the next flight out." "We'll be long gone by then." Davidson replies. "Seriously, where are we going?" I ask again.

Smoke-filled back rooms

"These rubes will believe anything we sell them. I've got defense contractors lined up and ready to go. They want to increase production immediately, and we need a new conflict. We've been trying to do a new Red Scare for a while. Sure, Russia is no longer Communist, but the dopes in this country don't know any better. All they know is that Russia is a bad guy. Throw in some stuff about election tampering too. We've got to use every resource possible to get some troops on the ground over there. We are about to make some already wealthy people very happy. Isn't that what America is all about?"

38.

We pull up to Diamond 369, a strip club right outside downtown. "Uh...what are we doing here?" "Just relax. We're meeting a guy here in just a few minutes" Davidson tells me. A black Limo pulls up next to us. "Come on" Davidson motions for me to get out. I see a bigger guy with white hair get out of the Limo. He's got sunglasses on. He looks deadly serious. The sun is beating down so I assume that's normal. It's hot as hell outside today. We head inside. The inside of the club smells like old sweat and bad beer. It makes me wanna vomit. The dancers all seem to be in their early 20s. It's just a pretty depressing scene all around. I can't even imagine having to deal with these creepy motherfuckers every day. Yeah, I took a good look around. What the fuck did you expect me to do? Davidson points to an empty booth near the back. The music is so loud it's hurting my ears. Why the hell is music so loud these days. Back in my day, music was just the right volume and wasn't so fucking annoying. We sit down in the booth. The seat is sticky as hell. I would expect no less from a joint like this. "Davidson, who is this old motherfucker?" the guy in the glasses asks. "Oh him...he's going to be the answer to all our problems." Davidson replies. "You think this guy is going to be able to handle the job? I've got guys from Washington calling me repeatedly saying it needs to be done as soon as possible." The guy in the glasses says as he looks me over. "Look, I don't know exactly what this is all about. I just wandered into something I know nothing about. Could you just let me go. Believe me. I'm washed up. I'm of no value to you. Please just let me go, and you'll never hear another goddamned thing from me" "Well, sadly it's not going to be that simple" Davison says with a smile. What the fuck is he so happy about. Why the fuck are we talking to this dude with the glasses? What the fuck do they want me to do? I look up at the television overhead. I can barely hear the news anchor over the roar of the music. "The small town murder spree that has caught the attention of all of America has a major update today. The murder of Connie Jerret that happened recently has seemingly been solved. The police have released a statement that the prints that were found on the murder weapon, a hatchet, have led back to a felon by the name of Dexter Bateman. However, due to Bateman being out of the state when the other murders occurred, there seems to be nothing connecting him to the other unsolved homicides. Channel 4 will keep you up to date with all the latest developments."

#### Deus Ex Machina

The writer must keep all of his plotlines in order. He must twist and weave. He must rip and rattle. He must jib and jab. He must float like a butterfly. He must sting like a bee. The connecting tissue must stay just far away as to be out of grasp of the reader, but not so far as to make the narrative disjointed. The writer knows a concept that needs to tie all of these ideas together must come from somewhere. There must be a meaning. There must be a reason for

something. There must be a reason for everything. What is reason without a reason? A hero must rise out of the seemingly infinite void to prove his purpose within the story of the universe. His actions must rattle the very nature of the universe. Only he, and he only, can change reality with his actions. Only he, and he only, can rip the very fabric of existence itself. The reader is unsure of what all of this means. The reader disregards it as the ramblings of a madman.

39.

"We're staying in this shithole tonight. I need to keep a low profile." Davidson says as he opens the door to a room of a run down roadside motel. There were two beds. He threw his bag on one of them. I just sat down on the other bed. I had nothing with me to throw down. "You probably need to call those motherfuckers that are coming after me to see if they're in town yet. I need to know so I can grow some eyes in the back of my head." Davidson says as he walks into the bathroom. I call up Che. The voice-mail picks up. I assume they're on the plane already, and on their way here. I think about leaving a message, but I decide against it. "Did you talk to them" Davidson asks while coming out of the bathroom. "No, no answer." I dial 411 and ask for the number for Lillian Deane in Crystal Falls. I get the number and write it down on one of the motel office pads sitting on the desk. I sit there for a minute before I make the call. It's ringing. It's ringing. It's ringing. No one picks up the phone. It doesn't go to voice-mail either. I end the call and fall back on the bed. Where the fuck are they? Why aren't they answering? Was Che and the woman on the plane or were they just not answering. There are so many questions I need answers to.

#### A Trip

The waters of the Nile are smooth and calm as a young man paddles his small reed boat. He sees the lights coming from the cities. He looks to the white pyramids in the distance. He looks up to the sky. There is an ocean of stars above. Most of them have been dead now for millions of years. Their light still shines down upon the Earth even though they no longer exist. He wonders what will happen to his legacy when he is no longer alive. Will something about him live on or will he be immediately forgotten? Has he done something to be remembered for or will he be lost in the sands of time? A streak of light darts across the sky, then another. They seem to be chasing one another. The lights seem to be engaged in some sort of combat in the sky. One of the lights comes crashing down to the sand. It creates a devastatingly loud explosion. The young man paddles his reed boat to the bank of the river. He runs up the bank and over the sand towards the crash site. He comes upon the glowing wreckage of something alien. It's something like he's never seen before. It was sent by the Gods. A being crawls from the flying chariot. It is clearly injured. The being is the size of a child, but its features are inhuman. It rolls into its back. It gasps for air. It seems like it can no longer breathe. He sees the God stop moving. The young man staggers backward in awe of what he has seen. Another large explosion engulfs the area, and burns the skin of the young man. He runs away from the fire back towards the river. His skin is raw from the burn. It's hurting him more than he has ever known, but he isn't even thinking about that. He's thinking about the God. He's thinking about how Gods can die just like people. He wonders what the purpose of worshipping a mortal truly is.

40.

"So, who was that guy?" "Don't worry about who he is. That has nothing to do with what your purpose is." Davidson says. "What fuck do you mean 'my purpose'? What exactly are you expecting me to do? Tell me goddammit. I'm sick of the question being ignored." How did I even get into this shit? "Listen, you old fuck. You're in no position to be demanding anything". Davidson shows me his pistol as he says it. "Arrangements are being made as we speak, and you're going to do what we say. There's not going to be any more questions. You'll learn soon enough what your place is." Davidson turns on the television. A news program is on the first channel. "....Senator Davidson has seemingly disappeared after his court hearing for insider trading. Worldwide News has reached out to his office, but we thus far have received no comment." Davidson turns the channel. There's an old movie playing.

[Now we return to 'Life In Motion']

"I never thought it'd be you. I would never think you would be the one who would betray me." "I was the last one you expected. That means I did something right. I fooled the great detective Renault. Renault, we are two sides. You are the white. I am the black. We are opposing forces, yet we are the same. Renault, sometimes I watch you. Sometimes you watch me. It was me the entire time, and I was doing it right under your nose. You're such a misguided fool Renault. You have no power. I am your power. I am your other side..."

Davidson turns off the TV.

41.

Davidson doesn't say much for a long while. He just stares at the wall. I stare at my fucking shoes. I'm being held at gunpoint, and this motherfucker is about to use me as some pawn in a sick game he's playing. Finally he speaks. "Look old man. I got nothing against you. You just happen to be a great way for me to help out a few people, a few powerful people. I had some guys I know inside the agency look you up. You appear to be squeaky clean. You also have no connections. That's good because we are going to manufacture an entire history of you. Your new name is Joseph Lennon." "Why would I need a new name? What's wrong with my old one?" "We had to scrub your old one out. That person legally never existed. I've got your new ID and a passport being delivered here in the morning." Davidson says with a smile. "What do I need a passport for? Are we going out of the country? Man, I don't want anything to do with any of this shit. Just fucking kill me. I'm not doing anything for you." "You might want to think that over a minute old man. You've got zero leverage here. You're going to do exactly what I tell you." Davidson says forcefully, making sure I know that I have no options. "Fine, fucking fine. Where the hell are we going?" Davidson waits a few seconds to respond. "Tomorrow, we head to Moscow."

