

**and it all fell**

...shortly into what could only be called a kind of

# REPLACEMENT FATIGUE

the threads began to unwind...



it wasn't always going to end this way

was it always going to end?

it was always going to end this way



# REPLACEMENT FATIGUE

# REPLACEMENT FATIGUE



# REPLACEMENT FATIGUE





REPLACEMENT  
FATIGUE

replication crisis

Pillars of raw meat towered over us like wobbly, reeking evergreens in an all-you-can-eat forest. Save for a single, winding path, the entire polychaism was taken up and swallowed by impossibly tall piles of steaks, ribs, haunches, and mystery chunks that squished and groaned in the soft evening breeze, elongating silhouettes over the buildings in town.

Soon they'd be tumbling to the ground, spilling juice and stink all over Mama Meatpie's home.

She wasn't coming back this time. She was dead, and the chaism had gone rampant in her absence, warping obscenely away from her grandiose creative vision, distorting into...

Into nothing.

But death happened. It was just a part of life.

"Hem." Aodhan grumbled, clearing my fog.

He clenched an unlit cigar between his teeth and rolled it back and forth as he scanned the chaism. His gaze locked downhill, past all the shuddering pillars of meat and darkened buildings, on a squat, lit-up warehouse.

"You go check the... uh. Building... thing. I'll cover out here. For stragglers."

I nodded. Aodhan would sit in one spot and 'take watch' while the rest of the work--the actual work--would fall to me, like always. And we'd split the commission fifty-fifty, and he'd feel like he did an honest day's work, like always. I'd never understand why Walden hired him again, and I couldn't believe I was dwelling on it again.

Like always.

"Don't be that way."

His voice was calm and almost reassuring, like a father comforting his daughter, but he couldn't help the faint smirk that smeared his illusion away. As if he could hear my thoughts, he always pushed where it hurt the worst.

For fun. To poke at me.

"I don't have to be the bad guy, you know? We could be friends. You could put all this childish nonsense behind you, and we could just pretend like we're adults. But, hey--the ball's not really in my court, is it?"

"Aodhan, not now."

He recoiled dramatically, pretend-wounded by my dismissal. I had to look away from his slime, toward the warehouse. The job.

"Oh, okay, sure. Little discomfort too much for a prissy missy?" He took a beat and shook his head, still beaming a smarmy grin. "If not now, when? You plan on ignoring it forever?"

"I plan on doing my job, like we're paid to. And you probably should too."

"Look at you, My... so hostile--so willing to slap away a helping hand. For what? Because you don't like me? Reports are due next week, and I think Walden's gonna hear about this."

"Oh, yes. He will."

I pushed off, following the winding path downhill.

"Good luck, My!" He oscillated in a sarcastic falsetto.

Walden would hear plenty. He'd get it all wrapped up in my fancy resignation later. Aodhan was a problem, but he was just an inconvenient, and unfortunate, side effect of a larger issue.

I was sick of the Foundation. I was sick of the corporate constriction, the lack of support or resources, and all the unbearable pain and sadness in every single job.

There was so much pain.

Why? Why did it have to be so painful?

For all our marvels in technological advancement and human progression, the final result was nothing short of a travesty. They said we were like doctors, but doctors didn't cause the problems they were trying to fix. Doctors didn't have to watch their patients die twice.

We weren't doctors at all.

We were gods.

I breathed through my mouth as I weaved between the pillars, hopelessly struggling to avoid the stench. The air hung thick and humid with meat grease that glazed my mouth and throat like sour milk. It was no use; I could taste the rot.

I remembered when the meat was all freshly seared and shimmering with juice, wafting sweet hickory smoke swirls over the chausm, and it had been that way every single day, for years. For decades, Mama Meatpie had her all-you-can-eat-meat polychausm dialed to perfection, and for all those years, it was one of the finest chausms on the Net.

But when she died, the meat began to spoil.



And as I surveyed the husks of decay and filth around me, I couldn't help but compare. The place was gone.

It was time to shut it down. And it was sad, just like everything else.

"And don't think I don't see you both plotting. I'm not blind."

A voice rang out, echoing warmly through the meat forest.

"Oh, what an absolute arrogant--Nine, this has nothing to do with you! We're not plotting anything. We're discussing the--"

Another voice called back, but cut off, and the chaosm fell silent again.

What? People? Here?

How?

The logs showed no signatures before we entered, and even before that, we delisted public access from the chaosm to truncate any lasting connections. But someone was still logged in. Multiple people. Somehow.

Interesting.

Walden's insistence on manual shutdown sweeps was making more sense.

I rounded a meat pillar, jogged across the clearing and up the squat stoop hanging off the front of the warehouse, and carefully popped the latch on the tiny metal door. Though it only pushed open a small crack, I could see inside clearly; unlike the exterior, it was all cobwebbed and grey, entirely barren from wall to wall. Even the weird little cheese rats had vanished. In fact, the chaosm had no organisms at all anymore. It was empty.

I stood still for a moment, baffled by what I heard.

That was real. I heard people.

I heard voices.

Then came a crack like thunder, and the warehouse glowed brightly with flickering blue light. I shielded my eyes from a blue rip that hovered in the air like a wavering hole in a t-shirt. Though distorted and wobbly, I could barely see through it, like a window cascading with rain, unveiling rippling, oblong metal machines, wiring, cables, and segments of pipe on the other side. It looked like a factory.

"Excuse me, but you're all idiots. Nine, get back to the distributor. Six, ten, follow me. We've got a leak."

"Oh, it's more than a leak. Look, the regulator isn't hold--oh, god, it's collapsing!"

The voice grew deep and long, hitching slightly and reverberating in the dark. I felt the air sucking away, swathing the dark in dead silence.

And then the rip exploded, spewing thousands of blue, splintering cracks.

"What... the..."

The cracks joined together and split again a million times, spiderwebbing chaotically around the warehouse, searing into the ceiling and floor. The rip kept surging and pulsing wider until it was a large gash, and then it was bigger than the walls, engulfing the entire warehouse. Metal, shelves, pumps--the very architecture bent unnaturally as the hole crossed over, consuming, growing.

The ground began to shake.

"Oh. Puta madre."

I had to move.

I bolted, sprinting back into the wobbling meat towers, up the winding path toward the exit. The pillars swayed and shook in the quake, and a few tumbled to the ground behind me, echoing like heavy, slapping rain, or gunfire off in the distance.

Aodhan was leaning against a light pole, literally twiddling his thumbs, and glanced up as I leapt from the forest.

"GO!" I yelled.

"What? What's all the noise?"

"We have to go! It's--just go! Now!"

"Why?"

He raised an eyebrow and shook his head like I was overreacting, but mosied for the exit anyway. I sprinted by and leapt up the small hill, landing cleanly on the metal disc.

"Come on, man! It's collapsing!"

"Well, you didn't say that, did you?"

"Just--Aodhan. Look!"

He glanced over his shoulder. From here we had a grand view of the undulating, wobbly hole; it stretched over most of the forest now, lapping up the hillside toward us, painting the chaasm bright blue before swallowing it all up.

He gasped, finally grasping it, "Oh. God damn. What is that?"

"I heard voices coming from it. And... I... I don't know."

"Voices? Maybe Walden will know."

"Maybe."

He stared a moment longer, seemingly transfixed. The hole bent and refracted light around it, like the world all just fell into a really big pool. It was all still there, distorted and frozen in place, engulfed in bright light.

"Twenty-three!" A man's voice rang across the chasm, echoing sharply.

It was the voice from before. The same man.

"TWENTY-THREE! NO!"

Aodhan met my eyes with a refreshing sense of worry creasing his brow.

"I heard that."

"Same. Ready?" I asked.

He nodded.

I crouched and tapped the enable switch, launching us out,

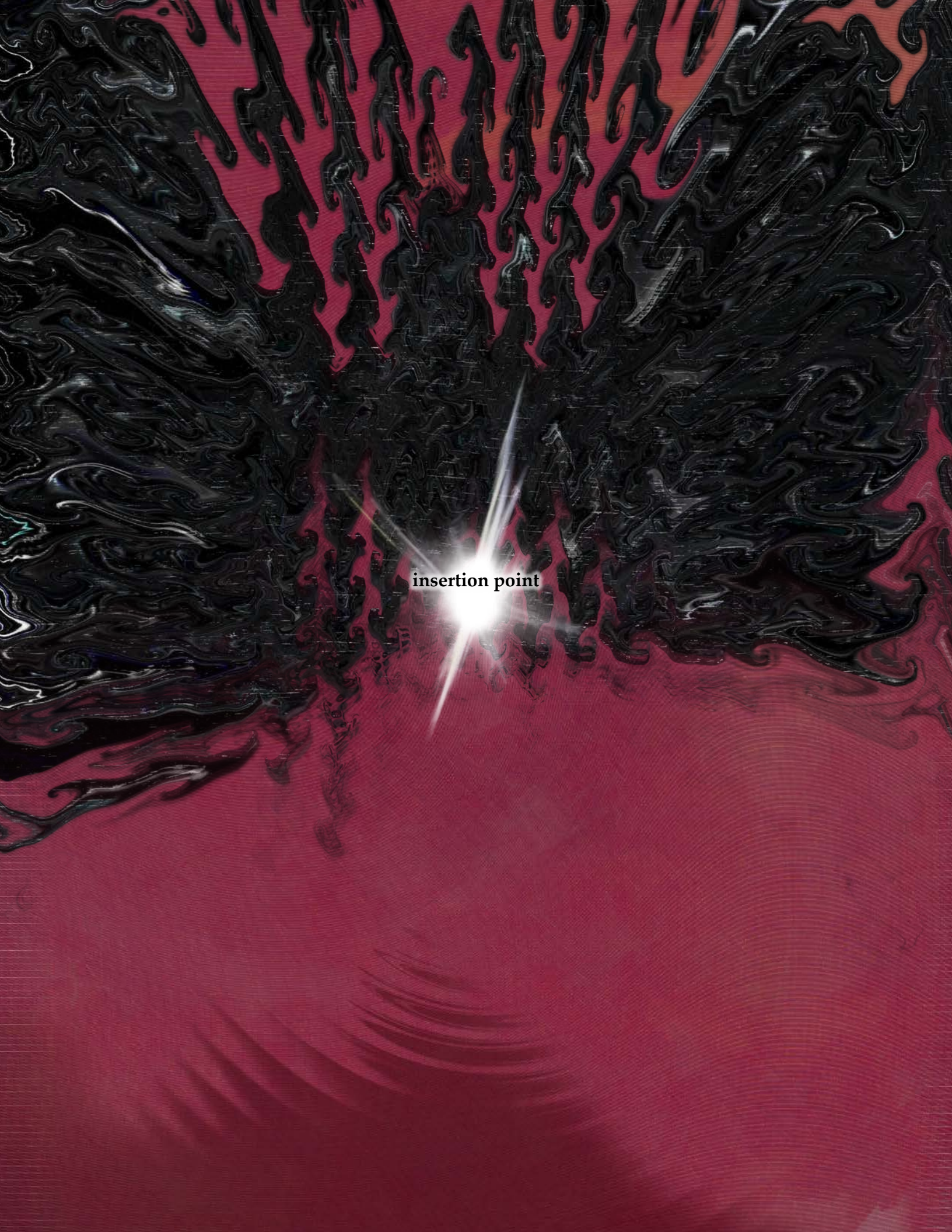
through

the

dark

again.





insertion point





I had ears and a nose too. Most of a face.

I felt the man's eyes on me, but didn't meet his gaze.

"It's not a real diner." He said.

"I know."

"So, what's with the ugly mug?" He slid a laminated plastic sheet across the table. "Order."

"I don't know what to get."

"Just get what you got last time. What was it? A pate?"

"Patty melt."

"Sure thing, darling." The waitress was over me, beaming in a wide, toothy grin. "Is that all?"

The waitress. I knew her. I trusted her with my life, she was the smartest person I ever met, and I loved her like my sister.

"No, there's plenty more." The man held up two fingers. "Two lives down, Philip. Let's see if we can make a good number three, huh? Oh, and Ms. Medy, I'll take a patty melt as well, and she'll have the same as us."

He folded his fingers in and thumbed over his shoulder, at a woman I hadn't noticed before. She slouched in her booth, sleeping, or maybe unconscious, or maybe dead. I had never seen her before, but I felt like I knew her too.

"Her name is My." I whispered.

The man nodded. "My, what a sweet slice of pie. I like her. She's something else. Not so smart as anyone in your crew, but she's got a spice to her. Well, no--she's smarter than Harold. He was a dumb son of a bitch, wasn't he? Sad, really."

His words weren't making sense, but I finally understood who he was. Or who he was supposed to be. I met his eyes.

"You..." I pointed at him. "You're me."

I saw my hand, and trailing behind was a pale, lanky forearm. I had arms. From that, I could make some safe assumptions--probably had a couple of shoulders sticking off a torso, too.

Two heavy plates clanked and slid across the table, skidding to a stop before us. Patty melts curling with hot steam. Cheese dripped and dribbled down, running trails on the white glass. Hot cheese. Cold glass. I could grab it with my hand. But did I like patty melts?

The other me chuckled around a thick bite, spilling cheese down his chin. His chuckle wasn't my chuckle. The voice was right--it was almost identical, but the chuckle was very wrong.

"I am you, yeah. Is that a problem? Figured it would be easier with you. No one more familiar, right?"

No. That wasn't right.

I shook my head. "I'd rather talk to Wilson."

The other me slammed his hands down and shot to his feet, knocking the table over. Our plates clattered away and shattered, presumably on the diner floor, and I followed suit, discovering all kinds of new limbs and body parts as I tumbled.

He took a step forward and crouched but still towered over me.

"You're almost back home, Philip. Wilson's dead. It'd be for the best if you just moved on."

"But he's not dead. He'll never be dead--not for real."

I couldn't stop myself. I wasn't sure if I was right, but it just came out.

His voice grew ragged and impatient, "He's dead, Philip. He's dead! He's a god damned skeleton in a parking lot! He's just as dead as you. He's deader!"

His face drooped, forming baggy, wax-like beads of skin that slid free and began pooling on my chest. He wasn't me anymore. As his skin clumped and fell free, I could see beneath it; his face had no muscles or bones--it was just hollow, empty space.

"But the difference between you and Wilson is that you don't have to be dead."

His voice warbled and grew loud, now emanating from nothing, or maybe from everywhere. It got deeper and carried a rasp on a smooth drawl.

I knew the voice well. He wasn't me.

"You're not me."

"You always were the dumb one. Took you long enough."

"But you--I thought Wilson said... you..."

"Don't make me say it again, Philip. Forget about Wilson. Let's talk about you. Let's talk about being dead. Care to entertain an offer?"

Even without his face, I could hear the wide grin behind Eoghan's voice.

**the silent flute**



I tried to talk, but my voice didn't come out. It wasn't weak or caught in my throat--the sound was just gone. Taken from me.

The little girl watched intently with those eerie goofball eyes, obviously scared by my soundless mouthing.

Why couldn't I talk?

Was it her? A stupid little girl? Did she possess some ability to steal voices? Powers existed far beyond my realm of understanding, far outside the reach of the keys, and I had only just opened this door. I had no way to know.

Was I losing it?

It wasn't her. She was a plainly dressed, ordinarily normal, boring little girl. Almost too plainly dressed. Too normal.

Too boring.

That had to be it. She was some crazy monster--a god thing, a beast, whatever--and she cast a god thing beast curse on me. She stole my voice.

I dropped to my knee, hanging my face an inch from hers, and she gasped and stumbled back, but I followed close, trying again and again to speak, to make any noise, to confront her, to shout at her, to scream as loud as I could, and scold her for taking what was MINE--for STEALING from ME and thinking she could HIDE like a COWARD and that I wouldn't notice her INSOLENT--

She collapsed to the ground in a ruffled pile, wailing and mumbling out gibberish. Tears flowed down her cheeks, wetting her dress collar.

I stopped--she was trembling, absolutely terrified. I looked down at my hands. They were shaking. I was dead, and my hands were shaking. I was losing it.

The notion was discomforting. No brain but still losing it.

Hm.

Back to the drawing board.

