

The Ontociders

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CHAPTER I: The End of the World

I remember ending the world. Not on purpose, although you could argue that, being in the biological weapons business, in my case ending the world straddles the line between ‘industrial accident’ and ‘Freudian slip.’ But I don’t think I wanted to end the world. Not that time.

I was just better at my job than I thought I was, and the people who were supposed to balance me — the doctors, the World Health Organization, the heroes, and, God help the world, the governments — were worse at their jobs than they should have been. Even my boss, who was always pushing me to get more creative, should have paid more attention to what she was doing.

So in a bonus-seeking flash of creativity, I had the idea of tacking a polymorphism engine and a P2P code library to an elegant, if generic, retrovirus. Just to see what’d happen, you understand.

It happened that Chicago ceased to be. Yes, I had a small lab in my apartment. So sue me; everybody else gets to work from home sometimes. It’s not my fault that... Well, that was my fault. I made a live virus vaccine against my baby, just in case it got out, and tested it on myself (there might have been alcohol involved, you understand). It worked well, as far as the ‘vaccine’ part of it goes. My vaccine virus was quite live, and hosted in my body it recovered very fast from the attenuation process that was supposed to turn it from deadly killer to training dummy for my immune system.

I suspected something when everybody started dying. I was quite sure when I didn’t.

But by then I had already run away from Chicago, perhaps contributing a bit to the speed with which the disease (diseases, meta-disease, whatever; the polymorphic engine was very good) spread all over the world.

I’m not a very moral person, so I waited until I was sure it truly was the end of the world before I killed myself. Guilt, I could live with. Being the last person alive, not so much. Partly out of sentimental reasons, and partly because, let’s face it, it wouldn’t be a very comfortable life.

So the question is, what am I doing being alive?

And for that matter, why isn’t everybody else dead?

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Subways are especially bad for you. Underground, few exits, visibility depending on electric lights that could flicker off at any moment. And the people. God, the people. So many people that you can’t believe they are all alive, moving so uniformly that they must be running away from something. Jammed so tightly that it must be the most obvious trap in the world.

Subways couldn’t be better zombie-feeding slaughterhouses if they were specifically designed for it. Of all the things that terrify you, they scare you the most. So you ride them for hours every day, wanting to protect the survivors (survivors? there are millions of them!) and hoping to catch a Handler (but in a world without zombies, why would there be Handlers?), but mostly doing what has kept you alive ever since the world ended: killing whatever you fear the most.

(Except that there's nothing to kill and the world hasn't ended.)

Other things are troublesome, too. Walking around with so few weapons feels wrong, but it's the kind of wrong you can live with. Twice someone has tried to mug or rape you while you were walking back to your apartment, and both times it was only their screams of pain that made you stop and realize that you were about to kill a person. Zombies never screamed in pain or begged for their lives, and Handlers cursed at you as you burned them. People scream and cry and call you names, and you apologized both times as you took a step back from the bloody mess that had tried to rob, rape, or kill you.

But the showers. The showers are good. Hot water. Soap. Washing your hair. At first you had showered as quickly as possible — it'd be embarrassing to be killed in such a cliché. But now your showers are long and fantastic, and not once have you had to cut one short and use the shotgun or the axe you always keep at hand while in your apartment.

So you still sleep with your back against a corner and furniture blocking all doors, and you still wake up with a weapon in every hand, but you are eating well and you smell *great*, and by all rights you should be happy.

You can't be happy knowing that you're insane. All the people alive and carefree, all the dead not walking anywhere... What is going on? Who undid the apocalypse?

You remember it clearly, and you remember the moment when it all began to make sense.

Now it doesn't, again, and your skin itches every moment with the need to kill something undead.

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It worked the first time. There shouldn't have been any need for a second. But the sun was in the sky again. Yellow, not red. And the stars no longer sang.

Once more, then. Once more the abductions, the killings, the endless rituals. An script of nightmarish complexity to write down a language so old that it predated Man and his provincial notions of logic. Blood as ink, symbols as gears, to build a machine in an 'abstract' space that so-called mathematicians thought unreal and uninhabited out of the naivete of a civilization a mere few thousands of years old.

A lighthouse to attract a conquering army. Pheromones to call the ultimate predators. A message from the traitor inside the citadel of life.

The second time there was no pleasure to be had from the victims' screams, no thrill of novelty, no shivering doubt and no amateur's pause. Just a careful rush to get it done quickly and right. To recover the exquisite tortures that had been the payment for betraying humankind.

Nothing happened the second time. Blood dried on walls. Corpses rotted. Candles burned down.

The ravings of lunatics were consulted to recalibrate maps of the planes beyond. Nightmares were culled for clues. Books were consulted, so secret that they had been hid as fiction and lore. Every step was checked thrice.

And still a yellow sun shone in the sky.

So he cries. He sits on the floor next to his latest victim and he weeps like a child because nothing he did seemed to work, nothing except that one time when he had called forth monsters from below the night. The monsters had eaten everything, and shared with him the pain of the world. But now he is again alone, throwing a bloodied knife against the floor in frustration.