Forty-two

"Can you believe this shit? They are bailing out Wall Street again. Everytime there's a recession, the billionaires get even fucking richer." "Look man, we need those billionaires to stay afloat. They are the job creators. Without them investing in the community, nobody would have any jobs." "Seriously, WHAT THE FUCK are you talking about? Trickle down economics is one

of the biggest scams ever to be pulled on the American people. You really think they invest that back into the community? Hell no they don't. They pocket it and move on. Don't you know how bad income inequality is in this country? We've always got money for war and corporate socialism, but we've never got fucking money for Healthcare or the poor." "But....the Democrats keep trying to push bills through, and the Republicans keep blocking them." "Oh my God. You really believe that shit don't you. American Electoral politics is pro-wrestling for people who think they're smart....."

42.

There is a knock on the door. I open my eyes. It's barely light outside. There is another knock. Davidson gets up and goes to the door. He opens it, and there's a woman in her late 40s or early 50s standing there. "Here's the documentation. If you get caught, we will deny any connection with you, but I know you know that. You're not going to have much time after you land. The target will be in a parade coming down Leningradsky Prospekt. Keep in mind, you only get one shot. After the first round goes off, the local authorities are going to descend on you like hell fire." Davidson takes the documents. "Yeah, I know the plan." "Call me when you land." The woman says as she's walking away.

43.

It's pouring down rain when we leave the motel. I'm pretty sure I've got bedbug bites from the mattress. The wipers on the cab we take are so loud they're making my head hurt. The rain reminds me of home. It washes away all the ugly things and leaves the world clean. I miss home. I miss the boring life I had only a couple days ago. "So, where you guys flying to?" The cab driver asks. "Oh, we're headed out of the country. We're going to Europe." Davidson tells him. I figure the driver can't think of any witty follow-ups so he just stays silent. Davidson hands me over my passport and ID. Joseph Lennon huh? This is who I am now. I wonder how high up Davidson's connections go that he could have an entire life erased. "Have you got any calls from the woman or the Che guy yet?" He asks me. "No. No word, and they aren't answering." "Well, no worries. I figure they're both dead by now. I've got a hidden army on my side. No two-bit traffickers are going to be able to take me down. It's sad that they even thought that was possible." I am silent for a minute before I speak. "I'm done asking. You need to fucking tell me what we are doing. Why the fuck are we going to Moscow? Let me out of the car. I swear I won't tell anyone about anything that has happened. Let me the fuck out!" "Everything OK back there?" The driver asks from up front. "Yes. Everything is fine. My old friend here has his days..." Davidson says with a smile. "All right guys. We're almost to your destination." The driver announces. I see a plane take off from a runway up ahead.

### Financial Security

A middle aged man goes to work every day. He has a decent paying job. He resides in an area of the country with a low cost of living. Every couple of weeks, he sees his paycheck deposited in his bank account. Nowadays, he doesn't even bother to check on payday if the money even made it. He's got a comfortable cushion in case something happened, and he needed it. He's got more than a cushion. He could be spending half of it on luxury items and still live comfortably. He doesn't do this though. The more money he has in the bank, the more money

he needs in the bank. Those digits in the bank database own him. He is shackled to the idea of money. He is a slave. This is fine for the majority of people, because they don't know. They don't know that money doesn't really exist. They don't know that it's only worth what someone will trade for it. Money is just a concept that runs the world. A large percentage of that money was created from nothing and given no worth. Why would a rational person feel so locked down by something so irrational? One day he goes to check his bank account balance. He stares at the screen with curiosity. All of his money is gone. Someone has taken his slave collar away. He could call the bank and report the issue. He doesn't though. He smiles and closes the browser window. He is free for another day.

44.

"Today there was a major technical issue at Angle-Tri Bank. Any customer who checked their balance most likely saw their account had been zeroed out. The bank is restoring backups tonight of their records, and service should return to normal tomorrow."

The sound of a television assures the bank account owners. This fucking airport is massive. Now don't get me wrong, I'm poor as fuck, and I don't go into many airports, but still. "Davidson, enough shit. If you're taking me hostage in your scheme, you're buying me some fucking lunch before we leave. I'm starving!" "All right, let's go to that pizza joint over there in the food court." "That greasy shit? Do we have to?" I asked. "Yes....." Davidson replied. I shuffled over to the food court. We got our greasy pizza, and sat down. "We gotta hurry. Our plane is going to leave in just a few minutes. Come on." Davidson says as he takes a bite. I was done with mine less than a minute later. I was fucking hungry. Don't judge me! "Come the fuck in old man...I mean Joseph. Let's go. Our plane is about to depart." I guess things haven't really hit me yet. All these events have happened so fast that it's all so hard to comprehend. There's something in the air these days. There's something ominous. I see the people. They don't even feel real. That's one of the problems though. I don't even know what real means any longer. Maybe that's why I'm going along with all this Davidson shit without much hesitation. In the novel of life, I want to experience it as it's written. I want to see how our story ends.

45.

As soon as we board the flight, I know it's going to be a long fucking night. The seats are fucking cramped. Davidson and I sit down in our seats and a younger college aged guy sits next to us in the aisle seat. Sitting this close together really should be a crime against humanity. I turn on the little screen on the seat in front of me. I flip through the options and eventually find something I'm familiar with. I put on my headphones and hook them in. I never thought I'd live to see the day where we would have all this useless shit, these keys to modern living.

[Life in Motion Season 3 episode 6]

"Nine PM? That's when he's showing up?" "Yeah, I'm sure. That's what I heard while eavesdropping on him earlier at the bar." A car is heading down the road to the old diner. It looks like something straight out of an old television show. The car slows down to a crawl as it enters view of the diner. The sign of the diner, Double R, is lit up in bright red. A Thompson machine gun comes forth out of the window of the car. There is an explosion of sound as the



first shot goes off. Everything in the scene just goes into slow motion. The shell casings are falling like rain. The front glass window of the diner disintegrates into a million pieces. There's a man hiding behind the bar. He was able to take cover before the shooting started. Suddenly the shooting stops. The man with the Thompson machine gun is changing his magazine. The man behind the diner counter emerges. He's got a pistol in each hand. He unleashes hell into the direction of the car. Two people jump out and make a run for it up the street. "You bastards tell your boss that Renault sees all!"

There is a spot of turbulence and the screen goes black. I hear the flight intercom come on. "We'll be experiencing a little bit of turbulence for the next few moments. Please bear with us, and we should be returning to smooth skies shortly." I relax. I'm not worried. I was just shaken by the sudden stir. There's something about that television show I love. I used to watch it home. I guess I always wanted to be a guy like Detective Renault. He always got the job done, and he rarely ever received a scratch. Sometimes I wish life was like television shows and blockbuster movies. Everything gets wrapped up all nice and neat. There are no more questions to be asked. There are no mysteries left to be solved. It's going to be a long fucking flight. I lean my seat back and pull my hat down over my face.

## Hyperlife

Space is big. I mean really big. It's so big that it's kind of pointless to use words to describe it. It's so massive that even a small bit of its scope would destroy a human mind. Space is like God. There's really no way to describe it. The only difference is that we know space exists. God is another beast entirely. Some people need the idea and others don't. What separates the two? What is the difference in the mind of a believer versus the mind of a non-believer? Why do some throw skepticism to the wind and others do not? Is it love? Is it fear? Do they want to be embraced by God's everlasting arms, or do they just not want to burn in the fires of hell? To the non-believer, it doesn't matter. They know they have no control. They know it doesn't matter. They know that whatever God they choose to worship would probably be the wrong one. It's all pointless. It's all for nothing. The black void is full of life although it may not seem like it. The humans looked to the stars for thousands of years, yet they never saw life looking back. This is likely the reason humans believe in their superiority. This is why they have no respect for mother nature. They don't even have respect for other human life. Endless wars for profit and slave wages show this to be true every day. An uncountable number of civilizations rose and fell before the first human ever spoke their first words. Humans are an embryo as far as the universe is concerned. They are children that know not what they do.