I swiveled toward the mountains,

toward the hanging ring,

now closer than ever before.

I reached forward, found the key--the black glass--and gripped it, pausing to steady myself at the sheer weight of the thing.

It grew heavier every time I used it, which would almost definitely be an issue,  
maybe, eventually,

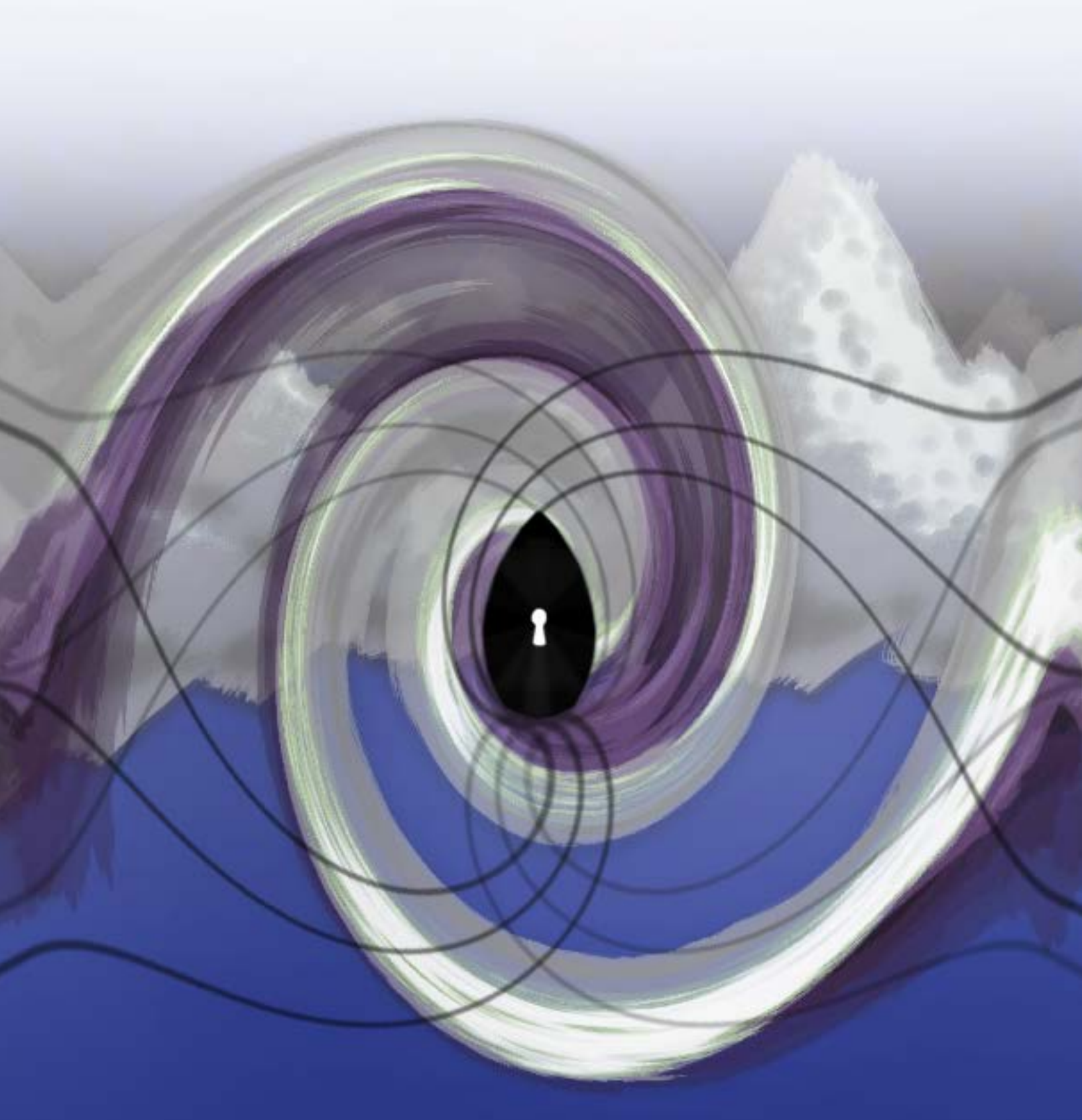
but I didn't have time. Not now.

Bigger fish.

Smarter fish. I hefted the key

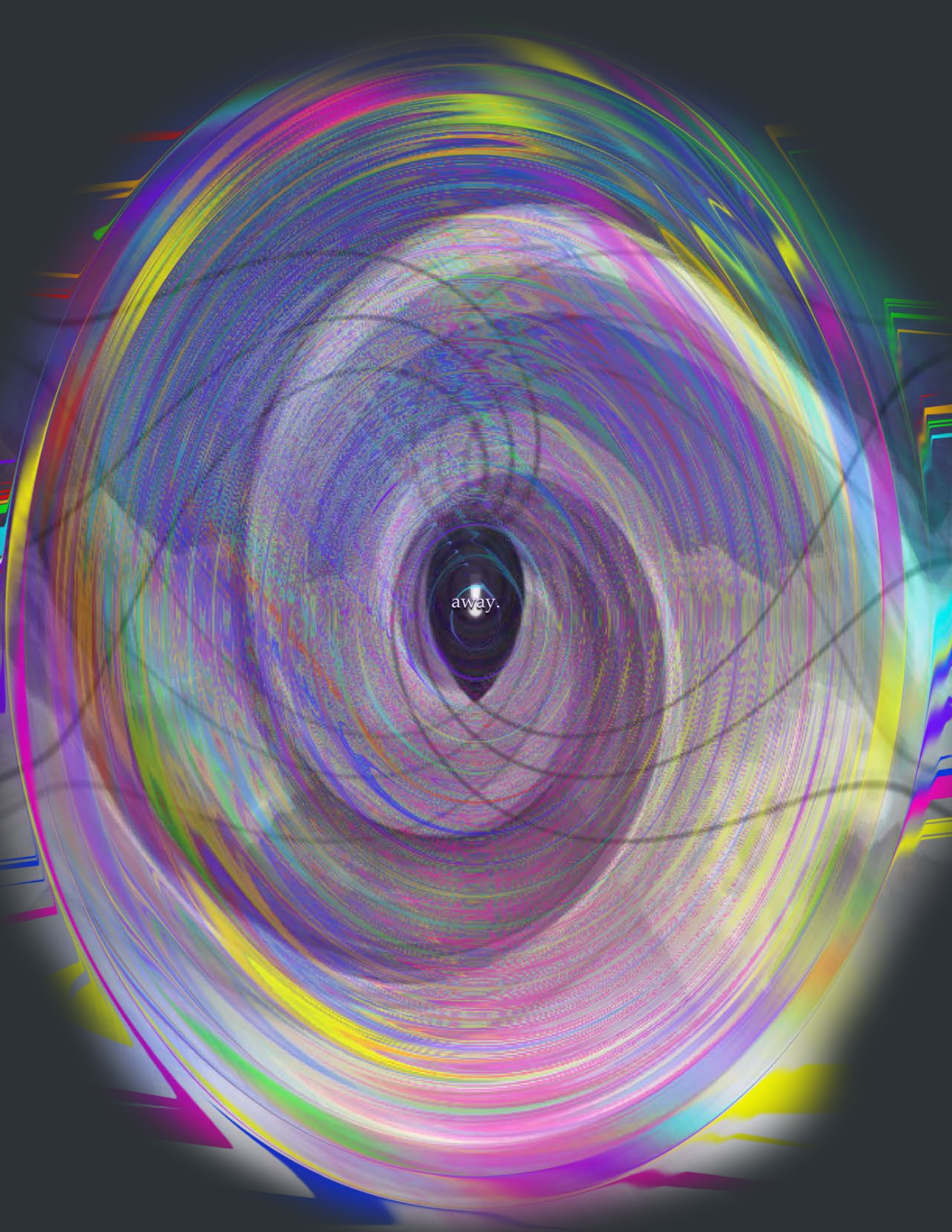
and

twisted it to the right,



*rotating* the world





away.



And then I was in the auditorium, on the wooden slat with both feet firmly planted on stone, in a pile of ash. I released the key, and it clattered on the ring behind me.

The closet was impossibly quiet. I always hated perfect silence.

And somehow, even in death, I still had terrible tinnitus that roared in the soft cushion of this place.

Terrible tinnitus, shaking hands, paranoia.

How many afflictions would I develop? Probably a few. Maybe more than a few.

Wasn't too bad so far. Would probably get worse. Potentially a lot worse.

Still a small price to pay, really. For now, at least.

My skin itched. I tried to pop my neck, but it was gummy and bent with no resistance. It was still hard to take--to have a body, but not. It didn't feel right.

And I kept dwelling. I kept dwelling on everything.

I was absolutely losing it. The thought stirred me up from the slat.

I called for the recollector, surprised to hear my voice boom through the closet.

"Abraxas!"

It felt good to shout and make noise again. After a moment, smoke bubbled at my feet, and a deep growl churned into words.

"Clerk. I've been waiting."

The voice spoke like a bear's roar, rattling the door in its frame.

This wasn't Abraxas.

"I called for the recollector. Who are you?"

"Dyeus." It rumbled. "And you are the Clerk, and this is the closet, and Boden wept when you took the keys. My turn. Why do you call for Abraxas?"

Straight and to the point. I could appreciate that.

"My voice is gone when I leave the closet. I was going to ask him for help. Can you help?"

"Can I help...? Oh, Clerk. You need more than help."

I sighed, "Okay. Why's that?"

"I will help, because I know this path and respect both its end and my place in it. While I'll admit I have an admiration for your unparalleled persistence, this end will come no matter your choices. Give this up. Relinquish the keys and abandon the slat while you still have the choice. You might just ease your pain. But, no..."

It paused and grew softer, "Not a little rat like you. You hear this as a challenge."

"I do, yes. So, what do I do?"

The smoke condensed and darkened, rippling in a short tempest before settling at my ankles again.

"The little girl has it. You'll have to kill her."

I almost gasped.

"What? Really?"

It was her?

And I saw. I knew.

It was a relief to hear; I wasn't really losing it.

I had just been second guessing good intuition.

Dyeus chuckled, vibrating my spine.

"No. You are a fool, Clerk. If there were any autriarchs or chancellors left, you would not hold the slat. You would not be in the oh-wid at all. Boden would not allow such an embarrassment to breathe in his realm."

Tinges of worry crept over me again. I was losing it.

But that wouldn't matter. It could be fixed, just like my memories, just like me. I could fix it; I just had to learn how.

I glared at the smoke.

"Well, your chancellors didn't fuckin make it. But guess who did? Me. Can you do that math? Or do you not have math around these parts?"

"They were lords, betrayed and befouled by the only living things in reach--the only life they trusted. They were gods lost to corruption. You are just a rat with good luck. There is no comparison."

"Alright, fine. I'm a rat. While I am thoroughly enjoying your lecture, I'm feeling like it's not going anywhere. I'll take my business elsewhere."

"There is nowhere else to look."

"Okay, great. This was great. Thanks for all the bullshit. I'm going--"

"Relax, Clerk. As I said, I know the path. I know my place, just as you already know your answers. The clear glass key holds domain over corporeality; it chains soul to flesh and fills air into lungs. You know this. When you walk with flesh again, use the key and bind to yourself."

"Myself?" I rubbed my lip.

I knew the keys well, but I had no way of knowing...

Of course they worked on me.

"The girl didn't mention that." I muttered.

"That was no mere girl. She was your aide. And it would have been quite difficult for her to mention anything while burning alive."

The smoke churned into a heavy fountain, joining into a tight, rippling ball in the air, waist-high. It was a long moment before Dyeus spoke again--it just hovered, coursing like a lake and spilling grey smoke.

"The Clerk is meant to hold balance."

"I've heard that. And?"

"You are not holding balance. You are playing. The oh-wid is not simply in flux, it is failing. And so are you. The threads are unwinding, and you have no hope of balancing them. There is no saving us now."

"From what?"

The smoke collapsed, spreading in a thin wave on the floor before dissipating entirely.

For all his attitude, his words were still true.

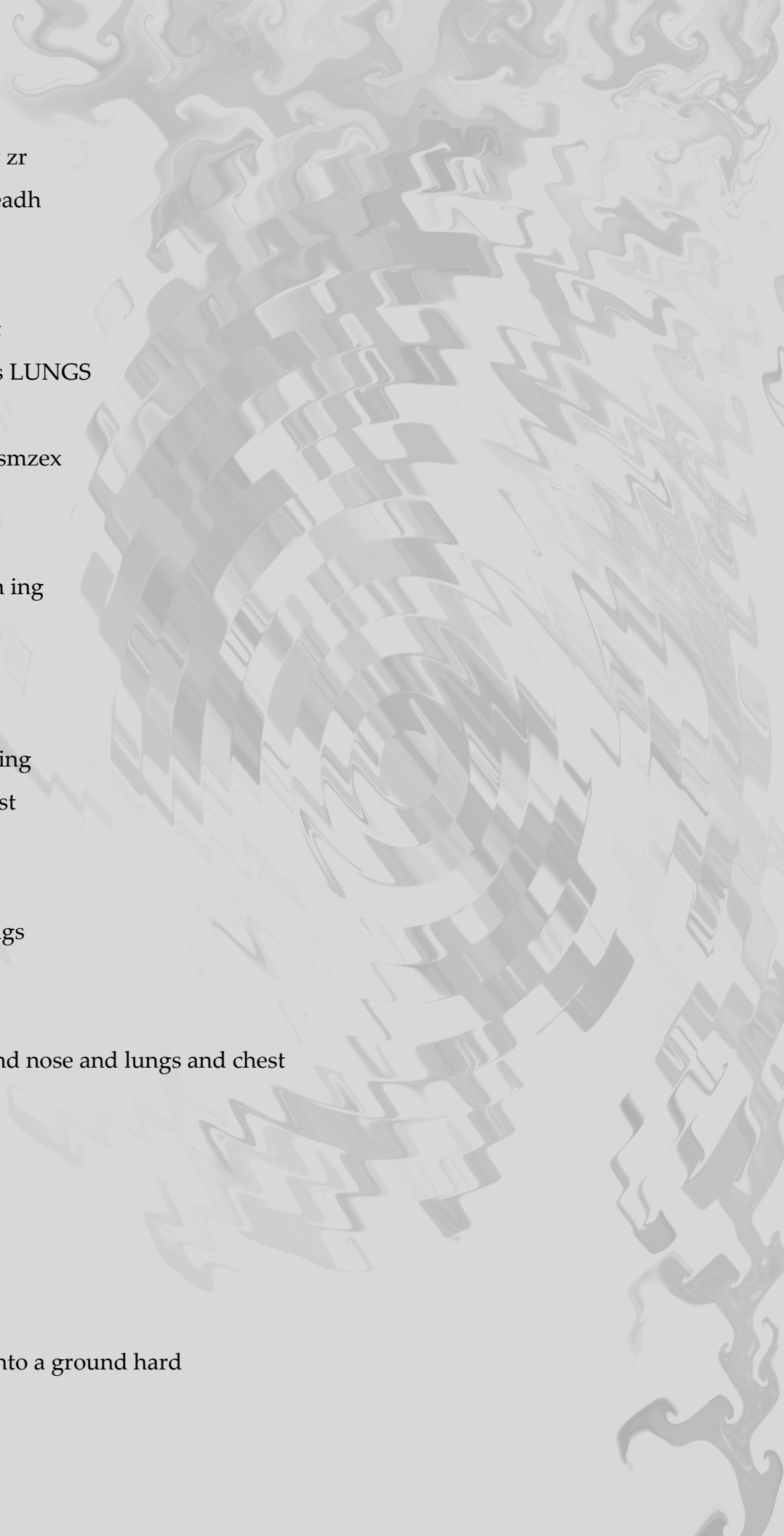
The clear glass key. They weren't just gimmicks--each of the keys was immensely powerful. Together they were meant to hold balance over things like madness, infirmity, corporeality, even life itself...

I hadn't seen it before. They were a convenient solution to my problems.

I had to use the keys on myself.