He curls up against the cooling corpse. What had gone wrong? Was it somehow his fault?

Confused and broken, he closes his eyes and cries himself to sleep, cradled by slackening dead flesh and the familiar scent of blood. Above his basement and outside his house, people go by with their lives, but sleep somehow comes to him despite that.

He dreams of the time when he had broken the glass floor of the universe. In his dream he is again cut, eaten, burned, and loved. In his dream there is no distance and no end, and everybody shares everybody's pain.

He wakes up smiling into a nightmare of a normal world.

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It takes you a month to realize that you're alive. Not just your body, but the you that matters. During that month you keep your routine just as if you were still controlled by the memetic scaffolding that made everyone a puppet for the Loop. It is only gradually that the moments of lucidity become more frequent and contiguous, until you can push small things off track: a bizarre email, an unexpected retort, an spontaneous act of rationality. One day you realize that you are technically in control of yourself, and that you have been for the whole time.

In your defense, you had been insane during most of that month. It was for your defense, too. Being an expression of the Loop is only bearable to those that were insane to begin with; the rest of humankind had quickly broken down. Not because of the things the Loop made you do, which were usually the things that you had always done, but because you had no choice but to do them. The difference was just a hair on this side of metaphysical, yet even the most axiomatically and unreflexively deterministic had felt the lack of freedom erode their minds until only their behavior remained.

You're free now, and perhaps everybody else is free too. In fact, things seem as if the Loop has never struck. You cannot prove it, but some people still have a certain look in their eyes, a look you recognize from before the Loop. Not many, but enough.

The Loop couldn't be broken. Not from inside, not by minds running it. That was what made it the Loop. You could believe that you had escaped it, even that you were mounting some sort of resistance movement against it, only to wake up one night just before dawn seeing the pattern of your actions cast a shadow against the ceiling, and the shadow had the form of the Loop.

So what had happened? What could have excised it so fully not only from minds but, it seemed, from the past? Even understanding the question, keeping it in your mind, is an effort, it seems so close to self-contradictory.

Only the reality around you makes it seem conceivable, and only because you keep probing that reality to make sure it stands.

You don't know the answer to this question. You don't need to know the answer. But not to seek the answer would be too close to falling back into the Loop, and you had sworn, back when sanity was a rare gift of happenstance, that death was better than belonging to it.

So you choose to know. That was always the hard part, the choosing. Now all that remains is to find out.

CHAPTER II: The Survivor

The Survivor was no beautiful CIA-trained ninja assassin, no alluring heiress of a fated realm. She was plain-looking, which the zombies didn't care about, but five years of hunting with an uncle had given her a certain skill with a shotgun and a very keen awareness of the importance of boiling water before drinking it. You'd be surprised by how many would-be survivors fell to dysentery and food poisoning after the first month.

Others were killed by other survivors, people who had gone Lord of the Flies at the drop of a hat. The Survivor was sure that it had always been a not-very-secret dream of theirs, that they'd always preferred to rule a small tribe over whatever else they were doing back then.

Well, the zombies had given them the chance, fleeting as it usually was. Thugs and rapists (or, as the more pretentious of them called themselves, 'warlords') were good at gaining power, but seldom good at keeping people alive. That took logistics.

The Survivor knew logistics, because she had always had to manage her own, and she knew not to trust anyone, because she wasn't bloody stupid. So she stayed away from all tribes, and never tried to rescue those who had been stupid enough to seek them out, no matter what screams she heard afterward.

She also raided their camps after the zombies were gone. Practicality beat the hell out of everything else. Not that the Survivor didn't have to fight. There were too many zombies lurching around not to. Sometimes in those fights she ended up saving other people. Never on purpose, if she could avoid it. Sometimes she couldn't, and she beat herself up for that while sterilizing and dressing up her new wounds. Very few of the people she rescued were grateful for that, and their gratitude meant little anyway. Not those days.

She never cared about her legend, and neither will we, except for this. She was the first person to kill a Handler. The Handlers knew this. Unlike the zombies, the Handlers were smart, and talked, although not like humans prefer to talk. It involved an eerie sound, so deep your gut felt it before your ears could, one that carried menace and depression, and carried far. The Handler she killed first, thin and fast, spent their whole fight screaming at and about her, or maybe calling for help from its kind.

They arrived there, if they ever did, only to see its charred remains. The fight had been close to one of the Survivor's homes, and she kept ways to make fire in all. Lots of fire at once. She never thought of herself as a Killer of Zombie Hordes, but there were zombie hordes out and about, and fire was useful against them.

Fire also seemed to be useful against this new nightmare, the scarecrow-like Handlers that shepherded the zombies around. That knowledge would come very useful as time went on.

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The second time she killed a Handler it was with premeditation, and only after a long time (or at least the Handler thought it was long). It had seen a human enter a building, and, as the consummate predator it was, followed her in deadly silence.