[Translated via the Galactic TalkBack App]

"Our civilization has been around for longer than a human could comprehend. We have conquered entire galaxies. We have destroyed entire races that threatened to enslave us and our allies. There was never a time we even felt the least bit afraid that we could lose, yet that time is now upon us. The Velmore are bringing a war, and I don't believe we can defeat them alone. We need allies. Many have questioned why we would even bother trying to contact the humans. Well, there is a very good reason. Humans understand death. In our society, death

became a thing of the past millions of years ago. Our concept of religion and God died with it. We don't understand that we should be afraid. We have been told our entire lives that we will never die. We could learn many things from the humans, and vice versa. We are a very advanced race, and they are just a primitive one. We need balance. As you are aware, our scientists have been surveying the humans' homeworld. We will be making contact shortly. We have become aware that the humans actually make war between themselves. This is a disturbing revelation, but we hope their entire race can come together upon our emergence."

46.

I woke up. My back fucking hurts from this cramped seating. "Good Morning" Davidson says. It's morning? How long have I been asleep? "Well, you gonna say something?" Davidson asked. "Oh yeah, it's morning. How much more time until we land? I'm just itching to see what you're forcing me to do." "All will come out in good time, Joseph." God, I'll never get used to people calling me that. "So, be real with me. I overheard you talking to that woman at the motel. Who was that, and what was that that I heard about a target. What kind of spook shit have you got me caught up in?" "Spook huh? People still use that term?" Davidson asked. "Who gives a fuck Davidson? Tell me what you were talking to her about." "I find the less you know the better." Davidson tells me with a straight face. I can tell I'm not going to get anything out of him. I turn on the screen in front of me. One of the internet news channels is playing.

[Now we go to Mac Reynolds with World News]

"Today in world news, we're continuing to cover the ever expanding General Strike that is taking place in the United States. What started as a small coalition of Rainforest workers has turned into a massive movement against major corporate interests. The leader of the movement, now called Movement 42, was asked for comment. He goes by the alias Red Diamond. Here is what he had to say

["Why do you think the movement you're spearheading has taken off so quickly?" "Seriously, get the fuck away from me. I don't need to speak to state propaganda networks so they can twist my words. Power to the motherfucking people! Eat the fucking rich!"]

"Worldwide News has tried researching who Red Diamond is, but thus far, we have come up empty handed. If you know who this man is, please call our tip line below. We look forward to bringing you the most up to date news every hour on the hour."

I turn off the screen.

47.

A couple of hours pass, and we touch down in Moscow. I've actually never been out of the United States before. It's very strange. I hate the place, but it's the devil you know, you know? We walk out of the airport, and Davidson hails a cab. He says something to the cab driver in what I presume is Russian. What the fuck? He knows Russian? He probably is a fucking spook. "You know Russian? How the fuck do you know Russian? I thought you were a senator. They don't know shit." "Look Joseph, there's a lot about me that you don't know. There's a lot about your own government that you're probably not aware of." He replies with a smile. "So, where are

we going?" "Well, we've got a couple hours before we need to be in the spot where we're supposed to be. Let's go grab some lunch. It's on me." Davidson says. "Well, isn't that fucking nice of you. You've got me roped into some devious as fuck scheme, but you'll happily buy me some lunch. Aren't you just a fucking prince?" He says something to the driver in Russian again. The driver nods, and we pull off from the airport. A couple of minutes later, we pull up to a restaurant. I can't read the writing on the front of the building so I have no idea what kind of food this is. Let's hope it's something I can handle. I really don't want to be having explosive diarrhea while I'm being forced into a spook operation. We get out of the cab and go inside. As soon as we enter, I realize it's a pizza place. Well, what the fuck. I came all the way to Russia, and I'm eating pizza? It's probably the same shit I get at home. "Pizza, seriously? You couldn't take me to something with a more local flavor?" "Look old man, I'm buying you lunch. Don't fucking complain. I don't like the local delicacies. So sue me." Davidson says. He tells the waitress something that I don't understand. "You're not going to let me order?" "Just chill old man, I got you something good." Turns out he was right though. When the pizza finally made its way to our table, it looked amazing. It looked much better than that greasy shit from the terminal we had the other day. This was fine cuisine. I devoured it. Hey, I was hungry, and I'm being held hostage. Fuck it. "You need to slow down old man. You're going to fucking choke, and I need you alive for just a little bit longer." Davidson looks at me with a smirk.

#### Prisoners

"Get the fuck in there." Che motions for Lillian Deane and the boy to go into the room behind the bar. "Why are we here? What do you want with us? Why are you doing this?" Lillian pleads. "Look bitch, you just happen to be caught up in something you don't wanna be. It's probably best if you just shut the fuck up." Che replies. Lillian and the boy walk into the back room. Li Chen is waiting there sitting in a chair located in the corner of the room. There is dried blood on the floor around and inside of a circle drawn on it. "Hello" Li Chen offers a salutation. Lillian stays quiet. "You know why you're here. Your boyfriend is in a lot of trouble. If he doesn't get in touch with us soon, we will make sure he regrets it forever." "What boyfriend? I don't have a boyfriend." Lillian replies. "THE OLD MOTHERFUCKER WHOSE HOUSE YOU WERE SITTING IN FRONT OF!" screamed Li Chen. Lillian is silent. The boy starts crying. Lillian puts her arm around him to console him. It doesn't last long. "Tie these two pieces of shit up Che. If the old fuck doesn't get in touch with us in the next couple of days, we kill them." Che gets out the zip ties.

48.

I can see the parade lining up as our car pulls down an adjacent street. This must be what the woman at the motel was talking about. Davidson says something in Russian to the driver, and we pull over. I can see a man with glasses on the sidewalk standing alone and looking at us. We get out of the cab, and Davidson heads for the man. I follow closely behind. "I'm surprised you guys made it. It's getting really close to starting. Head with me on down the street." The guy with the big black glasses says. I can see the parade lining up and people walking around. We both start following the man up the street. "You have the weapon?" Davidson asks. "Yeah, there's a guy up the street that's holding it for us. You'll meet him in a minute." The man replies.

Well, guess this is it. They want me to kill somebody. I always knew this was what it was going to be, but I was in fucking denial.....denial....denial.....denial.

"You all right old man? You don't look too good. Guess it's finally sinking in huh, the kind of predicament you're in." Davidson says while looking at me. Oh my God! They are going to make me shoot somebody! And so it goes.....

When it rains....

A man got evicted from his home last week. He had no money to pay his landlord. A bug in the bank's software had zeroed out his balance. After feeling free for a few hours of his money anchor, he realized that he just must have it to survive in the modern world. The man reached out to the bank. The bank acknowledged that there had indeed been a bug in the system that had wiped out some accounts, but that his account had been unaffected. "What do you mean unaffected? All my money is gone!" the man asked the woman on the phone. "I'm sorry sir, but there's just nothing I can do. I can transfer you over to my supervisor. Give me one moment." The phone clicked and started ringing again. The man explained to the supervisor the same thing that he had previously explained to the woman before. "Sir, the banking IT staff restored all backups two days ago. On top of that, your account wasn't even housed in the same system that had the issue." "So, what can I do? Can I do anything?" he asks. "Well, unless you can prove that there was money in the account, there's really nothing else I can help you with sir."

49.

"All right, old fuck. It's time for your shining moment." Davidson says while looking at me. I see him reach into a bag that the other man is holding. He pulls out a small pistol. He turns it around to show me, and he puts it back in the bag. "You're going to take this piece. You're going to walk out into the parade. You're going to shoot at the person I tell you to. Simple enough?" Davidson asks after explaining. "Look Davidson, I'm not good with weapons. I never even carry one. You do not want me trying to shoot someone. I'll fucking miss. I'm a horrible fucking shot!" I plead with him. "It doesn't matter if you're the worst shot in the world. You're going to do what I say. I'm going to point out Alexander Ivanov, and you're going to fire at him. You're about to be famous, old man."

Oblivion

There is a light shining intently. It seems so far away, but it can still be seen. There is a light at the end of the tunnel. There is no way of telling how far away the light is. It could be right in front of me. It could be a million miles away. How big is this light? How can I tell when the world is so dark? What does the light symbolize? Does it symbolize anything? Everyone is a fraud. I am a hypocrite. Words come out of nowhere. Words are written to the page without a thought of what meaning they might entail. Every life is just searching for an ending. Where will your ending be? You know it's coming. Everyday the time goes away. Everyday you get one step closer to your demise. Will you do something to make you remembered forever, or will you be tossed to the dustbin of history? Forever is a long time. You better do something great, or you will be forgotten. That light at the end of the tunnel is death mocking you. Will you give into its braggadocio and fall in line? Will your end be tomorrow or in a hundred years? Will it be today that you slip into oblivion?