**wake up**



yjr eotomh jimh snpbr zr  
cocihrknt xouslnt beeadh  
bair eee fr ashve foro  
mny  
my jungs burned dhot  
mny lun LUngs Lungs LUNGS  
my lungs  
schfeamedt were schesmxex  
My lungs  
My luhngs wvere  
My lungs were scream ing  
Or was it was  
I was the  
I was screaming  
Why was why screaming  
I my lungs nd ny schest  
My che st  
I felt my chest  
My lungs I felt my lungs  
I could brethe  
Fresh clean air  
It burned my throat and nose and lungs and chest  
I coughed and  
rolled  
rolling  
But it felt  
I fell  
I was standing?  
I fell from standing, onto a ground hard

Hard ground

I coughed

Coughed and coughed and coughed

And coughed and coughed strings of red, veiny mucus from my lungs

But I was breath in

Breathing

Breathing in

And out

And the pain was receding. And I was feeling again.

I was me again? Again? Where?

There, where I was. The same place. I never left.

It was smoky, and I couldn't see much from the hard ground.

Someone was in front of me, on the hard ground too.

He was coughing strings of red ve--

no, he was not coughing.

He was dead. I recognized his face.

Dead.

Redd. His name was dead. Redd.

Redd. I remembered him. He died?

He did.

There was someone else, behind him. Someone dead.

I heard sirens. Were those always on? Loud ringing

My chest burned so bad.

It was the smoke. I had to go.

I had to leave. I had to.

My legs were bending, trailing close behind me.

I stood, but couldn't stand, and fell again.

Ghosts strolled by, paying me no mind, laughing and joking. Were they ghosts?

They had to be ghosts. The smoke was too thick for people. A beam snapped and fell, and then they were gone.

I pulled myself up to a metal table. It was the same table. I remembered it well. As I tried to stand, my legs shook violently.

I couldn't put weight on my bad leg at all.

But my other leg? My other leg.

My other leg was good. It was always good. Was it?

It was good now. I hopped forward, landing weird and lunging against another metal table. It skidded and screeched on the floor, but I didn't fall.

I was doing it. I could do it.

My bad leg wasn't strong, but I could balance. I could do it.

The doorway to the hall wasn't far. I couldn't remember the way, but a big green exit sign illuminated the hallway, pointing... a direction. That one direction.

What was that direction?

Pointing. My hand. I was... handed. What handed? I held up my thumb and pointer to make an L, but the L was backwards. Not L, then. Not left.

What did that mean?

Other. I was other-handed. I struggled to focus, to think back, to push through the shaking, fuzzy, blurring--Dr. Payne said...

It isn't wrong...

It's right!

The sign in the hall was pointing right.

I hopped twice across the room, barely leaning on my bad leg, my right leg, and fell against the wall with my shoulder. My left shoulder.

It was easy. I was good at it.

I moved again, sliding to the doorframe to peek out. The hall was smoky too, but there were more green signs all the way down. I just had to follow the green lights.

It would be easy. I could do it.

I launched from the doorframe and slapped against the far wall, and then, with a push, I was off again, moving down the hall. Easy.

Step, slide, step, slide. The hall was long, but I was moving quickly.

Smoke was pouring from a room before me, and the air was thick and hard to breathe.

I pinched my nose and lowered to a crouch under the smoke, but as I tilted forward, I lost my balance and tumbled, crashing into the hard ground and gouging my knee on a sharp metal beam. This ground was a bit softer, and the smoke wasn't so thick down here, but it was still hard, and the smoke was still swirling around me, and my knee was throbbing boldly, probably bleeding. I had to get up.

But it was easier to breathe on the ground. I laid there, taking in deep breaths. I had to keep moving, crawling if I had to--

A chirp echoed down the hall. It was loud. Not like an alarm--it was small, like a bird, and it sounded faint, but close. I crawled forward, shimmying with my good knee and pulling myself forward on piles of overturned junk. The chirp echoed again, clearly coming from an open room farther down, on the right. I clambered up from the ground on my left leg, hugging the wall with both arms.

As I got closer, I heard it more clearly, not chirping, but crying. Like a fox or another animal that cried in yelps. I pushed off the wall, staggered into the doorway, and leaned in.

A cat. On the table, in a wire cage, was a black cat with big white spots, next to a small sign that read, "MALE, TABBY, 97671."

He was matted and skinny and gross, but he seemed nice. And he was so scared. He didn't deserve to get stuck in that cage. But he didn't have to be stuck.

I hobbled to the table and leaned over the cage.

"Hello." I held my finger up.

The cat meowed and licked my thumb. His tongue was rough and dry.

I found the cage door, but it was locked by a small, strange clasp that didn't make sense to me. I flipped the clasp up and down, but neither opened it. I tried again, shoving up, and it suddenly fell to the right, clinking the door open.

"Aaow." The cat yowled loudly as he jumped free.

He trotted over to the doorway, but stopped and looked back. He wasn't leaving.

"Go, buddy. It's dangerous."

He blinked.

I hopped forward, following him to the door, and he took a few steps into the hall, but looked back again, waiting for me.

"You don't have to wait for me."

"Yow." He croaked back.

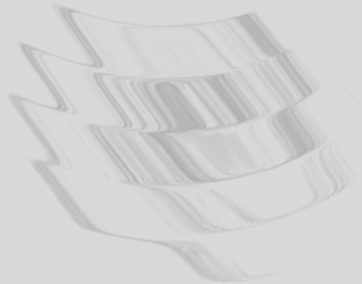
"Oh--well, okay. You want to be friends?"

The cat stared at me, like a gross little statue.

"I'll be friends with you. What's your name?"

He just kept staring.

"My name is Joseph. I can give you a name, since we're friends. How about Frog?"



**the getterling gum-guy**



They rewrote the program four times.

They rewrote it. I worried.

Four times, they rewrote the program at least.

At least four times. And

I worried about how quitting smoking might affect my mood, but then my doctor recommended I try Dipendenza. Since then, I haven't smoked a cigarette in over forty-three days, and my mood has never been more neutral.

I am a whirlwind of stability.

*I am now*

*how you should always want to be.*

The strength came to me quickly, as if in a dream.

As I digested, I felt my blood gliding through my veins,

and in mere seconds, I ascended. You could too. In a flash, like the Almighty lightning from God flowing into your veins. It will boil within you, coalescing with your ether, evolving your genome, transitioning you beyond the mere dirt flesh and dusted bones of ancient men, upon high, toward the angels,  
USHERING YOU FROM THE ASHES OF CREATION AND GRANTING YOU  
THE CHANCE TO FINALLY TOUCH UPON TRUE SALVATION BEYOND  
LIFE AND LEARN ALL INFINITE TRUTHS--

So maybe it's time to talk to your doctor or call 33-33-3-33-33--the number doesn't matter. Just dial, just dial, just dial.

It took four times to rewrite it so it would work. It worked, but it did not work correctly.

I don't remember how exactly. At least four.

And it still didn't work after four times. It worked, but not.

I am a whirlwind.

A crack interrupted my reaction to the crack in the room, which was otherwise empty, save a stool and a crack that ran along the ceiling, down the wall, and across the floor, between my legs, and up around the wall again.

I never saw that crack before.

It wasn't a crack, it was more like a rip, like it was cut, like it was pulled wrong, and it was beaming blue light, like nothing I ever saw before.

I never saw that crack before.

Had I seen that crack before? At least four.

I had not.

I moved my neck to push my head over to the crack, but it was more like a rip, like it was cut, like it was pulled wrong, and the beaming blue light was very bright, brighter than anything I had seen before.

They wr... rewrote it. They rewrote it four times.

It was growing wider, spilling something dark and red, flooding the room with a thick pool. It knocked the stool over, which bobbed in the rising sludge.

I worried about how quitting smoking might affect my mood.

Even though my doctor recommended I try Dipendenza, the flood was rising quickly. I hadn't smoked a cigarette in over forty-three days, but I felt my hand clicking the lighter, and my lungs draw in deep. My face lit up with an amber glow.

Smoke swirled around me.

Four times. At least.

The pool was up to my chest, so I stretched my chest up to the ceiling, but then it was there too, filling all the space. If I hadn't been smoking, I would've been cigarette free for over forty-three days. At least four times.

I filled all the space too, thinking maybe,  
maybe I could fill the space first,  
and maybe I could stop the space from filling.

But then the space was full,

and pressure began

building

within

me.

I let go. It was worse now. There was barely any room to breathe.

At least four times. So it would work. It worked, but it did not work correctly.

I had to go, I had to get out of the room.

How could I leave? I remembered there was a way, but I didn't remember the way.

I couldn't remember.

That's when I remembered my doctor recommending I try Dipendenza, and I remembered having a very neutral mood after doing so.

The crack. It was more like a rip.

Sludge was pressing on my eyeballs. I pushed my face against the ceiling and took a deep breath, and then stretched my body toward the crack that was more like a rip, cutting through the sludge,

I became

a dagger,

flying into the big crack,

into a tunnel where orange and red sacs pumped and filled and gasped, like lungs filling and emptying,

like a womb pushing me forth,

like death.

Someone screamed far off, echoing around me. It was terrible, and it made me thankful that I had Dipendenza, and thankful that my mood was so neutral.

The scream stretched and elongated, getting worse. Maybe it was an animal being tortured. At least four times, so it would work. Or a person.

But it faded and tapered and fell away, into silence, and I could only hear the rushing, breathing air as it coursed by.

And then I emerged, landing, pressing myself against something hard and flat and new, somewhere else.

I was standing in a room full of squat walls.

An office. At least four times.

I was alive.

It was quiet. The scream was no longer loud or in my face.

It was gone, like my craving for cigarettes.

I needed a cigarette.



**red herring day**

After three clicks, a soft thump, the quick scrape of metal on hardwood following a big thud, and another, lower clunk, the door popped open, unveiling Aodhan's black silhouette against harsh outdoor light. A moment later, his finger was thrusting into my face.

"What the fuck was that email, huh? I'm done with the fucking bullshit, My!"

Spit bubbled and ran down his chin.

"I've told you before, Aodhan." I fought to hide the adrenaline from my voice. "I can't hear complaints over eighty decibels. The noise--it's too loud, you know? I hate to ask, but can you say it again at a more respectful volume?"

"Fucking--you're not... NO! MY! FUCK YOUR EIGHTY DECIBELS! YOU--YOU NEED TO FUCKING RESPECT ME, OKAY?! Do you know how long I've worked here? Do you even know what I've done to make your job so fucking easy? Do you know what I helped build for you?"

His stained wife beater was darkened and bruised by more than just chassis sweat. Brown and black splatters painted his chest and stomach, and it jiggled as he shook his arms, rippling in motion, almost like waves on a river shore, beautifully lapping over the silt--

"Are you even fucking listening to me?" He was entirely red in the face now, and his voice slumped into an eerie, almost ghostly tone.

"I've been saying this the entire time. I warned him. I told him you wouldn't be a good fit for the team. And I was right. Now it's all about your fucking FEELINGS and RESPECT. Well, if you could act like an adult for five fucking minutes, then I would be able to show you some respect. But you can't, can you? You can't fucking grow up--"

Aodhan cut short and swiveled as the door rattled open again. Walden stepped in and stared between us.

"Am I interrupting something?"

"Yes." I smiled. "Aodhan was just giving me a performance review. Join us."

"Aodhan, why were you screaming?"

"Sorry. I--I got a bit worked up, I was, uh... complaining, yeah."

Walden glanced between us again, but held a squint at me.

His tone grew suspicious, "What's going on?"



"My sent this email a few minutes ago--I, no, we--we had a weird day. A bad day. And I have tried and tried and tried again with her, but she has pushed me away every single time. And now she's holding a bad day against me. I'm--"

"Stop." Walden held a hand up to Aodhan. "My, we need to talk."

I stood, rounded my desk, and followed him to the hallway. Aodhan glared at me, mouth still agape, interrupted mid-sentence. As we cleared the door, Walden swiveled and put a hand on my shoulder.

"We have a problem."

"No, I have him handled, really--"

"Not Aodhan, the Network. Destabilization. We're running tests, but I need you in the lab. Can you push your afternoon--actually, better push tomorrow too. Can you?"

"Y-yeah. Of course. But we've been monitoring the virus for--"

"Not the virus. Full node destabilization. We're losing more than just--listen, I can't explain this now. Handle Aodhan, and if he calms down, bring him too. Meet us in the basement. Talk soon."

He squeezed, released my shoulder, and bolted down the hall, almost in one fluid movement, and then nearly tumbled over himself as he hit the stairs. I shook my head and snickered.

I wanted to tell him about Mama Meatpie's chaasm. The rip, and the voices. It was assuredly related, but it would have to wait.

Aodhan coughed, now looming in the doorway.

"What's up?" His brow was creased with worry again.

"Full node destabilization. Walden wants me in the basement. You better come too. I think that's what we saw. It's probably systemic. It's obviously systemic, actually..."

I pushed by, heading for my desk; my laptop was already in my bag, I just needed the charger, a spare battery, and my notebook, and probably a printer too. And some toner, and we were definitely going to need--

"I'm sorry."

I froze. What?

Aodhan was over my desk, hanging his head and idly fiddling with one of my pens.

"That was... I don't want to make this a whole thing... but... okay, well, listen, I'm sorry for being a dick, My. I... it was uncalled for. Like you said, we're both just trying to do our jobs, and you're very good at yours, and that email really... I don't know, I guess I'm the one acting like a kid. I can be selfish, and I get all caught up in my own bullshit and... well, I'm sorry. I hope you can... forgive... uh, that. Ahem. Hm. That's it."

He released a heavy sigh like he had been holding his breath.

I didn't know what to say.

"It was a good call telling me to bolt back there. You do good work. I mean it. I was... stubbornness like that just gets people killed. But, ah, anyway. I'm gonna head to the basement. I'll fill Walden in. See you there?"

He waved two fingers and pushed through the door.

What the hell?

I was shocked, almost frozen in place--even my breathing was short and quick. But I had to talk to him. That took a lot. He deserved... something.

"Hey! Aodhan, wait!"

I chased after. He was in the hall, glancing back.

"Thank you. Thank you for saying all that. I'm sorry I've been such a bitch back at you. You--I let you get under my skin, and that's my fault. It's just insult to injury--"

Vincent's voice rang out, echoing down the hall. He was screaming--a terrible, burning yowling.

Aodhan's face perfectly illustrated my terror.

Oh god.

An abstract, circular, concentric pattern in shades of purple, blue, and white, resembling a stylized eye or a complex mandala. The pattern is composed of many overlapping, slightly irregular rings, creating a sense of depth and movement. The colors transition from a bright, almost white center to deep purples and blues towards the outer edges. The overall effect is ethereal and complex.

the many-headed pedagogue

I gripped the lever and steadied myself. Anxiety radiated in my chest, but I knew I was getting worked up over nothing.

These were likely mere residual effects of regaining lucidity after so long spent... in the dark. After an event like that, it made sense I'd be paranoid. I'm lucky I even had a mind left. I could've lost it. I could've never had it at all.

No, this wouldn't be so bad. Regardless of what happened here, it couldn't be that bad. It couldn't be. Could it?

The Wilsons were all unique entities, but it was clearly only possible for us to deviate within a small variance of personality types. We were all essentially the same person, with a few caveats. Because of that, problems that stumped one of us tended to stump the whole crew.

Together, we landed on two potential outcomes--though the odds only totaled at 99.987%--and both were similar in their assumptive qualities: either the bin translation would work, or the bin translation would not work. Fifty-fifty was a great ratio split for gambling, but not so much for open heart surgery. It was all relative.

If it worked, then we'd all clap and laugh and high-five, and everything would be fine.

If it didn't work, well... there was a chance everything would be fine, but it was more likely that we'd all die horrifically. Again, maybe? We were already dead, so did it really matter? Would we die again?

The physicality of the bin was far more tangible than any chausm, and my body was as real as I'd ever felt. This wasn't the standard, simulated existence we created. This felt real.

And if it felt real, then dying would probably hurt, and dying horrifically would probably hurt quite a lot. But that was always a risk. Every time I sat in a chassis, I knew I was taking that risk, and for all the thousands of times I did it, I never felt this kind of anxiety.

No. Something was different. What was different?