Predators only need to be as smart as their prey, but evolution had badly misjudged in this case. The Handler only realized it was all a trap when he was hurt, bleeding, and chained at the bottom of an elevator shaft.

Then the experiments began. Not very sophisticated experiments, for the Survivor was no scientist, and time was likely to be running out. But she needed to know what the Handler was and how to kill it, and waiting for experience to teach her was the wrong way to look at things. It was faster to trap one in a hole and try things to see what hurt. Bullets. Fire. Pointy things. Acid. More. She even tried ultraviolet light, but that worked as badly as you could've expected. Handlers weren't vampires, and this wasn't a fictional world.

Finally, about an hour of exploratory murder, and a few minutes digging around its remains, the Survivor figured out what Handlers were.

They were people. People who had learned to speak to zombies, who were rather easy to convince once spoken to. People who had developed a taste for the high-protein diet of cannibalism, and the rather high-adrenaline life of a monster herd's Lord. It was all in a small book the Handler had kept with him.

The Handlers were people. That changed things.

It had never crossed the Survivor's mind to wage war against the zombies. That was not who she was, or what they were. You swim, sail, or avoid the sea, but you don't wage war against it.

But the Handlers were people.

The Survivor swore to kill them all. In silence, of course, and only after she had retreated to the relative safety of one of her hiding-holes and read the book the Handler had with him and thought about it a lot.

The Handlers had to die. That seemed as clear as the need to boil your water and bury your trash far away. But the book itself spoke of a more complex problem. It had been recently printed, if badly so.

Somebody was running a printing machine, making books for Handlers. Maybe that somebody was making Handlers, too.

The Survivor, who besides hot showers missed books most of all, felt rage for the first time in months.

* * *

It was a mistake. She was a Survivor, not a Hero, so she only could safely get so many dead. To kill is a survivor's skill, but not to murder and wage war.

She killed many, because she was careful and smart, but eventually the Handlers caught and ate her. It was not a good end.

The Handlers were very superstitious, and with good reason, so those who ate her regretted it soon. Those who hadn't, just to make sure, killed those who did, and then burned their bodies and books, and buried them far away, dispersing their herds to dissolve, as much as was possible, the threat of vengeance from the one they hated so much.

They were superstitious, not physicists. When hunger came they thought it was her. Knowing nothing of the Laws of Thermodynamics, they saw nothing

wrong with a carnivorous lifestyle that consumed more energy every day than their already energy-inefficient prey could acquire.

To simplify matters: they ate all the humans, and then most of the zombies, and then each other, in vast (for the times) wars of zombie herd against zombie herd, dozens of lurching undead fighting to get their rulers just another stringy meal.

They thought it was the Survivor's curse. They had destroyed her body too much to bring it back to life, but they spent time and energy cursing her grave, her name, and her memory. Some of the last Handlers believed her weapons to be magical, and carried them to combat as a talisman.

A new legend arose by the time there were only a few surviving Handlers. It was not a Handler legend, but something the zombies would grunt to each other during the long uneasy hunger of the day. There was a second book. The Handlers had a book to tell zombies where to go, and there was another book to tell Handlers where to go. The Survivor had written this book and hidden it somewhere.

Zombies began to look for the Second Book as if they were looking for food. And they found it, and somebody taught them to read from it.

The final battle was not of zombie against human, or of Handler against Handler, but of a desperate Handler against whatever zombies were left. It was long, terrifying, and not very interesting. There was little of the Handler left.

The zombies lurched away, never to die, leaving behind the Handler's torn bones, two small books, and the Survivor's shotgun, which the Handler had tried to kill itself with at last.

It had run out of ammo. Of all that had happened since her death, that was perhaps the only thing that involved a curse from the Survivor.

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What if zombies surrounded you, and Handlers ate you, and you died, and then you opened your eyes to a nice apartment and the plaintive demands of a hungry cat? You would think it all a nightmare, right, everything before the apartment and the cat?

You wouldn't be a Survivor, then. She knows something is utterly wrong, and she is disciplined enough to check the whole apartment before feeding the cat (a live, uneaten cat is not the least wrong of the things she saw, although it trailed behind the food in her fridge, and the way the city looked from her window, and, well, all of that.)

She misses her first day of work. She remembers having a job, and where it is, but she doesn't trust those memories. The ones about food caches and ammo stores feels much more right. But the Survivor is adaptable, and very soon she goes through the motions, although not sitting with her back to any doors, or going out without water, or for that matter an axe in her bag.

But nothing happens. Survivors don't think of Heaven, and there is coffee, so it couldn't be Hell. She concludes that she doesn't understand. That is of secondary importance.

Are there still Handlers? Zombies she doesn't hate, and if there are none around, she wouldn't be the one to try and look for them. But there could be Handlers without zombies, Handlers to kill.

And a book to find. She remembers some parts of the book of the Handlers. If the book made Handlers, then the book was something she had to find. There are more printers, authors, and books now-or-here than then-and-there, but to be a Survivor is to have patience.

She had survived zombies and hunted their shepherds. For her to find a book is only a matter of time.