50.

I'm old as fuck, and I know I've been going to die for a long long time, but I gotta admit, I'm scared. I did not expect my life to end this way. I'm in Russia about to shoot some guy because a congressman told me. I don't understand anything anymore. "All right Joseph, take this pistol." Davidson hands me the bag he's holding. "It's already loaded. Just pulled it out and fire." I take the bag from him. I look at the ground. "Okay, it's time. Start heading up the street there. We will be watching. Don't make me remind you what happens if you don't do what you're told." I start walking up the street toward the parade. Every step seems like it takes a million years. Davidson had given me a picture of Alexander and told me what his parade float looked like. I wish he would have came with me and pointed him out like he claimed he would, but I guess he didn't want to be caught in a hail of bullets. Fuck that guy. He's sending me in there to do the government's dirty work. I wish things had not of turned out this way, but it's how it goes. The parade keeps getting closer and closer. My end is coming home. I reach the sidewalk next to the parade. I see Alexander's parade float. I see the fucking float. This is happening. This is really fucking happening.

51.

Funerals are for the living. The dead don't give a fuck. They're gone. They're happier. The living are the ones that have to go through the traumatic event. When I was younger, I thought about suicide a lot. I thought about putting that fucking revolver up to my temple and pulling the trigger. I never did though. I'm selfish as fuck, but I'm not that selfish. I had people that cared about me then. All those people slowly went away, yet I still didn't blow my brains out against the bathroom wall. I think about that a lot. I had lived for other people my entire life. That was the only thing that kept me going. Now, all those people were gone, and I still couldn't find the courage to shuffle off this mortal coil. I know I'm going to die. I guess I just wasn't expecting it to be this soon or in this way. As soon as I pull that trigger, they are going to unleash on me the hounds of hell, whether that be gunfire or just thrown to the ground and beaten to a bloody pulp. I guess I can feel better knowing that this isn't all in vain. At least, well I hope, that Lillian and the boy will be fine. I got them in this whole mess. I hope this will be their way out. Living for someone and dying for someone are two different things. One is an act of selfishness. One is not. It is up to you to decide. Alexander is waving to the crowd and smiling. The people on the street are cheering. I don't even know who this guy is. He could be a monster. He could be Jesus fucking Christ. I don't know. I unzip the bag. I pull out the pistol. I point it at Alexander. I fire.

52.

It's unclear as to what happened next. I pull the trigger. The next moment everything goes black. I hear screams. I hear yelling. I feel the ground come up to meet me, hard. Everything hurts. The pain is unbearable. Then I just feel numb. I open my eyes for a second and the light is blinding. It is short lived. A bag is pulled over my head and some handcuffs are thrown on my wrists, crushing them. I'm lifted up off the ground by several hands and thrown into a vehicle. I feel the car take off. My head is fucking pounding. I feel like I can barely breathe. I blame Stockwell for all this shit. If he hadn't of walked into my life, I'd still be home eating my noodles

and being oblivious to the shady shit going on in the world. It all comes back to him. I hear some people talking in what I assume is Russian. It feels like we are slowing down. We come to a stop. It feels like forever that nothing happens. It feels like a million seconds pass before there is a sound. All the sudden, I hear the door open. Someone crawls in. I can tell just by the sound of things moving that this isn't just a car. This is a limousine or something bigger. I can tell there's a man sitting across from me. I hear someone say something in Russian in his direction. He clears his throat. The hood over my head is pulled off. "Who sent you?"

53.

I was scared. I didn't say anything. "I asked, WHO FUCKING SENT YOU!" "Look man, I don't know anything." I said. A punch comes from my right side and slams into the side of my skull. "DON'T MAKE ME FUCKING ASK IT AGAIN, YOU OLD MOTHERFUCKER!?" He screams at me. My face is on fire. There is so much pain draining into my brain. I fall over against the window and try to regain my senses. The world is a blur. Tiny twinkles of light surround me. I can see two men in the seats facing me. They look like they are talking to each other, but I can't hear shit. My ears are ringing, and it sounds like I'm down in a hole. "All right, let me rephrase this. Is there anything you can tell me to prevent me from breaking your fucking legs? Who the fuck sent you?" "Look, I don't even know why I'm in this shit. I don't know the people who forced me to do this shit!" I was lying of course. I could have given up Davidson right there. I didn't though. It wasn't worth it. I'm a fucking dead man. I can feel again that the once moving vehicle has indeed stopped. The hood is pulled over my head again, hard. Someone grabs me and pulls me out of the limousine. I'm walking now. Someone is pulling my cuffed hands. I'm on the floor now. I don't know how I got here. The bag is still on my head. I'm too old for this shit. I feel like I'm moving in and out of consciousness. I'm a wave.

#### Waveforms and Deep Time

Blackness is the natural state. Nothingness is the normal way of things. Existence is an anomaly. It is something that was never supposed to happen. The odds of it happening were an infinite number to one. How could it happen? Why would it happen? Floating in the ether, I feel the hatred of all of the universe. I feel it deep inside slowly killing me. Hatred isn't the explosive emotion that people always equate with it. Hatred is something deeper, something darker. Do we define Love in contrast to Hate, or is it vice versa? Which came first? That is the question. Time ebbed and flowed for an eternity before there was a mind to ask the question. The minds that asked the questions came and went within the blink of an eye. They accomplished nothing. In the grand scheme of things, they were useless. They changed nothing. They were nothing.

54.

I can see things now. I can feel things. I feel in every pump of my heart. I feel it in my veins. The floor is cold but somehow calming. The front of the bag is wet from my breath. I can tell I've shit all over myself at least a couple times. Suddenly there is blinding light. "Look, there's a fucking guy over there.", I hear someone say with a clearly American accent. "Yes, let's get him", another man says in a thick German accent. It's strange how we assume so many things about people from their accents. I'm not sure if that's a good or a bad thing. The bag is removed from

my head. There's a massive hole in the wall of the room I'm in. I see two men in military uniforms in front of me. "Who are you?" the one with the American accent asks. I don't say anything. The world is still spinning. My mind seems to be going a thousand ways at once. Finally, I'm able to string some words together. "I am Joseph Lennon. I am an American." "Well, come on. Let's go before they start bombing the hell out of this place again.", the American said. He helps me up off the floor. The German had some bolt cutters that he used to take the cuffs off me. "I would have left those cuffs on you old man, but you don't look harmful. Don't make me regret my decision", the American said. "What has happened?" "Well, things moved pretty fast. I guess you've been out for the last few days. The must have fucked you up pretty good if you didn't feel the constant bombing that's been going on the last few days. I'm surprised this building is still standing, well most of it is I guess.", the American says. "Who was attacking who?", I ask. "Come with us. You'll just have to see for yourself what happened, otherwise, you probably would not believe it." He says while pointing at the door.

### A Cosmic Tragedy

[Translated via the Galactic TalkBack App]

"Welcome to the members of the Galactic Federation. We have received news from the planet Earth. Something terrible has happened. We have detected the detonation of numerous atomic weapons on the surface of the planet. This has all happened in the last 2 rotations of the Earth planet. We have our answer now as to if we could contact the human species. The answer to that question is unfortunately no. They are a naive and childish species. They have not learned that no species that makes war within itself can last for long. It is obvious that the human race will be a forgotten memory very soon. This is clearly a race that will never be able to survive long enough to develop interstellar travel. We will have to face the Velmore without them. We will have to learn the fear of death ourselves, if that is possible. We are actively transporting all of our scientists back aboard the research ships in orbit around the planet. We will be departing for our home system shortly. We've received word from our scouts on the Galactic Front that the Velmore are on their way. May the Universe be with us."

55.