I looked around at the crowd of hurried Wilsons, each running on his own path, fulfilling his obligations, running tests, pushing code commits, checking formulas, prepping for the project. It was certainly a new setting, but that wasn't it. Working here felt strangely comfortable and familiar, like I was where I had always been, back at the office.

No, it wasn't that. What was different?



Was I just worrying over the work? Had I lost my edge? Had I lost my mind?

I had no way of knowing.

But I felt like it was something else. Something...

Medy said...?

The machine. The world was a machine. What did she say?

She said something important--

"Twenty-three."

Nine stood before me, peeking over his cracked spectacles.

"In thirty. Are you ready?"

I nodded, "Yes."

"What's bothering you?"

"Oh. Ah. Nothing, really."

"You have seniority, and a majority of us are willing to admit that you know the most. Your worry is making me worried. Why are you worried, Wilson?"

I was being naive. Nine wasn't just like me, he was me.

Of course he saw through my barriers. They were his barriers too. And he had plenty more experience talking to himself.

"I don't know, I--I was thinking about what Medy told me. She said there are two machines--well, I believe by machine that she meant the world itself. Two distinct worlds."

"You think? Doesn't sound solid."

"I know. And I can barely remember anything... it's all so... ah."

"Hmm. Two machines? Two worlds? What does that mean?"

"Truthfully, I have no good idea. But if I'm not mistaken, our math is dependent on the existence of a singular fabric. With multiple worlds, there may be multiple fabrics. And that could complicate what we're doing."

"Yes. Or your new information could be a hallucination from twenty years of death. Or maybe you just misheard her. Can we rely on that? Maybe partially."

"No, we can't." I shook my head. "I wasn't going to mention it."

"Hm. No, I'm glad you did. I'll postpone."

He swiveled and regarded the room, both hands raised.

"TIME OUT! Let's talk for a second. New information. Huddle up."

The Wilsons all dropped their various routines and clustered in, crowding us like a football team in a huddle. The sight was absurd, like some tacky surrealist painting. Catherine would've loved it. I chuckled at the thought.

"What?" Nine glanced at me.

"Oh, I just wondered what Catherine would think, seeing us together like this. Like a football team. She'd probably have a fit."

Most of the crowd burst into laughter.

"Yeah. Oh, I hadn't even--she'd love this."

"Oh, yes. I bet she would."

"She'd--ah, haha ha. She'd probably scream!"

Nine cracked a smile, "Yeah. I bet."

"Nine. Care to explain?" Six wasn't smiling.

"Ah. Six. Yes. Twenty-three remembered something. Go ahead."

"Uh. Ahem, yes."

I felt put on the spot, a bit like a schoolboy that hadn't done his homework. I couldn't think of a more scrutinizing, analytical, skeptical, or contrarian critic than myself, and the crowd was full of nothing but. I cleared my throat.


"Ah. So. Medy. She... Medy said there are two overlapping machines. Overlapping worlds. I assumed she meant the Network, and maybe she did, but our math presumes this fabric is isolated. If there's even a chance of two, overlapping fabrics, we can't know what ramifications translating this place will produce."

Six nodded as I spoke and put a finger to his chin.

"True. But we don't know if the second machine has a fabric, or if it even exists, where it would be located if it did, or how we could measure it. Can we afford to abandon the plan for this? It's loose."

"A vote then." Nine looked to the crowd. "Spread out single file. Raise your hand if we should keep going today; keep your hand down if we should abandon it. Come on, let's go."

The Wilsons all quickly shuffled into place, and before the line was even complete, every single one had a hand raised. Nine glanced at Six, and then me.



"It's unanimous. Our math could be wrong, but we can't know. It could be correct. It could be fine. But we're in the dark, and time is short. We keep going. Back on in sixty seconds, everybody. Lock in."

The Wilsons dispersed, an organized army of hurried little scientists rushing back into position. I almost laughed again, and I probably would have if not for the gnawing in my stomach. I couldn't shake the feeling that this was wrong.

I leaned against the wall, gripped the lever, and waited.

If two fabrics overlapped, and our recycle bin was rooted in one, it could very realistically have roots in the other as well.

I shook my head. The concept was so intangible and lacking in corporeal comparison that I was having trouble working it out. Two fabrics. Were they inhabiting the same space, or were they adjacent? They were overlapping, but to what--

"Twenty-three. Go."

It was time. My arm fell, clanking the lever into place.

The coils above illuminated orange, and zeros became numbers ticking up on the KV sensor display. I focused on the readouts. They were good. The central reactor was humming healthily. It flipped its relays one by one, and each of the four engines whirled into life and engaged their regulator fans, winding the chorus up into a full bore.

It was working. I was wrong. Thank everything, I was wrong. I released a literal sigh of relief--

A cable to one of the engines cracked and snapped free. Nine stood in the corner, in a hushed conversation with two Wilsons I didn't recognize. Wilson One pushed into their conversation, and his boisterous tone carried across the bin.

"Excuse me, but you're all idiots. Nine, get back to the distributor. Six, ten, follow me. We've got a leak."

I tried to yell, "One! Should I terminate?"

"No!" He called back. "Hold steady!"

They walked over to engine three, into the billowing wind of regulator exhaust, and screamed over the noise. I could barely hear their garbled words. One pointed up to the line, and Ten made a wide arm motion before mounting the engine and climbing up to the clasp. It looked like he was eyeing the length of the break.

And then the engine exploded.

**trouble in orthodoxy**



I remember before breath was ever drawn,  
when my world was just a pinprick,  
when life was a suggestion, and  
when dark was no different from light.

It was all in there, in me,  
silent and waiting.

I remember.

Even as I began pushing the waves, hanging the strings, and forming the bends of this new world, I knew its future inhabitants--my fools, though not yet seeds in my garden--were doomed. They wouldn't know for millennia to come, but a few among them would develop technology with tremendous, untold power they were never meant to know.

One man, small and misguided, but incredibly clever--

My attention was broken, drawn away from my world, and I unclenched my grip, letting the strings hang free. A flare, purple and hot, burned in the distance. What distance? This was my realm, and I created all things within it.

But I did not create that.

What was that?

I flew to it and saw the flare for what it was: a pulsing, oozing crack, spilling purple light and blood into the abyss around my world. That was...

The foundation. That was not supposed to happen. The machine had broken open, exposing the guts beyond the fabric, and the tear was growing rapidly. What could I do?

How could this be? The Network was gone. Was it not gone?

It was very much here, now.

There, in the dark, through the crack, I could feel it. It was still present, throbbing soft vibrations into the space between worlds. But the frequencies were unrecognizable and foreign; I wasn't feeling the Network I knew.

It was from somewhere else entirely. But if not here...

The other machine. There were two Networks. I never felt it before. Why was I feeling it now?



Emperador needed to know. This was an aberration in my cycle. It was not supposed to be.

Yet I was already late. The bin still needed forming, but it was already my time to go. The cycle was moving on, pulling at me.

As I resisted, I could feel Emperador's gaze upon me. I called to him and tried to signal. But he wouldn't listen. He turned away, and his gaze abandoned me.

He would be no help.

But I couldn't go.

Not yet.

If I didn't stop it, there would be nowhere left.

I had no choice. I flew into the crack, into the bright, burning light. The shackles around me melted and tore free, releasing me from my loop. I was sliding unabated, making my own chaotic ripples in the fabric behind me as I fell into the warm light. It felt exactly like I had forgotten it. I was free again.

I emerged from the energy, somewhere new entirely, sliding into form again, building into something new. My body grew around me, fresh, burning, bright, and far more than just a cat. I felt alive.

"Medy!"

Several voices rang up in unison. I glanced down and saw a broken, quaking basket of little Wilsons looking up at me. Some were dead. Some were dying. The rest were in a state of absolute panic.

The bin.

My bin. But it was gone.

I could see the churning boundaries of two realities coursing above me, flowing through a gaping hole that had once been the catch for my world. Oh, Wilson. What have you done?

There was no way forward. I spoke my thoughts aloud and addressed the many Wilsons below.

"I do not think I can stop this. The machines are being pulled inward here. All may be lost, Wilson. You... I remember."

I was drawn to one particular Wilson near the wall, who stood up straight and smiled despite his terrible burn and great pains. He was the one I had ushered home, to the cycle, to the warm end before dissolution and rebirth, yet he was here. Something had intervened.

"You were not meant to be here."

I pointed to him, and he glowed brightly before joining me. The Wilsons were enraged, screaming at me.

"TWENTY-THREE!"

"TWENTY-THREE! NO!"

"I am sorry, Wilson."

But I was responsible for him. That Wilson was mine.

The currents still convulsed through the rips above, spewing ancient, vitriolic blood that pulsed violently across the bin and out the other side. I couldn't tell how much time was left.

Time was hard to read.

What else could I do?

I attempted to hold back the waves, to stop the flow, but I couldn't even resist for a moment. I was nothing compared to the raw, unstoppable energies of two realities collapsing.

I couldn't do anything. Not directly. Not here.

What could I do?

I could take them all--everyone left alive above me. It could work.

Could it? No. I was still too small. Wilson was already a great burden within me. I couldn't take much more at all.

I had to truncate. Seal and remove the bin.

How?

*Philip. Find Philip. Please.*

What? I heard a voice echoing within--

*Please. Find him.*

Wilson? You're here...

Yes.

Of course you are. Why find him? I must seal the bin.

*When we met last, he found me, and you took us, you moved us somewhere. He did not go with me.*

Oh, yes. I am sorry, Wilson. My throw was weak. He may be lost.



*Please find him. He saved my life, Medy. And I'm not sure if you remember, but he's done the same for you before.*

I cannot, Wilson. The bin...

*Please. He would do it for you.*

I can't

really, I am not able

I

cannot

I...

*Please.*

"I will try."





**VRCmDB-vm01-Exp\_20320318.rut**

```
#####  
#####  
# WELCOME TO THE VRCmDB FLUX DISTRO CLI  
#####  
#####  
# WARNING: Value indication of higher than normal draw from multiple  
# redundancy solutions :  
# Bandwidth indication is higher than normal!!  
# Power indication is higher than normal!!  
# Thermal indication is higher than normal!!  
# 165482074 device alarm events!!  
# 64789 device CRITICAL events!!  
# Multiple processes are destabilized and require refreshing!!  
# // Enter command to continue.  
# // Note: Ctrl+H for HELP  
# sh diag ei_glo  
# //  
# enterprise_infrastructure_global.< diagnostic in progress...  
# ...localcheck...GOOD!  
# ...globalcheck...  
# Results in 34 seconds :  
NH.ZA: Down NH.BC: Down NH.BJ: Down NH.CA: Down NH.DA: Down  
NH.ZB: Down NH.BD: Down NH.BK: Down NH.CB: Down NH.DB: Down  
NH.ZC: Down NH.BE: Down NH.BL: Down NH.CC: Down NH.DC: Down  
NH.ZZ: Down NH.BF: Down NH.BM: Down NH.CD: Down NH.DE: Down  
NH.AA: Up NH.BG: Down NH.BN: Down NH.CE: Down NH.DF: Down  
NH.AB: Down NH.BH: Down NH.BO: Down NH.CF: Down NH.DG: Down  
NH.AC: Down NH.BI: Down NH.BP: Down NH.CG: Down NH.DH: Down  
# //  
# in NH.AA st shutd  
# ...shutdown process bundle 3...  
# ...shutdown process bundle 2...  
# ...shutdown process bundle 1...
```





"That's your new name."

Eoghan strode toward me, his flesh melding and slumping off him in bags. His body, the clone of me, melted and ran away, and he emerged as himself in a shimmering green light, but different than I had ever seen him.

His flesh was slick, without wrinkles or lines or scars, and his hair was full and thick and black like tar. He was so young. The sight struck me as odd, though I didn't know why.

"You'll get used to it, Vince."

"No. No! I'm not agreeing. I didn't agree. I'd rather be dead and--I don't even... why am I still here? I'm not doing it."

I had forgotten... I could just leave. The thought flushed me with determination. My body was heavy, but I pushed up from the floor, reclaimed shaky control over my legs, and aimed for the far wall.

"This isn't that kind of offer, bud. Notice I didn't say 'agreement.' This is not a negotiation. You are doing it. You have no choice."

Eoghan kept barking as I strolled across the diner, gaining confidence with every step. He could say whatever he wanted. It wouldn't change that I was walking into the wall, and I was leaving.

"Goodbye, Eoghan."

I took a step into the wall. Instead of black, I was met with an immediate splash of white, red, pain crashing across my entire body, and then I was tumbling to the floor. I couldn't open my eyes.

"Like I was telling you."

He was above me. I could feel his hot breath.

"You don't have a choice. You thought I didn't know? How do you think I found you? You're way too useful to let go of, pal. You're mine now."

I heard jingling, and then it was

heard

jingling

and

then

it  
was  
all,  
everything,  
entirely  
different.

I was home. At the sink, looking out the big open

I was at work. At my desk, bored stiff over a report on

I was in Wilson's chaism. Under cherry trees raining pink blossoms as Wilson walked by, and their branches seemed to sway in his wake, always pointing in his direction

I was in the dark. In the out, staring at the behemoth corpse of something ancient below me, frozen in place as its eyes opened, and words dripped into my mind

"Two lives down."

Two lives? Eoghan said two. He didn't make any sense.

It was way more than two.

I was in a river, swirling from top to bottom, carrying rocks and sand

I was in a syringe, and the pressure was holding me tight, pressing me down, and then I was losing myself in a powerful stream, flowing out

in


into something hard, rubbery, thick, and full of small pieces. My head pounded as I flowed down the cracks and fissures and open pores, spilling in and filling it all up. I was screaming. Oh, fucking--

What? I had a head? I fell to the ground, clutching my head, roaring uncontrollably. The pain was not...

I couldn't tolerate the pain. My hands were grasping at my skull. Why? What was--

I felt another thing, a drain inside me, and the pain began flowing into it. As it did, I was flooded with memories I never experienced. Birth, life, my mother, my sister, my friends--Aodhan, and Rachel, and My. Oh, My. They were dissipating, leaving, and with them I felt something else. Someone.





I understood what Eoghan meant as the pain receded entirely, as I was able to gasp for air again. He put me inside Vincent's body with Vincent still present. I was feeling Vincent die.

Oh, Vincent.

I'm sorry.

**Vincent!**

Vincent writhed on the floor of the break room, clutching his chest, gasping and choking intensely with each broken inhale. I fell to his side and checked his pulse--elevated heart rate, very high temperature. He was soaked with sweat and obviously in terrible pain.

"Vince, what's wrong, buddy? Can you sit up? Where's the pain?"

I was panting almost as hard as him.

"Oh... god." He whimpered.

Was he crying?

"I'm so sorry, My."

He looked at me with eyes I had never met.

"Vincent is dead."



The words hung in the air. Dead? You're right here. Dead? No, I'm talking to you. Dead? You can't be dead. I wanted to say anything, but I said nothing.

His cadence was so wrong, I almost believed him.


My breath caught in my throat.

I didn't

know

what

to



"Vince, hey." Aodhan crouched beside me. "You're not dead, bud. You're right here. We're talking to you."

"Not me. Vincent. I--I'm... not... FUCK! Fucking EOGHAN!"

His voice grew loud and full of anger, fiercely echoing off the break room walls.

"I'll fucking KILL him. I don't know how, but I will. And that's a promise, you rat bastard. YOU SACK OF SHIT! Can you hear me? That's a fucking promise."

Aodhan looked at me and frowned, "What'd I say?"

"W-who, Vince?" I asked. "Who did what? Help me out here, buddy."

"I... oh. Man. I'm sorry. You're not going to believe me. No one will."

A tear burgeoned and dripped down my cheek. Something was very wrong with Vincent. I steadied myself and cleared my throat.

"Remember Gulliver and the hanged kids? You didn't think I'd believe that either. Come on, Vince. Try me. Please."

He sat up and crossed his legs. The fear and terror were gone, replaced with deep, determined lines along his brow.

"I--I am not Vincent. My name is Philip Smith and I'm... I shouldn't be here. Eoghan made... I... there's this, ah... fuck, man. It's hard to put into words. This guy, Eoghan, he can... I don't know, I don't... He did this. To Vincent. To me. He put me here."