And once she finds the book, she decides, she will track down the author and kill him or her. Maybe then she will begin to care if the world was real.

CHAPTER III: The Logical Man

As I'm sure you know, proportionality in anger is one of the Aristotelian virtues. Get angry at the right time, to the right person, to the right degree, and in the right way. Take an eye for an eye, says an older book, with, one would hope, a footnote adding that you shall not take more.

So how angry should I have been about everything being wrong? Me, you, them, the stars dying slowly, the very wretched idea of time – it's all of it wrong. I added up everything I had lost and everything I was going to, and the total sum was everything. I refused to cope, and chose instead to be as angry as this called for.

I screamed at first. Then I got angrier, and couldn't speak. Then I got even angrier, and instead I wrote.

I still wasn't angry enough. My mind could, but my body could not. Like fear, like desire, like joy, anger required chemical support, and it eventually ran off.

So I developed mathematics to represent my anger, symbols to be angrier than anything my brain could hold. It was still not enough anger (enough for my death, perhaps, but not for that of the ones I loved), although I could intuit at the end of an infinite series of terms of hate a limit term of rage that might even be close.

But mathematics weren't enough. To express anger I needed a more flexible language, one that could both describe the fury that consumed me and extrapolate it to something more. A logic that would let me calculate feelings no-one had felt before. Creating it was beyond my powers.

But I found the book. I don't remember where or how. To be honest, I don't remember a lot. But I distinctly recall systematically fuming over some entropy integrals describing the decay of all things beautiful, and then noticing an slim old volume on the floor next to my floor. Finding an unknown book in my house, you understand, was like finding a new finger attached to my hand. Scary, strange, curious, and wonderful, too. And that was before I read the book.

I thought at first it was fiction, some weird tale about undead multitudes hearing a voice. But then I realized it was instead a cleverly disguised tutorial.

It described how to build a god.

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I'm sorry, can you hear me now? Good.

I think I was telling you about the book. Did I tell you where I found it? No? Too bad. Sometimes I remember, and I thought maybe I had told you... Never mind. I'm just curious.

I won't give you all the details. It'd take too long, and we don't have much time. The book seemed simple, but once you dug deeper into it, there were all sorts of recursive mathematical structures modeling neural pathways and whatnot. It was interesting, of course, I won't deny that. But I cannot say that I grasped at first what the book was really about. I thought it was at

most a very strange neurology text, or maybe a collection of paradoxes on the theory of manifolds.

Silly me, right? It didn't occur to me that it could be both. But I had slept that day, and I never think too clearly unless I've been awake for forty hours or more. It's not a quirk of mine; everybody does. But before electric lights I guess that it wasn't known or useful, so sleeping too much became a cultural norm. Just look at how small children have to be put to bed. They still haven't been trained to fall asleep that soon.

Anyway, about a day later, when my mind was clear, I browsed the book again, and then I realized that the brain the book was describing was very peculiar in how it worked. I won't bore you with the details (I know, I know, I said that before; I do apologize for that), but I trust you'll allow me a brief example. Picture in your mind a moment when you were very scared. Not as scared as you are now, but still, a lot. I'm sure you remember having the impression that there were things watching you from the dark, and the more scared you felt, the closer they seemed to attacking you.

It's depressing how everybody's familiar with that phenomenon, and yet almost everybody gets the causal chain wrong. That sort of thing, the way we are all, as a rule, just smart enough to realize how stupid we are, used to drive me mad. It was one of the many things that did. But now I have my equations of madness, and that frees my mind for the work at hand.

'Equations of madness.' That was a joke. Didn't you...? I'm sorry. Of course.

As I was saying, the book had an specific model of what happens when people are afraid. Of course, even when terrified, most people only get afraid enough to clearly *see* things in the dark, but in an appropriately controlled situation, if you add pain in an specific pattern and you keep the subject alive long enough, you can get something to come across.

Alright, it's midnight. I've only gotten small monsterlings so far, but I have great hopes for you. I tried men first, you know, because they are 'tough,' but females have a stronger threshold of pain. I mean, you only fainted once so far.

Feel free to scream against the gag. It's what it's there for.

* * *

Night 17, recording...

Nothing yet. I am beginning to despair.

No. This journal needs to be accurate: I despair at times. My last attempt was so promising at first – a young male, yes, but of a neurotic, fearful manner that put him already halfway where I wanted him to be before I made the first cut – that the complete failure of the night's experiment left me devastated. I had to rest for a while, gathering my wits and self-control, before I could proceed with the disposal of the remains.

I have known despair, but this is, in a sense, worse. Ever since the discovery of the book, I have been supported by the intimate certainty of agency.

Success might elude me or fall into my hands, but the fact that my efforts had some effect was impossible to deny. And, yes, once I fully opened the gates,

once I saw Their mouths, teeth, and spikes, I thought I had succeeded. I still think I did. I remember, or I believe I remember, infinite sequences of pain.

I remember hearing distinctly every scream in the world. I remember the heat and the cold and the light from the stars being somehow the most painful thing of all.