["This is Carl Johnson with Worldwide News. We are coming to you live for the first time in over 48 hours. So far, there has been at least seven nuclear detonations in the ongoing conflict between Russia and the United States. Worldwide communications have been up and down intermittently for the past two days. This has prevented us from broadcasting. The state department has indicated that it has evidence that Russia attacked a military vessel patrolling the black sea two days ago. After the attack, sources tell us that US forces descended on Moscow. We still have no information as to who launched the nuclear projectiles. Stay right here with Worldwide News to stay up to date with the current events.]

One of the soldiers reached up and closed the screen.

"So, where are we headed boys?" I ask them. They didn't answer. Fucking assholes, they're everywhere. I'm on the other side of the fucking world and nothings changed. Nothing ever fucking changes. I look out the window of the military vehicle. The city, or I guess I should say

former city, is a pile of rubble. I can't believe this all happened while I was out. I wonder for a second where Davidson is. Then I remember that I don't really care. I just want to go home. I need to find Lillian and get back to work on finding out what happened to her daughter. I don't need to be in the fucking motherland asking questions to a couple of dipshits that don't want to talk. After a few minutes, I see a military aircraft coming into view on the horizon. We pull up to the side of the aircraft, and the two soldiers up front get out. "Come on old man. Get in the plane. We've got to get the fuck out of here, now!" I'm not in the mood to ask questions. I start walking up to the aircraft behind the soldiers. I look up and see several military aircraft flying overhead. Everything goes in slow motion. For a minute I forget where I am. Nothing seems real. I feel so far from home. I feel so alone. I climb up the steps and one of the soldiers points me to a seat.

56.

It's strange seeing destruction from far away. It makes it seem so impersonal. It makes it seem like something off a news report or a war movie. I guess it's easier that way. I'm sure it takes more courage to murder a man face to face rather than it does from 25000 feet. War is a fucking racket. I've known that since I was a kid. Every time you turned on the news, American was having to "liberate" some country I'd never heard of. Liberation is another term for robbery at gunpoint, I guess. It's all a fucking scam. This whole life is a joke. We're thrown into this world without a clue, and there's that giant plot hole that's always staring back at us. Why?

The roar of the engines give me a headache after awhile. "They are trying to take the Capitol right now. Red Diamond is already saying they will have full control by the end of the week. The president wants us on the ground by tomorrow morning." "Do they know how many people Red Diamond actually has behind him? I guess it really doesn't matter. These are guerilla fighters. You saw what happened in Vietnam. I don't know if our brand of warfare can defeat that kind of army. I'm just hoping for the best." "Well, we signed up for this job. We might regret it now, but it's too fucking late. We've got to do what the president says." I hear the two soldiers talk amongst themselves. I suddenly feel so depressed. I feel so powerless. I feel nihilism creeping inside my soul. It might have always been there. Just seeing the destruction below and now knowing there's some kind of revolution starting back home fills me with existential dread. I know there's no way good things will happen. I know nothing will ever change. I know Lillian and the boy are probably dead. I know I'll probably go home and die alone. It's all in the cards for me. I'm just waiting for my hand to be shown.

57.

The military transport vehicle I'm riding in lands in D.C.. It has been a long night. It was one of the darkest nights of my long life. I never thought I would be this old when I finally grew up. Time creeps along as we move down the runway. We come to a stop. "Come on old man. My superiors want to see you. They want to know what the fuck you were doing in that rubble. They want to know who you really are." The American soldier grabs my arm and pulls me towards the door.



A few minutes later, I'm sitting behind a table in some interrogation room. How the hell did i get into all this? If I didn't have bad luck, I'd have no luck at all. "How are you Joseph? Joseph is your name right? Did they get you all cleaned up earlier? The boys were telling me that it smelled like you had an accident before they picked you up. They told me they could barely fucking breath with your stinking ass smell filling up the cabin. Look...I know you're not Joseph Lennon. I know this passport and ID is a forgery. Hell, I might even know who did it. Thing is this though. You don't look like a hitman. You look like a crusty old fuck. You told the boys last night that you were told by someone you didn't know to shoot Ivanov. Well, I'm sure you're well aware of the situation the world is in now because of your little action. You know who told you to shoot him. You know who gave you this passport. Who fucking did it? We can do this the easy way, or I can just waterboard your stinking ass until you give me an answer." I sit there silent for a minute. I look up at the buzzcut questioning me. "Fuck you, Jarhead." I say with a smile. I don't even give a fuck anymore. Let them do what they want. Suddenly I feel intense pain coming from the back of my head and I feel like collapsing on the table. Someone behind me slapped me as hard as they could in the back of the head. "You still coherent, you old fuck? WHO FUCKING SENT YOU TO RUSSIA?" My vision slowly starts to look normal again. "Well, I'll make you a deal. Get me some fucking food, something good, and we'll talk."

58.

Forty-five minutes later and I've got a feast before me. I've got pasta. I've got breadsticks. I've got red wine. I was going to eat well tonight. It might be my last meal. I'm going to savor it. I'm munching down when the buzzcut interrupts, "Alright fucker, it's time to talk." "Davidson, he's a senator. That's all I know. Think he just got busted for insider trading or some shit." Hey, I wasn't lying. That really was the extent of what I knew. "Davidson huh? Damn, you sold him out quick didn't you. Why did you? Why should I believe you?" "I really don't care what you believe, Jarhead. That's the truth. Go ahead and let me go or kill me. I'm growing bored and the food is almost gone." I see a smile appear on Buzzcut's face. He pulls up a chair and sits down across from me. "Davidson, Davidson, Davidson. This is the guy he got. This crusty motherfucker. This old piece of shit. I'll tell you one thing though. You did good. The dominos all fell into place. Of course you'll see no benefit from it, but rest assured, you made some very rich people very happy. Your life wasn't totally in vain. As you probably have guessed, there's just no way you can leave here alive. You know very little, but that little is still too much." The soldier behind me pulls me out of the chair. He cuffs my hands behind my back. "Let's do this in the drain room. I don't want to clean up a mess in here." Buzzcut says as the soldier pushes me toward the door. I am pushed to the floor in the concrete room. There is a drain in the center. "Well, this is the end of the road, old man. The story of Joseph Lennon or whatever the fuck your name is ends here. You got any last words? If so you better make them now. Nobody is coming to save you. This isn't a fucking novel where the hero makes it out alive." "Come on man, quit fucking with him. Just fucking shoot him so we can hurry up and get rid of this body. I'm ready to get out of here." I heard one of the soldiers say to Buzzcut. I'm silent. I don't know what would be the point of saying anything. I've failed many people in my life. I've even failed myself. I open my mouth to say something when I hear what sounds like a massive explosion outside.

Liberation Frequency

The world explodes in a massive fireball. People are running in all directions. The military base is flooded with guerilla fighters, the men in black and red. A molotov cocktail is thrown into a military vehicle setting it ablaze. The sound of gunfire echoes throughout the area. There are soothing sounds of assault weapons pumping out round after round into unknown enemies and clearly defined foes. Guerilla fighters are already rushing into the insides of the base, combing every room for anything that could give them the edge. They are like an army of insects all attacking at once. There's no way a modern army could defeat them. A modern army cannot think the way a rat does when it is locked away in a cage. Their backs are against the wall and all their rage demands to be let out in a destructive manner. Red Diamond looks through the rooms. He tells his comrades to grab the weapons and communications equipment he sees. The revolution needed a leader, and he stepped up to be it. He didn't want to, but he knew it would be a failure without one. By the time they reach the back of the complex, the small team he has brought with him inside has their bags almost full. Red Diamond almost doesn't even go to that last door. Red Diamond almost turns around and makes a run for it before the heavy reinforcements arrive. Red Diamond felt something pulling him in though. He opens the remaining door. He sees three soldiers inside. There's an old man on his knees on the floor. Before he can even make a move, the soldier behind the old man turns to Red Diamond and fires. A bullet rips through his chest, and he feels his insides being torn apart. The guerillas behind Red Diamond open fire into the room and paint the walls red.

59.