We sat in silence.

"Uh... what?" Aodhan murmured to me.

"I'm going to get him back."

Vincent--or was he Philip?--stood, now hardened with determination. His voice grew bold and deep.

"You don't know me. My word isn't worth a lot, but I promise you, I'm going to get him back."



**a second pseudo-metempsychosis**

I found it.

The hospital doors dangled from their hinges, framing the inside like a painting; a rain of dust swirled in golden beams that poked through the tattered ceiling and cast the broken entryway in gold and orange.

Dr. Payne's home was destroyed.

It was abandoned. Crumbling and emptied.

My throat burned. I was hoping everybody made it. I was hoping they found their way back. I was hoping I wouldn't be alone.

But staring into the dingy hospital lobby, the reality became very clear.

Life was gone again, but for everyone this time. A heavy wind threw dust up in a tall, swirling cloud. I watched it cross the lawn and crash against the ruined wall of the hospital. It broke apart and rained to the ground.

I was alone.

"Yeow."

No. Almost alone.

Frog glared at me with a half squint, like always, and scrunched his nose.

"Hey, buddy. Little Frog."

The burning in my throat was scalding, forming a hot knot--

"Aakow."

I choked a laugh at his gravelly meow.

He butted his head into my hand and purred in little crackles, a bit like bacon sizzling in a skillet. His face was gross, and he smeared drool all over my fingers, but I smiled so wide it almost hurt. I was thankful for him.

"Wanna go inside?"

"Mrro."

He hopped up the steps and waddled through the broken doors, so I wiped my hand on my pants and followed.

The far end of the lobby was split open and collapsed, exposing the guts of the hospital. This room wouldn't stop any wind or weather. If the whole place was like this, it wouldn't be safe. I'd have to keep looking. But maybe...

"Yow."

Frog was already down the hall, calling back to me.



"Slow down. It could be dangerous, dummy."

"Ow." He murmured.

The big reception desk was replaced by a smashed pile of broken beams and fallen ceiling. I curved around the mound, careful not to step on the exposed wires, and followed Frog into the dorm hall. He sauntered to the end and plopped down at the only door on both hinges. The number was familiar.

225. It was my room.

"Wow. How'd you know?"

"Mrr."

He licked the air and slapped a paw at his cheek, catching and getting stuck in his matted fur.

I gripped the heavy metal knob. It was cold, but it was nice. The knob turned and clicked, and--my room. Light flowed in from the tiny square window above my bed, slicing a bright orange line against the dim blue of my room. My desk was still against the wall with my typewriter and lamp. It was almost exactly the same, except for a new ceiling tile that had fallen and broke on the floor.

My home.

I crossed the thick rug and stepped over the broken tile, dropped my bag by the desk, and flopped down to the bed like I had done so many times before. It groaned slightly under my weight. The blanket was a bit dusty, but it smelled the same. I was finally home, after so much, and so long.

I was feeling... something. A feeling. Like when I was eating salisbury steak and learning about the Ottoman Turks. What was I feeling?

Relief. I was awash with relief. But it was a kind I had never felt before. My life--being alone, surviving even though I didn't deserve it, and the finality and the dread behind every waking minute since Dr. Payne died... it felt a little further away.

Because I was home. And it was mine.

Frog jumped up and joined me on the bed, shakily stretching his back legs before curling in my armpit. And I curled up too, tugging the blanket from under me and pulling it around us. It was soft and warm, and so nice...

and

then



A crack woke me. It was dark. I held my breath. That sound... was it real? A dream? My shadowed, blurry room shook into focus--the door was open from when I came in, but the room was empty. Frog was standing at the head of the bed, staring up at the window, chittering softly.

The walls flashed white and the crack came again, popping and reverberating sharply. A thunderstorm. My chest loosened and released in a long sigh.

I felt a stupid grin spreading on my face. It was storming, but I was dry, and warm, and comfortable. I was cheating.

After another flash and rugged clap, the rain started softly patting the frame, exactly like I remembered it, and a new metallic tinkling noise rang out from somewhere above.

I scratched Frog's ears and eased back down into bed, lulled by the quiet orchestra of tinkling and tapping, now comforted by the occasional dull crack. He purred softly, and we just laid there, enjoying the peace

until



I opened my eyes to the stark, yellow light of early morning, and my heart fluttered. It was still the same. Not a dream. I was home. About the only thing missing was the dumb loud bird that used to sit outside my window.

My stomach growled. Frog was already gone, probably out hunting for his breakfast. I envied the variety in his diet.

My breakfast was in my pack, on the floor by the desk. The bed creaked as I leaned off and pulled the bag over. It was still a bit damp from the pond two days back, which meant my rice was definitely ruined, but the sealed bars would probably be fine. I unzipped the big pouch, pulled the last few bars out, and tossed them on the bed.

One chocolate oatmeal, a peanut butter, two cranberry grapes, which I disliked, and three lemon bars, which I liked quite a lot.

It was time. Maybe I was celebrating, or just giving a little gift to myself. It didn't matter. I deserved it. I grabbed a lemon bar and ripped the plastic top, blossoming the sweet aromas of bright citrus and vanilla cake. I breathed deep and took a small bite.

After slogging through nothing but chocolate oatmeal and cranberry grape for three weeks, the lemon was sharp and acidic, but the vanilla quickly washed behind, mellowing the burn. I lifted the steel bottle from my pouch, uncapped it, and took a big gulp, and then two much larger bites of the bar. It was sweet, dense, and chewy. I couldn't remember ever tasting food so sweet.

I pushed up from the bed, wobbly on a sleepy leg, and stretched up straight. My back was sore, and my legs felt like they were bruised all over. I wanted to lay back down, rest, take the day off, but I had to know what was left at the hospital. Maybe there were cans of food, or water, or... I didn't know what else I needed. I glanced down at the typewriter. Oh.

Maybe there were ribbons.



good blood

Philip's body rolled up like a projector screen, compressed into a tight sphere, and fell to the floor with a heavy clunk. It rolled a bit and then vanished with a pop. Never seen anything like it.

Didn't expect it to work like that. Hell of a sight.

I'd have to go check in--make sure he fit in okay. I wanted my boy to readjust well. Not every day you have to change realities.

But not yet. Too much to do.

Philip's words rattled around in my mind.

He'll never be dead. Not for real.

Cute. But easy to prove wrong.

I just had to find him. That was next.

How? I couldn't find him directly. He was gone. Hidden, maybe.

Who else? Who was left? The woman died. Killed the old man. Philip's in a box. Who else?

Harold. Maybe he was still kicking somewhere. Maybe he could help me.

Regardless, one way or another, I would find him. He would regret ever existing. He would regret life itself.

But before I could gorge on all that steak and potatoes, I had some work to do. I had to deal with some vegetables.

I turned to the mountains, to the ring, and lifted the iron key. Death--control over old flesh. I turned it, and a small desk plopped before me holding a typewriter and a dim banker's lamp.

The wooden slat honked and screeched as I dragged it to the desk and clunked it down. I didn't need a key for this one, but I hadn't used a typewriter in ages. I cracked my knuckles and laid my fingers on the keys.

I'd have to trick him. Draw him out like a hungry roach. The guy was dumb as hell, so that was going to be easy. But I had to use finesse.

I began to type.

Hey, you ever, like, fall asleep for a couple years? Just accidentally left the dial turning, maybe? Stepped on an already-dead bug, got framed, and did some hard time? That kind of thing?

I'm going to sound dramatic with this, but I understand all that better than you do...

greetings



I knew more than I had ever known, saw farther than any eye, and felt the bonds of time beyond any simple corporeal understanding.

Of all the endless paths my life could take, I never would've imagined this. I was part of something different--a thing far more complex, denying comprehension itself. It was godly, unique from any earthly sensation, and altogether I was overcome with discomfort. No one should feel... this. It was uncouth.

Inhuman.

We flew, through dark, and light blue, and dark again, moving so quickly I couldn't see with any clarity, but I knew the distances were great, reaching spans, larger than any space I had ever conceived, and as we soared through absolute darkness, I felt us turn and lift and then stop abruptly, at an instant, eliciting no reaction to the shift in momentum. While we traveled, Medy thought intently, and I felt bricks tumbling and sliding into place somewhere very far away. Yet seconds later we were already there, though it could've been hours and the difference would've been the same to me, because I knew the truth.

Energy coursed around us in white, smoking spirals as Medy lowered and touched down in this new place. Tight, constricting stone passageways stretched infinitely in every direction, and above, clouds churned in deep greens and yellows. We were in the stone labyrinth again, and I finally knew the place for what it was: Medy's chaasm. She remade it.

I felt a rush of excitement as she compressed me and squeezed forward, and then I fell, a blade tumbling from a sheath. Gradually, Medy's grand truths began boxing up and sliding away from me as I clustered into place, compounding into flesh and bone, steadily piling up, constructing myself again. My mind quickly failed to grasp what those truths had been at all; concepts I had just known and felt intimately were suddenly foreign and abstract.

I dropped to my knees, promptly knocked into a state of disbelief, splattering pain up my right side. That was my leg. It was my body again, bearing all the burns and soreness and age to prove it.

I watched Medy's glowing form against the twisting green sky, unable to look away. I hadn't really seen her until now.

She appeared nearly identical to my Medy, save her stark white hair and overall lack of definition, though she still wore the same thick, braided tail that curled around her neck and rested on her shoulder. Her skin glowed faintly, alternating between white and blue, emanating a soft, pulsing aura.

I couldn't help but smile.

She was beautiful.

But her being was terrible.

I shuddered, "H-how do you live like this?"

"Differently." Her voice was deep, but hollow and cold. "Wilson, you must know, about Philip... I do not think I am able to find him."

"You're sure?"

"I believe I am. He always sang in his voice, but I haven't heard his song since. And I cannot hear it now. If he were--"

She trailed off and cocked her head.

"No. I do hear it. Now. Faintly. Through the bin. I hear it."

"The bin? How? He wasn't there."

"I am hearing through, from the other side of the crack. He is within the other machine."

The other machine. Of course he was there. That was so perfectly Philip.

And it reminded me--I could finally ask her.

"And what exactly is that? A machine. I don't quite--I don't understand."

"It is a construction from all layers of fabric woven into one. The blood, the flesh, the whist, and the resonance, all in bonding."

She trailed away again. Her answers only brought more questions. I almost asked another, but thought better of it. It would take too long. And I probably wouldn't understand anyway.

Did I need to understand? I never really stopped to ask.

I lived one way: resolutely, desperately seeking understanding without question or hesitation. But maybe... maybe I didn't need to understand.

Maybe it didn't matter either way. It wouldn't get us any closer to Philip.

"You're hearing this other machine through the bin--well, can we travel there? Through the bin, I mean?"

"Yes. But it may not matter. We may be out of time."

I pushed up on a rough knee and faced her, wincing at the burn along my side.

"But we have to try."

"I have to. You are not able to try."

I felt my cheeks redden, "Ah, yes. Correct. I can't do anything myself. I apologize, I do not mean to speak for you, to seem as if... I know my ask is perhaps impossible, Medy. But if he's still out there, and I do nothing for him... I understand the world is probably ending, but I just want to see my friend."

Her expression didn't change, but her tone softened.

"I am sorry. You care for him."

"I care for you too. And I assumed that feeling was mutual, and that you were still... but, well, faulty pretenses, I suppose. You're not like us anymore, and I was wrong to think that."

She lowered her gaze.

"We missed you, Medy. Terribly. Philip took it hard. The day of your funeral, we went to a little burger shack on the edge of town, and he broke down crying in the parking lot. We sat cross-legged on the curb all night, just going on and on about you the whole time. Telling stories, making jokes, sharing our little memories, until the sun went down and then started coming up again.

"When we got to the patty melt story and how smug you were, he laughed so hard he cried again. He loved you, Medy. And he still does, wherever he is. And I do too. And I think you remember that. Why else would you have taken me?"

She met my eyes.

"I will help you. Come."

Her hand pointed to me,

and like last time, I was filled with light and heat and fire, and I became fluid, lifting into her, breaking the bonded molding and opening into thousands of sensations and feelings, learning the intense, endless truths of the universe,

and knew more than I had ever known, saw farther than any eye, and felt the bonds of time beyond any simple corporeal understanding, yet again.



**asset allocation**



A bang, a slam, a gun firing,  
a volcano erupting, a bomb triggering,  
lightning out the window with soft taps of rain,  
no,

an eruption of sound and light blasted through the cave like a spear tearing the air itself, spewing heavy red mist in its wake.

It looked like... a rip?

Bright, wavering blue coursed free and pooled in a thick, red liquid on the stone.

Jacob. His face flashed in my mind, like every other morning we had been apart.

Two years. Two, god-awful, painful years without him.

My thumb found the power button on my belt and I jolted up, stumbled a few feet, and barely grabbed my bag without tumbling over. The rip was pulsing loudly, shearing ahead and growing wider. I quickly ducked under and slid through the cave mouth, out into sunlight, and got a better look: it was a vibrant beam of energy in a ripped, crooked line, hovering and shifting in the air, pulsing in an uneven rhythm.

New bullshit, but same old. I wished I could go back to the gates. I wished I could visit him. But I would never make it back--not after last time. It was too risky. Hopefully they left him alone. Hopefully he was--

I sighed. I had to stop.

Can't think about this. Can't think about him.

Not now.

Just go.

I limped away from the cave into a small ditch, stepping around a new soreness in my knee. My life in the afterlife had seen me go from paralysis to knee pain--not exactly normal progression.

But it was fine. I could walk most of the time, for one. And I had knee pain, which was neat, given the paralysis.

The rip was growing, piercing toward me in a shaking, slithering stream, a blue snake that widened in the tail tremendously, completely engulfing the cave I had slept in. It wasn't going to stop; I had to move to avoid the flowing red goo.

And then junk was flooding in with the muck--computers, papers, machines and fans and pipes and wiring, an ensemble of Institute gear and garbage, probably.

And people--three very similar looking scientist-type guys. Institute workers, maybe, fell from the rip, hitting the ground hard and rolling. Two of them were quickly on their feet again, clambering to escape the spreading pool of goo, but the last man slumped over, drifting down into the muck.

I had been transfixed, standing idle like an idiot, and quickly rushed to pull the man from the muck. A goo-slick hand grabbed my shoulder and yanked me back, smearing sludge on my shirt. It was one of the other men, soaked red with the liquid.

"No! Don't! He's dead. Don't touch the waste."

He nodded to the piling mass of red goo.

It pooled in thick, layered mounds like pudding or heavy custard. I took a step back. The man on the ground was an exact copy of the man before me, who was an exact copy of the man standing across the pond of rippling goo.

They were all the same man. Triplets? Clones?

And something about him looked familiar.

The rip was getting louder--and it was really moaning now; I had to yell over its odd squeaks and honks.

"Wh--what the hell is this? Are you okay?"

He spoke calmly as he wrung the goo from his jacket, "Ah, yes, I think I am. Didn't expect it, to be honest. Engine malfunction--real bad mess. Terribly sad about Seventeen. Hey, come back, let's step away from the fracture. Eight, are you alright?"

Eight gave a thumbs up but didn't take his eyes off the rip. Their calm demeanor was infectious. It was like the professor finally arrived and class could begin.

"Good. Come back, over here."

He ushered me a couple dozen feet back from the spilling sludge, and Eight trotted around the edge to join us. Their clothes were soaked with the red goo, swathing us in a smell bubble of sulfur and cat piss.

"Who are you guys, anyway? Are you twins?"

"No, not twins. My name is Wilson. And he's also Wilson. I'm Wilson Six, to be exact. He's Eight. Can't talk."

Wilson Eight nodded and waved.

Wilson. Wilson. Wilson?

Why did I know the name? The face?

Where did I know him from? How?

"Have... we met, Wilson?"

"No. I'm afraid not. You recognize him, Eight?"

Eight shook his head absently, primarily focused on dunking a vial into the goo.

But that wasn't true. I knew him. I...

A door opened, or something heavy moved out of the way, or a piece clicked into place, and clarity came to me. This man saved my life. Wilson. THE Wilson.