There was more. It was infinite, just as it was supposed to be. Yet somehow it ended, and I found myself again in an slowly rotting world. The gates I opened are closed, and I can't get them to open again.

Not only are the gates closed, but even the simpler procedures outlined in the book are now unsuccessful. I refused to believe this based on anecdotal observations, so I performed a single-blind experiment tonight. Two individuals, as close in physiology and personality as I could acquire, bound in the same position in mirrored rooms. Rituals were as close as identical as I could manage (I must confirm that with the videos, but I fear I will find nothing). I applied to one of the individuals the basic amplifier symbol grid, carved with a #10 blade doused with the standard coagulant agent. The control individual was given a nonsensical symbol grid with the same instrument and coagulant agent.

Unlike my first series of experiments before, and against all theoretical predictions, both subjects reacted with approximately similar levels of terror to the ensuing procedure. Neither of them remained conscious for long. Of course, there was no chance of a phobiogenic manifestation, much less of

Fuck this. Fuck...

The anger offloading equations aren't working either. I *feel* myself increasingly frustrated and angry, but I'm only using my own brain. I need the equations, and they aren't working! I had forgotten how limited the unaided human capacity for hate is. Sometimes I'm even too tired to be furious, or too distracted, or just sad.

I never wrote any equations for sadness.

Nothing works at all. I would say that this is a new form of Love, an illusion meant to increase the pain, but They were never equivocal like this. I don't feel Loved. I've tried to carve the symbols on myself, not for experimentation, I just felt alone. I could only do it for an hour or so. I'm not strong enough. Nobody is.

It feels worse than before I knew Them and They knew me. To have things set right and then wake as if nothing had ever happened... No!

This wasn't supposed to happen. Everything was supposed to end. The rage – the need – I built Them so they would end everything forever. And They had done it. Not for me, but I didn't care. I was at peace, I was still, I was screaming a single note while staying in one place. Even the pain was perfect and unending, and nobody and nothing would ever die.

And then something happened. Something worse than everything else before. Someone took Them away from me, and the world away from Them. Whoever it was, I will find them, and I swear I will carve the entire book on them. Last time it took me seven people, seven nights of carefully regulated fear and pain, to do what I had to do. If a single person took it away from me,

I will get everything I need from this person, even if I have to spend the last night extracting fear out of the breathing, hollowed-out remains of a man. He will not die until he undoes what he did, and then I will use his fear to reopen the gates and bring back the end.

And then nobody will take away my rest.

CHAPTER IV: Hope Springs Barefoot

It isn't the kind of thing you do. The same instincts that had kept you alive for a long time against zombies (and for less time against Handlers) tell you to call the police, among other things because they carried guns and you don't, not right then. But the very creepy-looking man had pushed a huge rolling suitcase through his house's door, and although nobody seems to, you still remember a world where having a good feel for the weight and balance characteristics of a dead or unconscious human body was a useful skill.

You realize there is a person or a corpse inside the suitcase just after the door closes, and just before you tell yourself to keep going to your apartment, shelve the goods you bought at the supermarket, and settle down to read sitting against a corner with the shotgun on your lap.

Too late. A creepy looking man has smuggled a person or a corpse into his home, and that's the sort of thing that for some reason you cannot let pass (although you wish you could), while at the same time you cannot give over to the police, not with the unbelievable explanation that would come attached to it (although you very much wish you could). You have long learned not to care about anything you can't do, but that forces you to do everything you care about.

You are beginning to think it was purely a fluke that you survived for as long as you did. You are also jamming a back door and entering the creepy man's place through its kitchen. It's a nice kitchen, squeaky clean and perfectly ordered. All the labels in the spice rack are perfectly aligned, all the spice containers empty and clean. You could eat off of the floor, if there were any food to be found, but the shelves are empty and a quick look at the fridge shows an spotless and empty volume that you are sure is being cleaned at least once a day.

The place reeks of lemon scent and insanity.

You take off your shoes and start looking for the basement. Anyone so concerned with cleanliness will do his psychopathic butchering in there (*methodical psychopathic butchering*, you know without questioning how). Before leaving the kitchen you pause next to a knife rack. They all look brand new, very expensive, and perfectly sharp – much better than the one you buy every week, out of habit, to complement your too-slowly growing collection of axes and machetes (the city is too inhabited, not to mention too unravaged, to hide caches of weapons in convenient locations, but the part of you that knows this is not the part of you that kept you alive, so you ignore it as much as you can).

You find a descending staircase. You can hear the muffled sounds of someone struggling in vain, and the irregular but assured movements of whoever is not being held.

So there was a live body inside the suitcase. You're not sure if you really care that much. When all is said and done, a little voice in the back of your head notes without passing judgment, but too softly to be heard by anyone outside, you are here because the guy entering the house had the eyes of a Handler.

Nothing more.

That's no reason to kill him. Not in this world.

You shift your grip on the knife you just took from the guy's kitchen and tiptoe softly down the stairs. It seems like it takes you forever to reach the floor of the cellar.