My head fucking hurts. I guess I'm still alive though. I guess that's a good trade-off. I'm covered with Buzzcuts guts. It's been a pretty shitty few days to be honest. "Come on dude. If you're one of us, we need to get the fuck out of here." One of the guys at the door motions for me to come on. I see a younger guy at the door on the ground. It looks like he's bleeding pretty bad. "Come on. Help me pick him up. We gotta get him to a medic outside. Come the fuck on." I get up and grab one of the kid's legs. We started heading outside the complex. That's when I notice I don't even have any fucking shoes on. Where are my fucking shoes! I guess that's the least of my worries. We reach the door. "Who are you guys anyway?" I ask, genuinely curious. "You kidding me man. You haven't been watching the news? You don't have a clue what's going on do you?" "I'll be honest. I've been fucking out of it for several days now."

And now a word from the author

Our hero here might be over his head. I'm not sure if I should even call him that. He really hasn't done anything heroic. He's an old fool. He thinks it's all going to be alright. You can believe me, it won't be. I know. Our hero looks up to me and questions what I do. He mocks me with his comments. Yes, I am his God. I control what happens to him. I could destroy him at any moment if I wanted to. He doesn't know that though. He doesn't even know that I really exist. I've never intervened in his life to give him any reason to believe in me. I haven't yet decided if I will or not. I may be his God, but I still have questions over what might happen to him. Where will he go? What will he do? There are so many places I want him to go. There are so many things I want him to do. I may be his God, but God has rules too. His God lives in a world of surveillance. If his God wanted to make him the hero that he wants to be, his God would be labeled a terrorist. His God would be thrown in a jail cell and the key would be tossed away. The

freedom of speech in the author's world is a bygone relic of the past, much like our hero here. Don't worry. It's not like almost every character in the story is somehow a piece of the author. Sometimes I wonder if he knows that someone else is controlling him. I wonder if he knows that nothing is under his control. Sometimes, I wonder that about myself. Who is controlling the words spilling out onto the page. If I have a God like our hero, I certainly don't know it. It hasn't intervened or exposed itself to me. I just hope my creation's world makes more sense than my own. Maybe I'll give him a happy ending. Maybe I won't. I haven't decided yet. For the time being, I'll let imagination be my guide.

59.2

"Where the hell you go old man? You were saying something and then you just looked like you had a seizure or something in the middle of it. You OK?" One of the guys in the medic van asks me. I look down and see the guy they've been calling Red Diamond. It looks like they are patching him up pretty well. This naive motherfucker might actually make it. Imagine being crazy enough to think you could actually change something in this world. I can't blame him much. I was that stupid once. I hope the best for him and for his revolution or whatever. I'm too fucking old at this point to take part in the fighting. Revolution is a young man's game. "Yeah, I think I'm going to be ok. My head fucking hurts like crazy. You guess got some ibrophen or something? Hey is that dumb motherfucker going to be all right? I really don't wanna see anyone die today." I said while pointing at Red Diamond. I take a look through the front windows of the van. We've gotta be doing a hundred. I don't remember the outside world ever flying back so fast. I guess it hit me before, but it just hits me again. I am in some deep shit. "Hey kid, where are we going?" I ask one of the guys in the van. "We're headed back the capitol building. Barricades are going back up after the hit they took last night." He says to me. "What do you mean the Capitol building? You mean THE Capitol Building?" "Yeah, 42 took it right after the nuke hit the east coast. I think it was supposed to get to D.C. but didn't quite make it. Pretty much everyone evacuated the city immediately. It's a ghost town now, except for last night. Federal troops showed up and tried to get us out. We held them off for long enough that they left. Diamond thinks the only reason they left was because they didn't want to hurt the building. He says otherwise we'd all be dead." Suddenly I realize this is the first guy in awhile who has actually tried explaining something to me. It's comforting. My life hasn't really been too fucking smooth lately, and it's nice to have someone sit down and take some time with me. "You said a nuke hit the east coast? Where did it hit?", I ask, genuinely interested. "All I know is that it hit somewhere in Virginia. Social media has pretty much gone dead since the attack, and the news is keeping their information pretty close to the vest, if they have any information at all." Wow. So, I guess this is how the world ends. I shouldn't get too ahead of myself though. That's the pessimist in me talking.

60.

We arrive at the Capitol building around sundown. The ride here was eerie as hell. The streets were deserted. There were fires burning throughout from whatever riots or fighting had occurred. That was really the first thing I noticed as we were driving. All of the lights were out. I'm guessing that the electricity had been cut off to try to drive the people out. How the fuck do I know though? I doubt anyone else does either. I see them move the barricade to allow the van

I'm in and the cars following us to get inside the encampment. The van comes to a stop and someone opens the door. "You got Diamond? We need to get him someone to get patched up a little better. We got your message on the radio that he had been hit, and was in pretty bad shape." Somebody behind him brought a stretcher to the side of the van, and they proceed to load Red Diamond onto it. It looks like he's still out. I think they gave him some sort of pain medication on the way over. I climb out of the van and take a quick look around. I see a sea of people moving and working. They are functioning as a well oiled machine. "They're taking Red Diamond over to the makeshift infirmary. You can come with us and get something to eat if you want to." One of the guys from the van motions for me to come with him. We work our way through the crowd. I try to avoid all the people busily performing their duty for the whole. We come up to a tent with a few people inside. "What's your name old man?" One of the kids inside the tent asks me. "Joseph" I quickly responded. Might as well keep this name if they've erased my old one. None of it really matters. "You don't much look like a Joseph. You gotta get a cooler name than that, bro. This is a revolution. You think anybody thinks a Joseph is fucking awesome during a revolution?" I think about it for a minute. Who am I really? Not only as a name but as a person. I couldn't think of a fucking thing. Another tired old song comes into memory, and I blurt out the first thing that comes to mind. "You can call me Al."

### Blood and Spacetime

A fleet of Velmore ships lunged forward into Federation space. They had more firepower than any race had ever accumulated. They wanted control over Federation resources. The Velmore planets had been rapidly depleted. The Velmore leaders had known they would be running out of energy soon, but instead of finding alternatives they decided to build the largest military in the universe. They succeeded in their goal and they had already ravaged various non-Federation systems. They were becoming increasingly more efficient with every strike. Now they had their eyes trained on Federation systems. This was to be the biggest fight in the history of the known universe.

[Translated via the Galactic Talkback App]

"The time has come. The wolves are at the gates. We are not scared. The word death has no meaning to us. We are standing directly in its path. Over the past several intervals, I've been thinking about many things. I've been thinking about fate. This day has been coming since the universe first sprang into existence. Every cause triggered an effect throughout the whole of time. This is what brought us here. I'm just going to be truthful with you. The people of the Federation deserve to know. The council and I have discussed revealing the obvious. We cannot win this war. I don't even think we will be alive in another interval. The Velmore army outnumber us 1000 to 1. This interval we will fight. We will fight for our existence. We are also fighting for the existence to all creatures that will someday befall the Velmore. This is it. This is the end. I don't even know enough to feel anything about it."

61.

The mood is quiet. The night had fallen like a southern downpour. I heard earlier on one of the radios that federal agents were being called in. 42 had put up extra barricades to combat the coming storm of troopers. "Al, you know how to use a weapon?", a young kid asks me. He couldn't have been more than twenty. At that moment, a strange feeling came over me. I felt so

old, but I also felt incredibly young. This was not the fight for an old bastard like me, but here I was. I was knee deep in the shit. I had never shot an assault rifle in my life, but I lied and told him I had. "Well, I got some good news and some bad news. It looks like we do have an extra weapon but it's a .22 rifle. Maybe you can do something with it." I take the rifle from him. He hands me some bullets. I really didn't want to do this, but I know all hell could break loose at any moment. Why did I get here? Would an answer make me feel any better? I sit back against the barricade. "Where you from old man?", the kid asks. I tell him. "Oh yeah, I've heard of that place." An awkward silence was followed by the sound of a megaphone: "Surrender now or we will open fire". Someone must have fired first, otherwise I would never have heard the bullets.