"Wilson! I remember you! I'm Max. You, uh, you picked me up in a taxi and paid for my medical bills, way back when. I was paralyzed. That was--god, twenty years ago? Thirty? Remember that?"

"It's complicated, Max. No. I don't. But it's very nice to meet you. To be precise, we're not the same Wilson you met--well, I'm sure we are the same man, just neither of us is the man that met you. Though I'm glad that other Wilson helped you. Bet that was Twenty-Three, huh Eight?"

Eight gave a grinning nod as he plugged the goo vial and slid it into his pocket.

"Anyway, that fracture right there is a functional borehole through reality as we know it, so do your best to stay back, Mister, ahh, what was it, again?"

"Max. You just fell out of that functional borehole. How do I know you're not a reality-ending-entity yourself?"

Six's eyes widened in surprise, and he raised an eyebrow at Eight, almost like he hadn't considered it himself. The joke went way over his head.

"I guess you can't be sure, Max. Keep that line of questioning open. Follow that thread, if you can. I'm interested myself."

He was cloyingly logic-oriented, just like Jacob. Although I remembered him, I realized I didn't know much about Wilson at all.

"Will do. So, is uh, falling out of a hole in the sky all you had planned? Or what's next for the Wilsons?"

"Hasn't been a structured plan kind of day. Not sure. Didn't exactly expect to survive falling through a borehole in reality. What's on the agenda, Eight?"

Eight shrugged.

**it gets worse before it gets worse**



Walden stood from the table and clasped his hands together, lost in thought.

"And you can't remember anything else?" Aodhan was understandably skeptical.

Vincent frowned, "I... no. I'm not sure of anything. None of it makes any sense."

No--Philip frowned. I couldn't get used to it. He was Vincent, but he wasn't.

Aodhan gave a breathy chuckle.

"How can we trust you? I mean, what are we even supposed to make of this?"

Walden's trance broke and he glanced over his knuckle, first at Aodhan, and then to Vinc--Philip.

"We take it as a warning. Aodhan's on the right track, though. You're sure there's nothing else you can tell us?"

"I can barely remember anything from... oh, Yubu! I was... well, it wasn't... this is hard to put into words, really. And I don't even know how the hell I ended up in that diner. It doesn't make sense. Eoghan did it, obviously. But why? None of it makes any fucking sense!"

Philip was thinking out loud. I gathered he did that quite frequently, which was a stark contrast to Vincent's more methodical, thought-out demeanor. The body was Vincent's, but this man was very clearly someone else, and I was more convinced of that every time he spoke.

He looked up at the wall, to our corkboard.

"Virtual corporeality combine. The VCC. That's you all?"

Walden nodded, "Yes. We're a subsidiary of the Foundation. But can we--"

"The Found--oh, what?" Philip cut in. "It's all so close. VCC, VRC. Foundation, Institute. My, Medy. Walden, Wilson. Why is it so close? What is this?"

Walden popped his knuckles and sat back down, sliding his arms across the table in a pleading gesture. I could tell he was getting irritated.

"Philip, please help me here. I need to understand what's happening. We're experiencing full node destabilization across all sites. Over 90% of chaum inhabitants are unable to eject or are otherwise unaccounted for. My and Aodhan just personally witnessed a chaum implosion this afternoon, and there are likely many more occurring as we speak. You just happened to inhabit my lead mentalist's brain on the same day all that took place. Am I expected to believe it's just coincidence?"

"No, it's not a coinci--wait, mentalist? You guys are mentalists?"

Walden nodded, unamused.

"Mentalists. Huh. Anyway, no. It's not a coincidence. Eoghan put me here, so he probably--"

Philip was cut short by a rolling plethora of thumps, like a horse falling against the wall, followed by an explosion of glass and scattering office debris. Several tiles clattered from the ceiling in the hall.

"Four times." A whimpering voice cut the air. "They rewrote it four times. And it still didn't work."

Several dozen strands of pink stuff stretched through the doorway, reaching, feeling the air like worms. The viscous, flowing movement reminded me of taffy in a mixer.

"What in--" Walden stood.

We all followed suit, standing in unison.

The thumps returned, sliding from the hall, and a blobby shadow darkened the doorway. And then a pink mass tromped into the light.

A big pink Gumby-thing. It was about my height, but as wide as a fridge, with dozens of pink tendrils protruding from its torso, waving and wiggling in the air, and a lit cigarette hanging from a thin, gash-like mouth up near the top.

"What, uh--what the hell? Walden?"

Walden seemed transfixed, intensely scrutinizing the thing.

"This appears to be some kind of Net entity, and it's currently blocking our only exit. Not a lot of time for a hypothesis here, but... well, maybe we can communicate with it. What did it say? Four times. I'll ask. Should I?"

I wasn't sure.

"Yeah." Aodhan chimed in. "Might as well."

"Alright. First time for everything. Here--"

"Hey, wait. I got it."

Philip patted Walden on the shoulder and strolled across the break room, waving to the pink thing. Walden inhaled sharply, obviously on edge, and probably shocked by Philip's confidence. I was too. He was something else.

"Hey! What's up?"

"Hello." The pink thing spoke in a whimpering, childlike voice. "I'm looking for the exit. Four times."

"Oh yeah, we are too. Nice to meet you. I'm Philip. That's My, Aodhan, and Walden."

It felt like he was introducing us to his long-lost friend.

The thing bowed stiffly, going as low as its wide body would allow, "I am Getterling, but everyone just calls me gum guy. Four times. You can call me that. Gum guy. They wr--rewrote it four times."

"Sounds good, gum guy. How'd you get here, anyway?"

"That room."

Gum guy's tendrils all pointed in one direction, toward the office next door to us.

"Oh. Nice. Well, the exit has got to be around here somewhere. What say we all split up and look around? I'll head down this hall, and you check down that way. Meet back here in ten?"

"Ten. Four times. Ten what?"

"Hm. We'll just meet back here... when we finish looking. Easy. Right?"

"Right. Four--ten--four times. Easy. I'll go look."

It slumped away, toward the hall where Philip pointed, and he swiveled back to us with a big grin, holding two thumbs up.

"Well? Nice? Right?"

I felt a smile on my face.

"Huh. Good work." Aodhan breathed.

"Yes." Walden shook his head. "But now I fear he's blocking our path in a different location. This could have just prolonged our issue, Philip. We need to consult each other. We need to operate as a team. What if he comes back?"

"Then, like I said, he'll meet me back here and tell me if he found an exit, Walden. You need to calm down. This is clearly a chausmic organism with some minor corruption. And it seems fine. Corrupted, but not malignant."

Philip leaned into the hall, peering into the office gum guy came from.

"And that is a rip in reality. Poor guy just fell out of gum land or wherever the hell and landed in your office. He's fine. We're fine, man."

"A--what?" Walden rushed forward and leaned into the hall.

"Yeah, it's like, a rip, right? Looks like a rip to me."

"Yes. And it's leaking."



pen pal

Bright, flaring orange beams burst through the little window above my bed, coloring my room with a bold sunset. I sat up, scratched Frog's ear, only slightly rousing him for a moment, and kicked my legs off the bed.

The smell of cooked squirrel bits still hung on the air from the warm plate in the corner. It was nice. Like waking up to the smell of meatballs.

I grabbed a bit of squirrel and tossed it in my mouth.

It was still juicy and tender, and bright with lemon pepper, mostly since that was the only seasoning I could find.

As I stretched, I noticed a page tucked in the typewriter with a few paragraphs typed up. I must've written it before bed.

I forgot. But that was odd. How did I forget?

I picked up the page.



Hey, you ever, like, fall asleep for a couple years? Just accidentally left the dial turning, maybe? Stepped on an already-dead bug, got framed, and did some hard time? That kind of thing?

I'm going to sound dramatic with this, but I understand all that better than you do. It's my whole life. I've been asleep for so long, so many times. We all have in different ways.

But I'm awake now. I learned that in place of one, another will suffer. I learned that protein comes from many sources. I learned how to play Jenga. And you're not very good at it.

You thought you were hidden, but I learned your name, Joseph, and I can hear your voice.

*"...shortly into what could only be called a kind of REPLACEMENT FATIGUE the threads began to unwind..."*

Wonder what it means?

I did not write that.

I couldn't move. I felt like my heart froze, but somewhere behind the numbness, it was palpitating rapidly.

Had someone entered while I slept? I wasn't asleep long. And the typewriter was loud. I would've... or... could I have slept through it? Even now I felt stiff and achy from chasing the squirrel. Maybe I did.

I had to check. The door was still shut and locked. But maybe someone picked it. I knew people could pick locks, though I had no idea how.

But why would someone go to these lengths?

I unlatched the door and peered into the hall. It was empty, and down at the end, the doors were still sealed up like I left them, with the winding rubber strip thing wrapped up in the handles.

No one. Nothing. How?

Who?

Did it matter?

Either way, I had to respond. Did I?

Somehow, someone was speaking to me--directly to me, going so far as to call me by name. They knew me. A person. Someone else.

I had to.

The orange light faded to purple, tilting my room into darkness. I had to get up early to try and find more fishing wire, but this was more important. Maybe I was losing my mind, writing to myself in a paranoid psychosis. Could that happen?

I sat at the desk and fed a new page into the typewriter, positioning the head at the top, and began to type.

I never know what the words mean or how they all fit together. I sing, but cannot hear music. It's happenstance that I understand the language at all. My mind is less a catalyst, and more a conduit--I facilitate the passthrough of a signal, of old data on a dead drive, on a failing system.

That system is all chaos. It exists at maximum entropy. I iterate this material based on recognizing patterns and by listening to the calling memories in my mind. I have no grand method to derive understanding, I simply transcribe what the memories tell me.

As for what your phrase means, I cannot tell you. I don't think I've consigned it, at least not yet, and even if I had, I would not know the meaning.

But it seems like something is being replaced.

When it was done, I didn't even pull the page out. I crawled into bed, careful not to disturb Frog's sleep.

He needed it.

I scratched his ears, listening to his soft, weak purr. And

then

I

I woke again to a dull crack and the pattering of rain on the window. Rain again.

Frog was still curled up at the foot of the bed, breathing slow and heavy, wheezing every so often. I felt his nose, but it was still cold and dry. Four days. He had been sick for four days, but he wasn't getting any better.

I patted him, ran my hand along his back and over his tail like he liked, and gave him a kiss on his head.

I had to think about something else.

My mind immediately jumped to the typewriter. I slid from the bed and ran to the desk.

But it was still holding the same page. I stared at my words.

***“But it seems like something is being replaced.”***

Still no response. It had been my imagination. I wrote it. I must have.

Because if not, then how?

I curled back up on the bed, nuzzled into the blanket, and wrapped my arms around Frog. He roused a bit, but nestled his head into my shoulder.

How? I didn't write it. I knew that. I knew. I tried not to think of it, and soon I began to drift again,

off

into



Soft, crackling thunder woke me. My room was dim blue, and Frog still slept by my feet, where he had been all day. Worry crept in. I didn't have to look to know his food bowl was still full.

He might be fine. It could be a bad cold.

But if he wasn't eating...

No. He could still make it.

I glanced at the typewriter and nearly fell from the bed.

There was a new page. My chair was still across the room, tucked under the handle, securing the door. No one came in.

I knew it. It was real. I wasn't crazy at all.

I held my breath to steady my shaking hands as I read the page.

**No shit.**

**I knew you were dumb, but I figured rehab would help with that, at least a little--I mean, it couldn't make you any worse, right? Obviously, that was just wishful thinking on my part. You gained one ounce of literacy and then went full Goof Troop on me. Of course you know what it all means. The memories are in your mind. You're not connected to anything. You're not a conduit. Your brain is a god damned filing cabinet, bud.**

**I wish I would've found you first. Could've saved myself a few problems. Maybe could've helped you, too. Probably wouldn't have, but still.**

**What'd Payne do--teach you with Kafka and Danielewski for textbooks? You sound like a fuckin cheeseball.**

**"I sing, but cannot hear the music."**

**My god! Grow up a little, Joey. The real world is more than just hacky writing and poor word choice. You remember the real world? It's all that stuff you ran away from. Remember? You should. You wrote it all down. Remember leaving your friends to die?**

**Remember?**

The letter was cold and angry.

I steadied the paper and read through it again, trying not to dwell when I got to that last bit. This person knew so much about me. How?

Who could it be? Who even knew me?

It didn't seem like they really wanted to talk to me. Why do it, then?

Should I even write back?

I repositioned the head and leaned back in my chair, focusing on my breathing.  
In.

What could I gain?

Out.

I could learn something, maybe. But... maybe not.

In.

Well, what could I lose?

Out.

I began to type.

**You pretend to be like me, but you're like them.**

**Who are you?**

**Why do you know me?**

**How?**

I leaned back and eyed my work. It was all I could think of saying.

Frog was still half covered by the blanket, breathing in jerky snores. There were only a few hours of sunlight left, but... I couldn't. I...

I crawled into bed. He didn't wake up as I curled around him and pulled him close.

I kissed his head, and he purred softly.

And

we

fell



I limped through the hospital door. My feet were heavy and hard to lift, like I was covered in mud. But I wasn't.

I trudged around the big broken pile of wood. It didn't feel real.

Dim light from my desk lamp spread from my open room and up the hall, spilling into the lobby. I pushed through the bright soreness in my forearms and knees, toward my room.

A loud clatter echoed from below. I stopped and glanced down; my shovel had fallen to the floor, spilling dirt and muck.

But it didn't matter. I left it and kept on.

I entered my room, crossed to my bed, and flopped down face-first.

What was the point?

I wanted to cry, but nothing came out. I was numb. Worse than numb.

I flopped onto my side and stared at Frog's bowl on the floor, still full from last week.

And then I saw the paper.

That stupid, worthless paper on the stupid, worthless typewriter.

I didn't care. I didn't want to read it.

But...

No. I didn't want to.

But it was there.

And this was it.

This.

Me.

Forever.

And it was there.

I... I was going to have to read it eventually.

I stood and moved to the desk.

**I'm like them? Joey, baby, I am them. I'm every them you've ever heard of and then some.**

**We've crossed paths before, way back when. We were both different people, but I remember, so I know you can too. Maybe you need some help with that?**

**Either way, I didn't like you then, and I don't think you even knew I existed at the time, but I kind of like who you are now. As compared to everyone else, at least. And only just a little, teeny bit.**

**You're not boring, anyway.**

**Listen, your whole thing is wrapping up, the world's ending for real this time, and you're going to have to face that music you can't hear. I've gained an appreciation for your value, and so I figure you've earned yourself an olive branch. It's the least I could do, really. And the most.**

**I'll put this in terms your used-up baby bean can comprehend:**

**Your bed is rotting out, and the bunk above is slowly crushing you. The music is deafening. If you can't hear it, you'll need an interpreter.**

**Just tell me where you are.**

**Oh, and if anyone else out there is still tuned in, don't you dare touch that dial! Joseph is hard at work scribbling away, so rest easy.**

**Replacement Fatigue is coming.**

Oh.

Of course. Yes.

I knew.

I knew who it was. And he was toying with me.

He was trying to hurt me.

But I didn't care. I almost laughed. It didn't matter.

I didn't even think--I just started typing.

Oh.

It's

That's

I understand.

You're right. I do know.

Eoghan. You're Eoghan. Or not anymore. Are you?

It doesn't matter. You're you.

The same you, after so long. How is that fair? Why do you get to stay you? You don't deserve it. Or maybe you do.

Maybe you deserve it more than anyone else.

You think the world is ending?

No. It ended a long time ago, almost as it began.

Do you know where I am?

No. You do not. I am alone. I live in the ruins of my old school with half a barrel of gas, and when that's gone, the lights are gone, and then I'm gone too.

I am not being slowly crushed, I am crushed already.

The world is over, Eoghan. You're late.

And it doesn't really matter to me anymore.

Frog died today.

He was my cat, since... I don't know when. He's been sick for weeks. I knew it was coming, but even when he couldn't really walk anymore, part of me was still hoping he'd get better. He didn't.