This isn't the kind of thing you do.

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It actually takes you less than thirty seconds, but that's not the kind of time that matters when knives are involved. In this case there are two knives in play, the clean one in your hand and the one dripping blood that the guy, his back toward you, is using to make shallow cuts over a girl's stomach. He's being very, very careful, as if it matters a lot for the cuts to be just right.

You understand the importance of being careful with a knife. With a few quick long strides you approach the guy, intent on stabbing him on the back. It's the first and only rule of killing anything, and if you have to put it in words, you aren't going to last very long.

You don't need to. You are fast and decided. You make no noise.

Yet *something* makes the guy turn around. He looks more curious than scared, his eyes clear and frank. He opens his mouth as if to ask you your name, and maybe if you'd be kind enough to let him cut you up.

You don't break eye contact with him as you stab him in the chest, deep and fluid, and then jump back. He makes a wet noise. It doesn't sound as if he minds the pain or feels animosity toward you. He does wobble a bit on his feet, and a second later he lets his knife fall to the cellar floor.

Good. You quickly walk around him, approach from behind, and cut his throat with a single slash. Everything is hard to wash in a zombie-infested city, and blood-soaked clothes are good for nothing but zombie bait (live people worked best to bait Handlers, but of the things you can't forget that's the one you sort of try).

He drops to his knees and then collapses in a pool of blood, now part of it his own. He seems dead and unmoving. You still keep an eye on him while you set the girl free. She looks at you in shock, not sure about what to do. You shrug and gesture toward the stairs. This is as far as you'll go to help her.

She seems to understand, and runs upstairs as fast as she can.

You follow her more slowly, still alert for the chance of the guy rising up. He doesn't, at least not by the time you reach the kitchen. You wonder, briefly, if you should have set fire to him, but there are cops in this world. It's one of the things you know, but don't yet understand.

The girl you happened to rescue is nowhere in sight, but although she was barefoot when you last saw her, your shoes are still where you left them. Either she was altruistic or just not attentive enough. It doesn't really matter. You put on your shoes again and leave the house, picking up both the knife you just bought and the one you just used to kill the creepy guy. It's a good knife. A tested one.

The walk home is easy. This is the most normal you have felt in a long while.

* * *

Night 18, recording...

There has been an unexpected breakthrough tonight. I can't die. To be more precise, I can't be killed by having a knife stabbed in my chest and my throat ripped open. Blood loss made me lose consciousness, but I woke up, I believe about two hours later, in fine health and without scars. Those I once called forth to reality must have left something of Them in me. I am neither alone nor unloved – unlike everyone else, I carry with me the touch and attention of once and soon to be again to be real timeless gods. I have sought an eternity of pain for this, and with their help, I am sure now I will again find both pain and Love.

This discovery alone would be worth the disappearance of the subject I was working with. There's a chance of her denouncing me to the authorities, but I'm quite sure the poison I gave her prior to the procedure will silence her before she has the chance to give them any details about my identity.

Of course, the entity who attempted to kill me knows my activities and the location of my house, but it's clear that it doesn't wish to involve law enforcement. Its attack is the first good news ever since I've woken up in this wretched world. It likely means that the forces who have engineered the undoing of my achievement wish to stop me on a more permanent basis, which suggests I am still in a position to regain what I lost. Once again, I can dream.

Just this morning, forced to hunch under an unbloodied sky with the suffering flesh of the city, I had considered killing myself in the hope of a Hell. Something eternal, anything at all. But I was afraid it would be just more of this flightless pain. If the Devil exists, I'm sure he had invented time.

But now I see again a way to rebuild a true sanctuary from suffering, and the very agent of the forces that thwarted me before will make it possible. Judging from the footage, the human-shaped thing wasn't aware of the cameras in my laboratory. I have images of it, and it's only a matter of time before I track it down, and, through it, my enemies. This is the clue I needed, the thread I will follow back home.

Even the shape my enemies gave it, that of a barefoot young woman, demonstrates that they know of my activities and are scared by them. They try to scare me, to make me second-guess myself about my supply. But both sides can play the game of symbols. If the thing they sent against me is human enough, if it not only looks human but also bleeds and fears, I will make a point of using this agent in my invocation. It looks as if it can sustain enough pain and fear to make Them real by itself. Although my efforts have so far been fruitless this second time, I have gained enough experience with the mechanics of it that I believe I can successfully complete all stages in a continuous ritual of two days or less. She should survive through it, I think.

Yes. I can feel Their approval pulling the muscles of my face into an smile alien to me. To be used like this, to be used *for* this, is almost as good as the world's consummation was. As it will be.

Yes.

CHAPTER V: The Hour of Lead

You wake up every morning convinced that it's possible. It has to be. If you made the thing, you can make it manageable. Set up some control mechanisms, moderate the infectiousness, add a self-destruct of sorts, and you'll have in your hands the finest biological weapon ever created and, more importantly, whatever amount of money you'd care to ask. You are thinking a cool billion. It's not too much – no reason to be greedy – but still enough to be taken seriously.