## Chapter 1.

She had television eyes, but she was broken by design. I heard the rain coming down hard outside, but it was warm and dry inside the bar. When I had first walked in, she caught me by surprise. I saw her across the room even through the heavy fog of smoke. Her eyes came alive with wet electricity. I moved over to the bar and sat next to her. "What brings you to a place like this?" "I don't know. I like to look at the scum of the Earth. It's kind of my thing," she said sarcastically. "Can I get you a drink?" I ask with a smile. "Sure thing boss. I wouldn't be talking to you if I wasn't expecting something for it. I'll take a Vodka Spritz." "You heard the woman bar keep. Get her what she wants and put it on my tab." I sat there and just stared into those bright cold eyes for a minute. You can see a person's soul in their eyes. I wasn't quite able to make hers out yet. There was something dark and mysterious blocking my view. "So, once again, why are you in here? You don't belong in a place like this." She laughed and took a sip of her drink. "I'm supposed to be meeting someone here. Looks like they're not going to show." "Now who in their right mind would leave a beautiful woman sitting here alone when they could have their exclusive company. The guy sounds like a real dirtbag." "Oh he's definitely a dirtbag, but for once, I thought he was going to be my dirtbag...." She trailed off. "I didn't catch your name." I remark. "I didn't provide it to you, snoop. You are a detective right? I'm trying to figure out who else would be in here wearing a fedora." "My apologies. Yes, I am a detective. You are very astute. Have you ever thought of it as a career choice?" She laughed. I took a drink from the beer I had ordered. I looked forward at the bottles on the wall. "It's strange being me. Nobody really ever wants to know my name. Sometimes I almost forget I even have one. That's neither here nor there. My name is Claude Renault.

## Chapter 2.

I'm not sure if it's just me getting older or if my mind is slowly going, but I've been having some strange dreams lately. I always seem to be an older man, much older than I am now. I feel like I'm searching for a meaning to my life and coming up with nothing. We're all searching for a meaning in this wild world, but a seldom few of us ever find it. I've been thinking all this morning about the woman from last night. She became pretty tight lipped after I acknowledged that I was indeed a detective. I'll never forget those eyes. I've seen them everytime I close my eyelids. A hazy static had filled them. Something tells me that she is the one. She was Johnny Todd's contact with the ring in question. I'm probably going to head back to the Cobra tonight. I hope the beautiful lady is there again and will give me her name this time.

### Chapter 3

The Cobra was vacant when I pulled up. There is only a couple of cars in the parking lot. There is a cool mist in the air. There is a sweet haze lingering under the streetlights. Tonight is colder than it has been. These are weird days, weird times. I sit there for a few minutes just staring at the entrance. A couple people walk in and walk out. None of them look important. None of them was the woman from last night. Her lips had glistened like warm rain on a tin roof. The perspiration had appeared from seemingly nowhere and rolled down next as I spoke to her. She had been nervous, but you would never have known. Those eyes gleamed confidence. They lit up an entire room when they entered. Those doors to the soul had held something dark though. There was something so deep inside those black holes that nothing could reach out and escape it's grasp. Just as I'm about to leave, I see a black coup pull up in the space next to me. Before I even saw her face, I knew it was her. She gets out of her car and heads toward the entrance.

### Chapter 4

The night was cool, calm, and collected. I had seen my delicate muse pull up to the Cobra and go inside. A buddy of mine in the precinct had told me that Johnny Todd had been picked up earlier for fake tags. He wasn't talking though. I'm guessing the families had heard my name around town after that murder in Crystal Falls last year. The cops had ran out of leads, and I had been asked to look into it. Her name was Laura, and I'll never forget her face. There was something so amazingly angelic about it, but her life had stolen in a fit of rage and human desire. It hit me hard at the time, because my daughter would have been about Laura's age if she was around. I didn't let that get in the way of my work though. Through working with the detectives assigned to the case, we were able to find a suspect and put him behind bars. It was the boyfriend. It's always the boyfriend. They had suspected him from the very beginning but had no evidence until my expertise help blow the case wide open. Thus, the legend of Claude Renault had been born. I'm sitting here now wondering if I can get the same insight into the Cobra and what may or may not be happening between its walls.

### Chapter 5

The room was smokey and the haze gave me a dreamlike feeling. It felt like my eyes had been covered in a thin layer of Vaseline and I was looking straight through. I saw the back of her dark hair sitting at the bar. The bar keep was passing her a paper over the counter followed quickly by her drink. I'm curious to know what is on that paper, but I question if now is really the time to broach the subject. I make my way towards the bar, moving quickly and in near silence between the crowded tables and inebriated customers. Crystal Falls was a town at the end of its rope. It had been for awhile now since the manufacturing jobs were moved out of the country in the 1980s. The inhabitants were now many gig economy workers that barely made ends meet and drank away their sorrows every chance they could.

### Chapter 6

"Chinatown is a surreal place on a weeknight. Something just doesn't feel real." I nodded my head in agreement. It had been years since I had found myself in that part of the city, and as with all good stories, it was intrinsically tied to a woman. I'll make sure and tell you all about that

when the time comes, but right now I've got more pressing matters. "So, what were you doing down in Chinatown, sweetheart?" I smile in such a way that I remain mysterious but don't come off as a complete creep. I look into her radiant eyes, and I can see them rapidly changing the stations, trying to find something that resembles the truth. She smiles. "Well....there's this guy I know that lives down there." She stirs her drink and looks down at the floor. "He your boyfriend or something? Not to be prying or anything. I just want to know if I should give up now." She looks back up at me. The smile has now all but vanished. "Listen guy, Claude, whoever you are. I can see you're just pumping me for information. I don't have any. I'm sorry. I'm going to get outta here. If you see me in here again, please do us both a favor and go sit at one of the booths or something." She grabs her keys and wallet from the bar and heads out.

## Chapter 7

The night had an eerie feeling that was alien to me. Even in my younger years when I had been lost in Paris, I had never felt so alone. The world had become so dark and lonely to me. It had become so strange. I was a man without a place anymore. I was now a man without a purpose. There was a ghost that I was chasing, and I was incredibly afraid that I would never be able to catch it. It was no longer a secret that the young woman had deep connections to Todd, however, I had made no headway in gaining any valuable information. The lights from the streetlights bounce off the storefront windows as I pass by. The world is grey tonight. It's stable but emotionless. The ring Johnny had been running had been around for a while now. The reason it had never been shutdown was because of its deep connections with the political elite. Johnny had dirt on everyone, and information is the greatest weapon.

## Chapter One

I was a poor kid. Growing up wasn't the greatest I don't guess. My mom had her issues and moved us around a lot. My biological dad had died when I was a small child. I wasn't too small to understand death though. I knew it was permanent. I knew there was no coming back. The rain trickles down a gutter against the building next to me. My brother is supposed to be here any moment. At least he was there, I don't know what I would have done. I stare up at the neon sign in the liquor store window above me. Somewhere inside it feels so soothing just letting that light massage my consciousness and take me away for a moment. My car had given out about a mile back. Believe it or not, I had actually been able to find a payphone. I didn't think those things even existed anymore. Some headlights are coming over the horizon now, and I'm thinking that should be him. Right about that time, the sky opens up and drops a bomb of water on me. The car pulls up besides me and stops. The window rolls down, and I hear my brother tell me to get it. O the stories they will tell about us.

## Chapter Two

We rode in silence for a while. The wheels of fate had been turning all this time. They had been leading us to this point. Our entire lives can be boiled down into the actions that created this moment. The entire world seemed to be against us now. Everyone was so pacified with all their little happy tools for modern living. They loved their smartphones. They loved their video games. They loved their unlimited movies and TV shows being beamed directly into their frontal cortex. This was the world I knew. It was one I helped build every day. It was a world I was deeply

ashamed to call myself a part of. The wipers made grinding noises as they pushed the rain from the windshield. The world was grey. The world was gray.....different ways to say the same thing. Almost identical except for a small difference. It reminds me of American politics. You've got two parties fighting for control when in reality they are the same party with some trivial differences. We're all fools to the hucksters and the charlatans. If you think you're not, they've truly done their job.

### Chapter Three

The fall of western empire seemed to happen so quickly. It felt like one day it was normal and the next day the world had descended into chaos. Of course, this wasn't how it actually happened, not to the people who had been paying attention, not to the people who had given a damn about anything. The fall had been in the works for quite a while now. I was a teenager when I saw the towers fall. I wasn't old enough at the time to know exactly what was going to be taken away from me. I wasn't yet aware that the "War On Terror" would be used as an excuse to tap the phones of every citizen and monitor their every move online. There are data centers out there that hold every aspect of my life. They have every time I spoke words of dissent against the oligarchy that runs our government. I figure they will get to me one day, but it hasn't happened yet. My older brother had been blinded by the narrative before I opened his eyes. Older doesn't always mean wiser. Most of the time, it means that the brainwashing has effectively taken hold. I managed to break his mind of the grip the mainstream media had effectively taken hold of him with.