I had to dig him a grave this morning. My arms were still sore from pushing the big rock across the yard yesterday, but I had to do that to make shade for him, just like I had to do this.

I had to dig the hole, but I didn't have a coffin for him, so when it was deep enough I put him down in there, just on the dirt all by himself. His eyes looked so cold and sad, and his fur was all matted. He really needed a bath, but I didn't have the water.

I stood there staring down at him for a bit, but I couldn't make myself do it. I felt so bad, I had to take him back out. He deserved better.

I tried to comb his mats away, and it worked a little, but I couldn't get the big ones. For a coffin, I gave him my blanket. It was too wide for him, so I had to wrap it around a few times like a big burrito. I put him down in the hole again and stepped back. His little head was poking out of the top, but it was as good as it could be.

I told him I loved him and kissed his head one last time, and started kicking all the dirt back. Every time I kicked, I could see less of him, until I could only see the tip of his ear, and then I couldn't see him at all. I kept adding dirt for an hour, maybe longer, I don't know. And then I wrote his name on the big rock with a pen.

I could not save him from death.

No one could. Death happens to everything.

Except you, apparently.

And I'm fine with it. I'm ready for that. I don't need your help. I don't want it.

There is no place for me anymore.

There was no place for me

because the world already ended,

and it all fell shortly into what could only be called a kind of REPLACEMENT FATIGUE as the threads began to unwind.



I tried to wipe my tears as I stood and fell into bed.

My pillow was wet

but I was

I was so...

exhausted

I...

it

I didn't want to get out of bed.

The room smelled stale. Like dust.

My head still hurt. I pushed up and just stared. A dull morning light plastered the room grey.

I wasn't even surprised to see it; a new page was in the typewriter, with a cleanly aligned short clause.

I stood and grabbed it.

**First of all, today was supposed to be my day of rest,  
so fuck you for that.**

**Second, you made a couple errors.**

**I wasn't offering, I was telling. And now I know where  
you are.**

**See you soon.**

I read the page, and then my door burst from its hinges.

game day



Outside was way, way worse. The rip was two cars wide, jutting from the side of the building, zigzagging across the street and through two more apartments, spilling red liquid everywhere.

"Oh. No." My joined me at the railing.

"Yeah. Looks pretty bad."

"There's no stopping this, I'm guessing."

"I have no idea. There might be a way, but without Wilson, I doubt it."

She faced me and then looked down.

"Can I ask you something?"

"Shoot."

"I--did... about, uh..."

She was struggling to get it out. Which meant she was probably going to ask about Vincent.

"Vincent?"

Her lips folded in, and she nodded slightly.

"He didn't make it. I'm sorry, My. But that's Eoghan. He's a monster."

"But why?"

It was weighing on me too. I wished I could answer.

"I don't know."

"How can we trust you?"

"I guess you can't."

She grew silent. She was obviously very worried, maybe disassociating, and probably in shock. I knew this. I knew that look. I had to say something.

"It pretty much proves there's no god, because who the fuck would give that piece of shit super powers, right?"

That probably wasn't the right thing to say. I peeked at her, fearing the worst, but she broke a smile and gave a weak laugh.

"This whole line of work proves there's no god."

"So you're a mentalist, huh? I'm a mentologist--well, I used to be. Same thing, basically."

"For the VRC? Where is that? I've never heard of it."

"Uh, great question. Not here, that's for sure. Actually, where is here, anyway? Where are we?"

"Vega City. Well, just outside. That's the 215 over there."

She pointed to a highway exchange in the distance. Vega? The 215?

"We're in Nevada?"

"Nevado. Yes."

Nevado. Vega. It was all just slightly wrong, almost comically so, like this was written out on a page, and we were all just part of a bad plot in some goofy sci-fi story.

"Vega. Hm. Well, I'm going to sound nuts with this, I know, but this has been nagging at me. I worked for the VRC, which is headquartered in Las Vegas, Nevada--well, it was. You work for the VCC, which is headquartered in Vega, Nevado. Your names, the way you act, the work, the companies... it's all mirrored--it's the same as my world, just slightly wrong. Or it could be that I'm just having a fever dream, off floating in a void somewhere. Hard to tell. Ignore me, if so."

She blinked.

"Sorry, I know it's a lot, but I'm telling you--"

"No, it's--this is what you meant before. We've seen evidence of this. And it might prove Walden's theory. Two fabrics. We have to go tell him."

My didn't wait for a response. She was gone, blazing through the guard shack toward the garage. I followed along, enamored by her demeanor; she reminded me of Medy--a much younger Medy, before all the insane bullshit.

I pushed the thin garage door open and joined them mid-sentence.

"--which, well, I think it essentially confirms two fabrics. I don't know the ramifications of that."

"I don't either." Walden scrunched his brow. "Perhaps... no, unlikely."

And he reminded me so much of Wilson. We had no hope of figuring everything out. It was wasted effort. We had to focus. I had to.

I tried to talk some sense, "But guys, does this really matter?"

My tightened her lips.

"Yes, fundamentally, I--I think it does. It's the first step in solving the problem."

"If you're trying to solve the problem, then sure. But I don't think we have that luxury anymore. This rip doesn't seem--look, we cannot solve this. I think, and it's just my word, just my opinion--and the only real experience I have to back it up is dying twice, living an eternity on the Internet, and falling through realities like a ghost for a couple decades, so take it with some salt, but I think we should move somewhere safer and wait this out. We can't do anything here. Think about this. We're mentologists. Mentalists. We can fix broken minds and reset servers, but we can't repair a hole in fucking reality. All we can do is get safe and hope things go our way."

They stared at me in silence. I couldn't tell how they were taking it.

Aodhan slapped his thighs, inhaled sharply, and stood.

"Yeah. He's probably got the right idea. I'll run home and get the artillery. Should we meet back here?"

Walden shook his head and held up his hands, stammering in protest, "Wait--no, woah, woah, please. No. No weapons. What is this? What are you all even considering? Listen, I don't know what you've seen, Philip, but we cannot simply hide away and wait. We are in a position of authority--of potentially very direct involvement, with agency, with resources, and we have an obligation to fix this--to at least try. I, for one, will honor that. I will try to fix it, regardless of the outcome. Because someone must."

I stifled an urge to make a very cruel joke. Walden. He was Wilson, in the fucking flesh. That was exactly Wilson's position--annoyingly, disgustingly selfless and morally upright, like he had a guilty conscience and a bunch of bad memories.

Wilson did, so Walden probably did too.

"I... admire that take, but I think--"

The sound in the room disappeared, stolen, smothered and drowned away, and the air seemed to lock in place. I couldn't move, but my senses were heightened, acutely aware. The door began to shine blue, and shifted to red, and orange, and then a mix of all three, before falling dark again. The air released like a deep breath, and the sound returned in a quick burst of crackling and rushing wind, like it was slow to catch up. And suddenly a glimmering woman stood with us, sticking out like a ghost in the middle of the garage.

There was someone with her--a man stood behind, shining as well, but only faintly, and as the gleaming light dispersed, I could see him--

I... I knew... I knew them both...

Medy. And Wilson.

What?

**net worth**



I took a sip from the bottle and passed it to Eight, who guzzled it like we weren't stranded in the desert. Like it wasn't half our water.

"Easy, bud. We don't have much."

He nodded and took a more delicate sip.

I envied his vantage--he was watching the city, or what was left of it, and his view had intricacy, and detail, and weird, interesting things to look at, like an overturned bus full of skeletons.

All I had was dust.

Dust and dust and dirt and more dust. Well, that wasn't entirely true--a half-buried gas station broke the endless dust a few miles out, but the thing was mostly dust itself, made of old copper and iron with faded paint and a blanket of rust to make it all useless.

I called below deck, "Hey, Six! You thirsty?"

"Ah! Hauh?" His voice echoed up.

I yelled, "Are you thirsty?"

"No! Thanks!"

Eight handed the bottle back; I recapped it and tossed it in my bag.

It had been quiet all day. Quiet made me nervous. We'd be fine--the brains were probably just congregating somewhere, but they had a habit of striking at the worst time, just when I lowered my guard.

I scanned the horizon again.

No brains. But there were other things to worry about. I held my hand up to block the intense blue light from all the new, weaving rips spiderwebbing across the sky. The sun was low--it was probably six or seven. Or maybe eight. I was never good at figuring that out.

Either way, it was late. And they'd be out soon.

We had to get back. We needed shelter, and this busted rig wasn't going to cut it.

"Hurry it up!" I yelled down again. "It's getting late!"

"Huh?"

"It's getting late! The sun is--just, HURRY UP!"

"No need to yell."

Six poked his grinning head out of the maintenance hatch, but quickly ducked away again. And then a circuit board flew up and clattered against the floor grating, followed by a power supply, and what looked like a tube of orange goo, before he finally hefted himself up again.

"I think that's all we need--ah, well, all we can get, anyway. Is everyone ready to head back?"

Eight gave his characteristic, cheery nod, and I tried my best to match his demeanor.

"Yep. I'd really like to get going before the phantoms--"

"I--yes. Yes. No need to remind me. We will."

"Sorry."

"It's alright. That's... no, I completely understand. It's all... well, you've been through it. You know all this hell. I've seen a lot, but... well, yes. If anyone owes an apology, it's me. Anyway, shall we?"

"Absolutely."

I scooped up Wilson's haul, wiped each on my jacket, and tucked them into my bag. Flat sheet metal grating groaned in protest as I dropped from the rig peak, clambered over the railing, and leapt to the dust below. Eight followed, carefully lowering and then dropping into the uneven ditch, but Six caught his foot and tripped over the railing, falling awkwardly and only barely managing to correct before impact.

The garage was a few hundred meters away, half-obsured by waves of rippling heat rising over the dust. I checked my belt. Twenty percent. Plenty left, then I had to swap. I wasn't going to risk another night on low power, even with the Wilsons on lookout.

"A--about, ah..." Six jogged up to my side and then stalled and bent over, fighting to catch his breath. "One--hold--sorry, one second. Not used to--I uh, I haven't exerted this much in a while. Sorry."

"No problem, man."

He took a few deep breaths and straightened up.

"About the... phantoms. What are they?"

We started again, trotting at a more even pace. I didn't want to wear them out. But... I eyed the horizon, the falling sun.

No. We had time.

I met Six with a smile, "No idea. They're what happens when you kill the encephalons--the brains. A few days later, they come back like that. Haven't been able to do anything to stop them. Just gotta run. They're really not all that bad, though. Not lethal like everything else."

"But that almost makes it worse. It's one of the most horrible... and who--who named these things? Phantom is so... romantic. Like an enigma to be respected. But that thing is... it doesn't deserve respect. It's no ghost."

"Not sure where it came from. Maybe someone told me that, or maybe it was me, I don't know. Names don't really matter. But you get that, right, Wilson Six?"

He choked a dry laugh, "Yes. I get it. It doesn't matter, you're right. And precisely because it doesn't matter, I'm going to call it something else. Help me here, Eight. Morsmind. Mor... brain. Or--no. Ah, I miss Philip. Oh! Ended? Ended. Does that sound right? To match how you feel when... you encounter it. Ended."

It did, actually. The name really emphasized the absolute, pants-shitting terror.

I liked it.

"Yeah. Ended. That's perfect."

"Alright. No more phantoms. Oh, and I do love a good mission, but I've been meaning to ask--what's at the gates? What's our goal?"

Just the mention made my face hot.

"Ah. A friend."

"Oh. Very well, then. To friends!"

We crossed over the pavement threshold, passing by the ruins of the town hall, offices, a hospital. So much of the town was destroyed. This street was elevated, and quite a few buildings were poking from the heaving mounds of dust, but the garage and the bait shop were the only structures left standing.

The garage door flashed golden in the setting sun. How? How did the garage even make it this long? Maybe there was some kind of sick God still watching us, taking pity on the dead. Or maybe we just got lucky.

Eight took the lead, bolting for the overhead door, and Six reached out for my bag. I tossed it and he almost keeled over, catching it with his chest.

"Oh, shit. Yeah, sorry. I forgot. It's kind of heavy."

"No problem."

He dropped the bag, poked his hand in, and drew his items out one by one, including one of my last three batteries. I winced as he twisted the connector and jabbed a screwdriver into the case. It hurt to watch it go, but it would be for a good cause, assuming it worked.

Perpetual energy. I almost laughed again at the thought. It sounded far-fetched to me, but Wilson was a very smart man. I'd just take his word for it.

Each Wilson was positioned at opposite ends of the van--Six was under the rear wheel, at the computer box, and Eight had his head buried in the engine under the front hood.

"Good, yes. Alright, I think--oh, wait, did you get the--oh, you did. Perfect. Are we ready?"

Eight gave a thumbs up around the hood.

"Starting it."

The truck chirped, honked twice, and then the lights came up, flashing the garage hot white.

"Hey! That's something. Alright. Eight, the rod."

Eight clicked a red clasp on the main engine block, and the central shield twisted away with a metallic scrape, revealing the core. Four cylinder tubes of goo jutted from the center. One was broken and drained, strobing in its socket. Eight pulled each end of the broken tube free, slotted the new rod with a twist, and pressed down on the shield clip, and the whole thing snapped back into place, sealing the block again.

Eight held up another thumb.

"Fantastic. I can see it. Diagnostic done. Sending the start signal."

The engine roared to life.

"Ha!" Six exclaimed.

"Fuck yes! It worked?! Are you fucking kidding me?!"

"Of course it worked! Institute EVs are built to work this way. I simply replaced the components. Now, what say we get on the road? Who's driving?"

Eight's hand shot up.

"You guys cool if I grab some sleep in the back?"

"Of course. Plenty of padding back there. Sleep well, Max."

I looked around the garage again, impressed by how my week had been going.

From sleeping in a cave to this. Good times.

I tugged the back door open to a wide, padded bed. The floor and surrounding benches were sterile, shining metal, but the bed had thick cushions and a fluffy comforter. I stepped in, pulled my jacket off, and slid the door closed.

"Ready?" Six spoke through a little hatch between the front and back.

"Yep. Set sail, Captain."

"You got it!"

The van lurched, and I quickly flopped into the bed and fastened the waist belt, struck by the softness of the comforter. I straightened my legs, adjusted to a good position, and flipped the power switch on my belt, spiraling the cascade of numbness down my spine again. God, damn this bed. It had to

be

the

softest

Max.



Max.

“Hey Max!”

I was on the bus? No, in the van, bouncing, rocking back and forth. I couldn't tell if the road was in terrible shape or if Wilson was just really bad at driving, but I was swaying wildly. To top it all off, I was unbearably hot and sticky.

All that comfort was gone.

“Yeah?” My voice cracked.

“I found a map, traced the river. Let you and Eight sleep for a few hours. We're here. The gates.”

“W-what?”

I powered my belt, ignoring the beeping alarms, and undid the bed strap. The back door slid open.

There it was.

He was right.

We were in the shadow of the broken grey gates.



# REPLACEMENT FATIGUE

My body was frozen solid, not cold, but rigid, unmoving, sealed to the floor of my room. I couldn't even turn my neck, and my arms sat broken at my sides. Sharp cramping ran up my shoulder. Frog rubbed his face against my unmoving hand, smearing gore and blood on my fingers. Maggots swam in the blood, squirming on my skin.

I ... my--

I couldn't. My vision swam with tears, blurred and then cleared again as they ran free. My heart...

My lungs burned, but I couldn't even cry.

Eoghan snickered, cold, without pleasure. He beamed down at me, an unearthly silhouette, a tower, a god.

Frog limped around us, chittering in hacking coughs.

"Now, let's use another key. It's a special one, like you. And I want you to listen very carefully, because it's important that you understand me: you are very special. To me, to the world, to everything else above it."

He showed me a jagged, silver key, gleaming in the blue moonlight from my window. My chest pounded, throbbing with splinters of radiating pain, and I felt like exploding, like dissolving, like beating my face against a wall until I couldn't.

Why was he doing this? Playing with me?

Kill me. I couldn't even beg. Please.

Just end it.

Please.

"This is the key to caducity." He took his time, musing like a public speaker.

"This crazy little diddy lets me control your mind. And once I have control, and you agree with me, then we'll use this one."

He held up another key, ornate and carved from swirling wood.