By noon you have usually come up with an idea. Your virus is clever and flexible, but the overall pattern is fixed. It's just a matter of finding the right weakness and making sure it will stay there. Like a spare key hidden in a garden, it has to be easy to find by you, but not by anyone else.

It only takes you an afternoon to implement most ideas. Viruses are fast, you have the right equipment, and, let's face it, you are just that good. Logic subroutines are encoded into protein complexes, and from those to gene networks and a DNA patch. A sufficiently fast computer array is indistinguishable from being patient, and all the simulations are completed before the end of the day. Then you key your lab to spin the virus while you treat yourself to a future billionaire's dinner. By now you have thought for so long about what you'd do with the money that it has ceased to feel important. Mostly, you want to get rid of this.

The virus is waiting for you when you get back. Time to run tests. But you begin to get nervous by that time. The tests have to be perfect. You remember too well what happened when you were careless, the aerial pictures of corpse-strewn streets. It takes time to design a protocol, and to decide whom in the military to approach.

By midnight you feel terrified by the risk you're taking, and equally terrified by the thought of somebody else doing it first.

You take a couple of sleeping pills and go to bed, wishing there was a way you could earn your billion dollars without killing the world again.

You wake up every morning convinced that it's possible.

(There's a fridge in your lab with two dozen variations of the virus now, all of them, as far as you know, as capable of ending the world as the first. Not trusting the laboratory's network, you keep track of them in a little black notebook.)

* * *

One day you wake up with your mind feeling unusually clear. It's as if you had shed something heavy on your chest. Everything seems slower and simpler, and nothing in your morning routine, from the shower to the first cup of coffee, to the not-very-long commute to your lab, holds your attention. If someone asked you, you'd say you are not thinking about anything.

It feels great in a hazy way.

The first thing you do when you reach your lab is to lock up the door from inside, as you've done every day since coming back to life. Then you make another cup of coffee and check your work email, reading each of them very

carefully. You decide to make a second cup of coffee and deal with the clutter that seems to plague every laboratory you have ever used. You had never done it before, and it's almost an hour and many equipment placement experiments later that you wonder if you are just procrastinating.

It's an interesting question. You play some Tetris while letting it stew in the back of your mind. You are playing very well at first, with the reflexes of a trained person not thinking about what they are doing, but your heart isn't in it, and eventually lines accumulate too fast. Time for another cup of coffee.

You change the coffeemaker's filters while you are at it. It's an old one. Maybe it's time to upgrade? You check online for the newest models, ignoring the way your stomach begins to twist.

It's surprising how close sickening fear and too much coffee feel alike. If someone asked you, you'd say you aren't feeling anything. You make another cup of coffee to drink while you check your email again, but you don't touch it. The emails seem to carry with them a feeling of sadness and loss. You answer a few, skim a week's worth of online papers, and realize surprised that it's too early to leave. Plenty of time, if you could face what for.

It'd probably be easier to distract yourself if you didn't work alone. Or maybe they'd be just another thing to juggle, just another thing to keep from blowing up.

If somebody asked you, you don't feel tired. A part of you could swear you've been awake for a year.

You remember shooting yourself. By then things had been pretty bad, and you had heard plenty of gunshots that night. You remember trying to drink and giving up, the knot in your stomach too much. You don't remember pulling the trigger.

You've run out of things to do, so you go to the fridge with the electronic padlock, take out a random vial, and stop yourself just before smashing it against the floor. It'd kill yourself and the rest of the world.

You realize you are snapping. Too much tension. It's a perfectly reasonable conclusion, and you feel very rational while watching your hands shaking. You put the vial back in the fridge as quickly as you can, lock it, and sit down on the floor, wondering if you'll throw up.

You don't, and it feels like a premonition of worse things to come.

(The company you work for, the one who had paid you last time to come up with a weapon to kill the world, has an appointed psychologist to oversee all researchers. Department of Defense regulations, of course. But they are more concerned with spies and terrorists than with emotional health. Nobody fully sane to begin with could do what they did, not without breaking down.

And no one would believe you anyway.

But you still have the gun.)

* * *

"Then I remembered I still have the gun," says the man. "The same one I killed myself with last time."

The woman sitting on the bed seems attentive but unafraid. It's rather impressive, thought the man, as he had just broken into her home, woken her up, and rambled at her about his virus and his predicament. Psychiatrists were tough.

"How did you choose me?" asks the woman. Rather than defensive, it sounds like a genuinely relevant question.

"I picked your name at random from a web search of local psychiatrists," says the man. "I'm sorry."

"Don't be. You made the right decision to come and see me."

"Are you humoring me? That could be dangerous, you know."

"Are you saying you will kill me?"

"Oh, no. Well, not you in particular. The gun was just to get your attention. But I'm afraid that if I get really crazy I might release the virus on purpose."

"Why not destroy it altogether?"