### Chapter Four

The world is cold. It's uncaring. The television screens always make it seem like it's all right. It's not, and it never has been. Since that first being sought power, it's been this way. Since that first time someone thought they wanted something more than everyone else, it's been this way. The rain is coming down harder now. We drift by a broken down southern town that used to have factories on every corner. Now they're boarded up. Now they're a relic. Now they're forgotten. I see a woman walking through the rain with a child on each side. A galaxy of angst enters my heart for a moment, and then I let it go. You've got to let it all go if you hope to make it another day. Otherwise, this world will eat you alive. I look in the side mirror and see fate staring back at me again.

### Chapter Five

The radio reception starts getting better as we get closer. Red Diamond had become a huge inspiration to me over the past year. He really believed in something. He believed in something bigger than himself. He believed in something bigger than our differences. Red Diamond was bringing people together who had nothing except breathing in common before. He was a new messiah for the common man, the common human. He wouldn't agree with me. I think Red Diamond probably sees himself as just another cog in his little revolution. We're all the same inside. Some of us just let it out differently. We're all scared. We're scared to death about this world we were thrust into. We don't know why we're here. We hope there's a purpose to everything, but deep down, we know there's probably not.



## Chapter 6

It's much darker than it's ever been before. I feel so alone and powerless. I just want to die and forget about this horrible phase known as life. We've driven hundreds of miles now. The towns we passed along the way all seemed to look the same, rundown, decrepit, decimated by design. It depressed me more than I could ever describe to you. I'm glad I've got my big brother through all of this. Without him, I'd probably already be dead. He tries to tell me there's still goodness in the world, it's just not shown nearly as much as the nastiness. I don't believe him. The world I see is cold and pale. The colors all seem to fade together, and I feel incredibly far from all right. The night air feels crisp coming through the rolled down window, and there's not a cloud in the sky. I always look up in amazement at all those little specks of light that hang out on Earth's ceiling. They are all beautiful in their own special ways. Sometimes I think about what us happening out there. Is there a person just like me out there? I wonder if they are thinking the same thing at this exact moment as I am. I also wonder if a more intelligent race than we are is looking down on us like children. That's what we are. We argue and fight over the most trivial things. We could be working to make the world a more beautiful place, but that would just be too illogical. There's probably no hope for anything. I guess I might just be a downer. I'll hold on for the meantime for my brother's sake. We pass the city limits, and I can already see the light from the fires.

62.

"Get the fuck up! We gotta go!" A kid screams back at me. He's already taking off down a back alley. Feet you better not fucking fail me now. I hope over the pile of dead left in the wake of the confrontation. There's a lot of dead on this side. What the hell does it look like on the other. "If there are any survivors, you need to surrender now. This is your final warning" I hear a man yelling into a megaphone. I think me and the kid are the only ones left. I can see he keeps grabbing at his chest. I realize it is Red Diamond. This guy must either be the luckiest or the most unlucky motherfucker in the world. Diamond starts turning dumpsters sideways in front of me. He leaves me a little room to get by.

### Angel of Death

The fires of revolution are burning and I'm entering the fray. An inferno of screams comes right at me. Mentally I'm torn apart. It's time for our hero to go. Let's be honest. He's too old for this shit. He's no revolutionary. He's a guy that was at the wrong place at the wrong time. He's got his back against the wrecking machine. He's got nowhere to run. Who the fuck does Diamond even think he is? He can't change this shithole of a country. Nobody can. This country is crooked to the core and only the most naive would ever dare to have hope. Hope is what happens when all rational thought is exterminated. I'm an outsider looking in. I see a world so familiar. It seems like things that could happen tomorrow. I get a sense of that thing known as hope. As quickly as it arrives, it disappears. The world I know has no hope. It's just a black void ahead, and I'm heading into it at an ever increasing pace. Time is weird like that. Life is weird like that. We are always staring death right in the face, yet we pretend it's never going to happen. We all just want to do something great. We want something amazing to happen to us. The night grows darker and we think, "maybe tomorrow". That tomorrow never seems to come.

64.

Red Diamond and I make it the fuck out of there. Don't ask me how my old ass did it, because I couldn't tell you. "Look, I gotta call somebody." I tell Diamond after we made it into the woods. Diamond drops down against a tree and continues holding his chest. He's still hurt pretty bad, but he's like the energizer bunny. He's not gonna fucking stop. "Hahaha...Who the fuck you gotta call old man?" "There's just some unfinished business I've got to take care of before you get us both killed." Red Diamond laughs again. "All right, old man. Here's a phone I've got. Don't stay on there too long because they're going to track it." I borrow Diamond's phone and try calling Lillian. A man answers. "Hello" It's Che. "Hello..." he says again. "Who the fuck is that?" I can hear in the background. Li Chen I assume. "It's me. Where the fuck is Lillian and the boy?" "Who the fuck is me. Me isn't ringing a bell." "It's the fucking patsy you motherfuckers set up. Who the fuck else would it be? Where are Lillian and the boy?!?!" Che doesn't say anything immediately. "Look motherfucker, we ask the questions here. We are the ones in control. You're supposed to be fucking dead. How are you still even alive? You should have been fucking buried." "How the fuck is that retard still alive?" I hear Li Chen yell in the background. "Listen up, you tell me how you're alive, and we'll talk about the bitch and the boy. We were planning on just trafficking them into slavery somewhere, but you're a friend so we can make some agreements." Che laughs. "I caught a plane back to the states with the military. I'm at a Capitol camp with the rebels now." "Wait, you're with Red Diamond's rebels in DC right now? You gotta be shitting me."

65.

Last ch4pt3r

Red Diamond, what a crazy motherfucker. His death wasn't exactly in vain I don't guess. The story of what he did will echo through the eternities of the underground. He had failed, but he had done so in a way that left a true legacy. The boy and I got shipped off to a work camp. We knew it was stupid, but we still had hope. We had seen a radical movement blossom and fail. We had seen some beautiful end in tragedy. The work camp isn't so bad I don't guess. It feels alot like life always did. The only difference is that now we knew for sure we were slaves. In the past, there was always a suspicion. There were people from all walks of life here. I listen to their stories, and they listen to mine (mostly made up shit since I don't have many good ones). Even though now it feels like the darkest time is upon us, we still fight. We sabotage the machines. We steal from the guards. We fight, even if it's our own little fight. I know that life doesn't have any objective meaning, but everyday I work to discover my own. Revolution begins in the mind.

Last Chapter

It's weird how things turn out. I look around at our new world. It's a world for us. It's a world by us. It's all ours. Someone in one of the cabins has opened their windows. I can hear "I Melt With You" coming out clear as day. I look over at the boy. His mother didn't make it, but I think he'll be alright. He's got a good head on his shoulders. Is this the future that Red Diamond had

envisioned? I'll never know, but I sure hope so. I look up to the sky and the fluffy clouds. It seems like nothing could ever stop us now. We are together as one human race. We are unstoppable. The future's open wide.....

Cue Credits

Lã%\$\$\$fē cĥāp#\$\$@tēR

Somebody with a pickup truck slowly drives ahead of us. They have a system in the back. I hear the opening of "Jump" by the real Van Halen ring out into the rubble of D.C.

Hell, I'm not going to complain. At least it's something I know. Lillian and I headed down to the waterfront. The fires still light the sky behind us. It sounds like a celebration. This was the time to be alive. Kids had given it their all. Some had died for their effort. I don't have too many years left, but I'll never forget the people I've met and the places I've been. These past couple of weeks have felt like a lifetime. There is something I'm feeling for the first time in my life tonight. Whatever it is, it feels good. It might be hope. For once, things might turn out ok. Lillian and I put the blanket down on the hillside. We sit down. I look up just in time to see the kid running toward us. He had been down playing by the water. As we gaze skyward, Lillian looks at me fondly. "It seems like it's getting darker earlier every day". I look at her with a smile. "We're just getting the star treatment....."

The End