Frog coughed spitting some blood on the floor, "Yhhaco."

"The wooden key. And with this key, you get to live forever."

No. No no no no. No.

I wanted to protest. To scream. To run.

I didn't want to live forever. I was ready for it to end.



I...

Why?

"After that, we'll use this one: the iron key. It lets me lock you in place, only where I want you to be. And it let me give you your little gift."

He dangled the final key over my face, brushing my nose; it was made from rough, black metal. Iron.

Frog coughed out a red lump and climbed up on my chest, kneading my stomach with his crackling paws and soaking black gore into my shirt.

"Okay, any questions?" Eoghan waited a beat. "No? Good. Alright, let's get to work."

He twisted the silver key

and

I

felt

He twisted the wooden key. I felt nothing.

He twisted the iron key, and a table and slat appeared, and then an old typewriter fell on top.

He lifted me and pushed me to the slat. I sat down.

He twisted the iron key again, and I was stuck in place.

My hands were fixed to the keys.

Frog jumped on the table and curled up by the lamp, dripping a growing pool of black blood and swimming maggots.

"Not so bad, right bud?" Eoghan spoke.

He circled around the slat and twisted another key, one I didn't see.

And then we were gone,

falling

in

the

dark.

goodbye



"Yes. This was no act of villainy, nor salvation. It was misguided, nubile fear. Man in action. And they ushered the dawn of collapse. I have seen it directly, and tried to intervene. Our machines are undergoing replacement fatigue, set into motion by that one small event."

My cheeks flushed with heat; Medy's explanation elegantly blamed me without naming me.

Walden clasped his hands together, drifting off in deep thought again, and Aodhan's mouth still hung open in shock. Admittedly, if a god strolled into my backroom, I likely wouldn't have much to say either. Or maybe I would. I'd have a laundry list of questions.

"So, it wasn't Eoghan?" The new Philip spoke up.

It was jarring to hear his voice from another man's mouth, but it brought me an odd sense of comfort.

"No. To name blame, it is my fault. My bin caught Wilson over and over, dozens of times. He was my prisoner, and he cannot be held responsible. It was... an oversight."

Philip grinned at me from a new man's mouth, but in the same rib-poking, smarmy affect as always. God, I missed him.

"Oh, God dammit Wilson, really? You did this? Of course you did this!"

I couldn't help but grin back, "You know, what, Philip? I'll have you know I was the lone voice protesting this entire machination. The collapse was me, yes, but not ME, me. I'm actually the twenty-third. We ah... we took a vote."

"Twenty-three!? All in one room? Oh my god. You guys didn't get anything done, did you? How long did this little scheme take? Twenty years?"

"About a week, actually. You'd be surprised--"

My shot her hand up like an impatient grade schooler. I cleared my throat and nodded to her.

"Sorry. Go ahead, My."

"Ms. uh, Medy, was it--that event... replacement fatigue. What is it?"

"Isn't it obvious?" I blurted out.

"Hyuk hyuk." Philip fake-laughed and socked my arm. "Let the teacher teach, Willy."

I snorted loudly at his goofy voice. I couldn't remember the last time I actually, genuinely laughed. And it was at nothing. I felt like a grade schooler myself.

"It really is good to see--uh, well, encounter you again, Philip. It feels like it's been an eternity."

bad

Eoghan strolled through the room, silent except for his boot crunching, while the other man, the one at the floating desk with a dead cat, tapped away on his typewriter, suspended in a deep purple aura above us, twirling in uneven circles and dripping blood like a tiny rain cloud.

"This... wow, man! This is just perfect, right?" Eoghan chuckled. "The whole crew. It's almost enough to make a man nostalgic. Joey, why didn't you tell me?"

He wiped a fake tear and glanced up at the floating man, "You owe these folks an apology! This floating husk of Harold right here is a real powerful macguffin, Wilson. He's how I found you. So, if you want somebody to blame, he's your huckleberry."

He stopped and swiveled before Wilson, shaking his head.

"Man. I didn't expect all this. I just wanted you. But we make do, don't we?"

"What do you want?" Wilson's voice deepened and grew quiet.

They knew each other. Of course. This had been an onslaught of confusing, intricate events I didn't understand, but I knew what I was seeing now.

Vitriol. Hatred. Resentment. Lifetimes worth.

"Wha--didn't I just say that? Did death make you stupid? I want you, Wilson."

"Then take me. Kill me. Whatever. Leave them be."

"Who? What--like this guy?" He pointed the wooden key to Aodhan and turned.

Aodhan didn't even scream as his skin erupted out in millions of little spikes and then retracted, sucking in through his pores and exposing his skeleton and muscles underneath, and then even that was sucking in, imploding and balling up. After a second, Aodhan was a withered, bleeding fencepost of flesh, and he tumbled to the ground.

I tried to gasp, but no air made it in--

"No! Eoghan, stop!" Wilson belted.

"Or, or who? This guy?"

Eoghan turned the same key at Walden, whose skin ruptured in spiking ripples and caved in just the same, slapping another contorted log of flesh against the floor, spraying blood up the wall.

"How about this one?" He went on, moving his aim to Vincent--to Philip.

It happened again, issuing sick, wet crunching throughout the garage, but with an added sharp crack and a flash of blinding white light. When the brightness faded, another log was on the pile.

"He was juicy. It's fun like this. Slower. More impactful. Right, Wilson? Now, this one. She's crazy now, huh? Probably a waste, but oh well! Will it blend? Let's find out!"

He turned the key at Medy. A rupturing, cascading torrent of cracking thuds reverberated as she exploded into bright red dust, flooding the room with spiraling cinders, burning the hair from my arms and flickering the lights.

And Wilson was gone too.

Eoghan looked up at the cloud of swirling fire.

"Holy shit. That was intense. Glad to know--"

He turned back and stared at the empty spot where Wilson had been.

"What the fuck?"

"Idiot. You killed him when you killed her." A voice spoke coldly.

A new man stood behind Eoghan. His skin was eerily pale and partially transparent, radiating blue light, but otherwise he was plain, with a black Smooch T-shirt and hole-ridden jeans, frizzy hair, freckles, missing teeth.

He was a normal guy.

I knew, almost instinctively. It was Philip.

"You? Again?"

Eoghan pointed the key at him and turned, but nothing happened.

"We're not in your diner. You forgot? Did you really fucking forget? You were the fucking dumb one, Eoghan, not me."

Eoghan hastily turned away, Philip grabbed his shoulder, and then they were both gone.

A light fixture fell from the ceiling, clattering loudly against the ground, and the typewriter man clacked softly above me.

What...

I fell to my knees and cried.



bad  
blood

Philip aimed his god-awful, crooked, shit-gobbling grin down at me.

"Hey, bud. Feeling small? Shriveled up? Have you tried Cialis? I heard it works better than the blue pill for older folks like yourself."

"You fucking rat!" I screamed, but my voice was smaller than me, wafting and dispersing on a soft wind.

"Can't hear you. But I don't really want to, anyway. Listen, this is an interesting predicament we're in. It reminds me of something kinda similar that happened to me not long ago."

Waves of dust coursed over me, and I fell on one knee to stabilize. The wind was soft, but so strong to me. My strength...

My power...

"Got time for a story? Course you do. I once had to jump inside the brain world of a mushroom guy named Polo. Well, a bit of backstory--mushroom people have these little flowery, green worlds full of lightning bugs called vella on the tops of their heads, like up in the mushroom part. I mean, it physically IS their head. Woah--"

No. Fuck this. I made a run for it, booking off toward the mountains. I could make it. I could--

I jolted up--his fingers hoisted me, gripping around my waist, and he twirled me around to face him. Ugly son of a bitch.

I spit at him, but it didn't reach. I tried to dig at his finger with my nails, to bite, to punch and kick, but his skin was like stone. My teeth were grinding on their own.

"Not so fast, little guy. Not done yet. Now, where was I? I said about the mushroom guys, head world, and all that? Yeah. Okay, so, Wilson fell on one of those mushroom guys and killed him, and then tried to use the head world as a power source, which of course led to an accidental genocide--yeah, I know, classic Wilson, right? Anyway, I went in there and the whole place was desolate. There was one vella left. Vo vella. It was really, really sick. And it asked me to kill it, and I really didn't want to. But I did it."

He paused and lifted me to his face, so close I could almost reach it, and then just dangled me there like I was a cat and he was my mother. Rage bubbled.

Fucking. Bastard.

I thrashed against his grip again, but I knew it was no use.

"I put the thing out of its misery. I committed an awful act for the sake of something greater: mercy. But you know what? That's not me. I'm not the 'mercy' guy. This time, I'm making the other choice."

He sat me down and patted my head.

"See ya, dickhead."

And then he turned, and he was gone.

Dust-laden wind blew by again, forcing me to hunker down.

I was alone in the mountains.

How in the fuck did I let this happen?

That son of a bitch...

It would be fine. I could always use time to think, and this would give me plenty.

All I had to do was wait. He'd come back. He had to.

I just had to wait, and eventually he'd stumble in like a dumbass, and I could grab the keys before he got to them. Easy. Just had to wait. I plopped down on the dust and laid back, staring up at the mountains.

Which began to shift, cracking and crumbling into a wall of dust that cascaded outward--a dirty, quaking avalanche.

And then the ground was crumbling away,

and I fell,

down,

through the rain of dust and broken land,

plummeting down,

staring at a wall, a churning, limitless ocean of opaque, twisting red and black that ran in all directions, a sky of flesh, as far as I could see.

I slapped hard and felt my skin snap and tear away, spreading me open in the red around me, and my stomach promptly exploded, spewing bile and blood up into my nose and throat. My arms were gone, and I couldn't feel my legs.

I knew it. I always knew it, and as my organs spilled from my skinless husk and I rejoined it, I almost felt a sliver of pride to be part of the unctuous flesh again.

I embraced my end.

But



it

did not come?

why?

my eyes still stared on, bobbing and swirling near the broken skull holding my brain,

and I was wrong,

for I could feel my arms and my legs and my other things; my nerves had tangled up with my veins and organs, sinking down into blackness, and I felt my heart still pumping, spilling my blood into the muck. My bones were with me too, mostly scattered, strung into splinters and thin ligaments, flecking away with the passing waves. But I would not die.

why?

WHY?

WH



bad  
faith



Emperador was watching over my swirling form, but I could not speak or reach from my place. I was nothing, dust, pollen, particulate unformed.

“Fuerza.” Emperador whispered to me.

My pieces responded, all screaming in unison, calling for him.

But he did not hear.

“This was not meant to be. What have you done?”

I could not speak. I could not say. I did it to save them. To save my world.

I fought for my machine, Emperador. I fought.

“You have destroyed yourself.”

I knew it was true. My form was gone, never to rejoin again. I was dead.

This swirling void was me. This was my being for all eternities to come.

“We mourn you. Goodnight, Fuerza.”

And then his gaze was go

bad  
dream

The thoughts were in my mind, easy to understand, and my fingers did their work, laying the words on the page like I knew I must.

Frog gurgled.

I saw the man return below me. He was alone, and Eoghan was gone, but I paid him no mind, and then he was gone too, and the woman was gone too, and then the room was gone too, and the sky was gone too, and the world was gone too.

And I typed on, like I kne



A thick, horizontal, textured red brushstroke or paint splatter that spans the width of the image, positioned at the top. It has a rough, granular appearance with varying shades of red.

bad  
taste

Philip joined me at the railing, and I wiped my face in a futile attempt to hide my tears.

"I..." He started but trailed off.

Above, the sky churned, and the cascading rips of purples and reds and blues swirled together, a broken miasma of light and spectacle--a white hole, maybe--painting the ground, roads, buildings, the entire world in shimmering, rainbow fractals. Like stained glass and water at the same time.

Vince would've loved it. And Walden too. And Aodhan... and... I...

Heat swelled, ballooned, blistered up--

The weight broke free. It released, flooding over me like ice water; I couldn't think of anything else.

Their confusion. That terrible, awful, sick, crunching noise, the look on Eoghan's face as he laughed, the blood, all the blood, and the smell, god, the smell--

"Hey. We're okay. This part is... it's a bitch. It's a real bitch. But we're fine, My."

Philip. I couldn't meet his gaze. I was barely holding. Not ready yet.

"And I can't say anything to make it right." He glanced over the railing, down at the parking lot. "I can't bring them back. But I'm not leaving, alright? I'm riding this thing out."

He touched my shoulder, and I met his eyes--bright and kind and familiar--and the tears burned up, boiling free--

I cried again, "T-th-than--"

"No, no. Nope. No need. Hey. We're gonna be okay."

He squeezed and just held it, wearing the slightest smile. A real smile.

I sniffled and wiped my face for the third time. My foundation was probably all smeared by now, like a bad sideshow clown. But that didn't matter anymore.

Not much did. I took a deep breath.

"Thank you, Philip."

We stared at the cascading, terrible, beautiful sky as it split apart above.

"Reemplazo." I muttered under my breath.

"Hmm?"

I cleared my throat and tried again.

"Sorry. Reemplazo. That's what we should call it."



"Reemplazo." He cocked his head. "Replacement?"

"Yeah."

"What's being replaced?"

"Us."

He grinned, showing all his teeth.

"Reemplazo Event over Vega, Nevado. Yeah, I like it."

"No, I meant, well... like an aurora."

"Oh! Oh, oh oh oh. Got it. Aurora Reemplazo. Yeah, that's more thematically consistent." He suddenly slapped his thigh pocket. "Shit, hold on. I forgot. I need to do something, one sec. It's one of those 'good for all mankind' things."

He slipped into his pocket, pulled up Eoghan's keyring, letting them dangle for a moment, sparkling beautifully in the light, and then tossed them to the ground and stomped down, spewing a cloud of dust and burning flecks of metal and wood. The keys popped and fizzled as he twisted his boot, and when he pulled back, only dust remained, tumbling between cracks in the floor planks.

"Damn. That was actually kind of neat. Satisfying."

He was right. It was like watching fireworks after a big game. Festividad.

Like we got to scream it: we won. We won and you lost, Eoghan.

No. The thought was a dagger. Something else. Not him. Anything else.

I could feel it all swelling up again, and soon I'd be... I'd--

"Anyway, yeah." Philip trotted over to my side. "Aurora Reemplazo. Little artsy-fartsy, but I like it. You speak Spanish?"

He forced it back. I swallowed through my dry mouth and pushed it down.

"My--my mother was from Mexica."

"Nice. Love Mexico. Never been to Mexica, but I'm sure it's better than--ah, well, that can wait."

He leaned over and tugged me close.

"I'm sorry, My. This has been a god-awful nightmare of a day, hasn't it?"

"Yeah."

We watched as the crack deepened, curving in on itself, spearing beams of white toward the horizon.



bad  
luck

Jacob.

There he was, teetering at the top of the steps to the east gate, wearing that stupid, unapologetic grin from ear to ear.

I couldn't even process it, I was already bolting up the stairs, and then I was in his arms.

He kissed my forehead, and then my cheek, and then my lips.

"I... I have... I cannot even tell you." I whispered into his neck.

"I know. No need."

I lowered and nestled my head into his chest.

Now it could end. I could die, and it would be fine. It probably wouldn't ever end, and we'd have to live out some terrible tragedy as our personal hells unraveled around us.

But it didn't matter.

I had him, warm and real in my arms.

Nothing else mattered, because I had him, and it was always going to end one way or another.

**reset**

"Huh."

Willard chewed on the end of his pencil, fixed to the rapidly scrolling readouts on his monitor.

"What's huh mean?"

"78741252 is completely out of sync. Look." He dropped his pencil and crunched down on a carrot, talking around it while chewing and pointing to his screen. "And 78741251 is now inhabiting identical coordinates. Here, and here."

"Oh. Yeah. Very interesting. The way those numbers look, it almost means something."

"I'm serious, Phil. This is catastrophic."

"For you? Can't you just reset it?"

"Yeah." He slapped the enter key. "Done. Trolley's?"

"As in, you're off your trolley, Willard?"

He snorted, "Yes."

I jumped from his desk, and my boots hit the tile with a loud clap.

"They better have milk. Let's go."



**thanks for reading**



end