"I can destroy the samples I made, but I already know how to make it. I'd have to kill myself to destroy the method, and I don't want to. I don't really want to die."

"Or maybe you are afraid of shooting yourself and waking up like last time."

"Perhaps. What pills should I take?"

"I don't think yours is a situation that can be approached exclusively through medication. There are some drugs that will help you deal with your anxiety, yes, but the deeper roots of your issues will still be there."

"Doctor, I know I'm the one who asked for your help, sort of, but I don't really think therapy is going to make this away. I already know that I hate my father and I'm a very fucked up son of a bitch. I don't have a problem with that, it's been working for me so far."

"Let's go back to before you killed yourself. You said you first tested your virus without fully knowing how dangerous it was?"

"I wasn't trying to field-test it, not fully. I suspected it was going to be an slippery bugger, and I just wanted to make a vaccine. I didn't know what would happen."

"Of course not. You don't strike me as a mass murderer, at least not on purpose. But the virus did get out."

"Worse. I had kept it in a very attenuated state, but interacting with my immune system, well, challenged it, made it evolve. After that, it was a matter of time."

"Are you sure it killed everybody in the world?"

"You mean, do I believe it killed my family, or my girlfriend, or some psychoanalytical crap like that? It might not have happened, but it was real."

"That wasn't what I asked. Are you sure the virus was going to kill every human being in the world?"

"I didn't stay that long, but yes. No way anyone was going to find a cure. The polymorphic engine was too smart and too aggressive. It'd be like trying

to fight every pandemic in the next five centuries, all at once. Maybe someone could survive for a while in a virus-proof self-contained facility somewhere, but I doubt it. Hell, the virus had co-opted all sorts of micro-organisms, so it wasn't just spreading in the usual ways. Not to blow my own horn, but it was unstoppable."

"Then it was the end of the world." The woman rises from the bed. The man thinks for a second that she might reach for the phone or his gun, but instead she picks up her robe from a nearby chair. "That's very interesting. I'm making myself breakfast. Would you care for some tea?"

"Coffee, please," says the man, following her to the kitchen. "I don't want to alarm you, but the crazy man still has the gun."

The woman turns on her microwave and waved his comment away. "You aren't crazy, as you well know. Not any crazier than you were when you created that abominable virus, anyway." She washes a pair of cups while talking to him over her shoulder. "Let me tell you about the Loop."

CHAPTER VI: Death of a Soldier

It's the end of the world. It doesn't feel like it. You have turned off the communication gear. If you succeeded, if World War Three is raging out there, you will only notice it if a target planner somewhere underestimated the strength of the bunker you are in.

You feel unquiet, though, and not because of the nuclear holocaust approaching all military facilities and major cities in the world at supersonic speeds.

Hundreds of millions of deaths, and then the likely extinction of mankind through the hell of a nuclear winter, are things you had thought about often. You can keep that screaming part of your mind safely tucked away.

What worries you is whether it might have been overkill. You killed everybody else in your unit, and they were military trained, professionally paranoid, and, to boot, your friends. Killing the Man of the Books should have been a piece of cake.

* * *

The Man of the Books was middle-aged, nondescript. Just the manager of a dying small library-slash-editorial that was little more than a romantic way to go broke. You would have never known about that business if it hadn't began to rain so suddenly while you were walking past its door.

Not a coincidence, no. And perhaps it wasn't even a coincidence that it was close to your father's birthday, so you had the idea of giving him a book. A peace offering, in a way, from a man that devoted himself to peace through violence to a man who had devoted himself to war through words. But the books were strange, with words you didn't recognize on their covers and hard-to-follow narratives in their pages. You suspected your father might like one of them – perhaps it was a deep literary device he had even taught about – but to you it was gibberish, and you weren't sure which, if any, to buy.

"Take as many home as you want," said the Man of the Books. "You can look them over and bring them back another day. If I can't trust a Soldier," he said, smiling brightly, "who will I trust?"

You hadn't told him you were military, but your father had always told you it was clear from the way you stood (said both in pride and subtle mockery, you were always sure).

You took half a dozen books, like weird Bibles with their black covers and even printing, and thanked the Man of the Books. It had stopped raining, and you wanted to go home.

* * *

All the books seemed equally long, so you picked up one at random and skimmed through it. It started as a horror story, the tale of an old vampire taking over a city and a young hero fighting him, but the further you read, the more it seemed like the hero was definitely out of his league. You began reading more closely, wondering how the author would get the protagonist out of his fix. The vampire took over the city halfway through the book. By the penultimate chapter he ruled the world.

The last chapter was obvious: final confrontation, humankind in the balance... And the vampire won. The epilogue graphically described humanity living in perpetual night as servants, cattle, and game for the hunt.

Depressing stuff. Maybe your father would like it, you thought, but picked up another book.

It was another fantasy story. It spoke of a new Flood caused by unspecified sins (you suspected some sort of ecological message underneath), but the causes of the Flood were quickly glossed over. The book focused on the panicked nations, multitudes racing to whatever high ground they could find, battles for and among anything that could float.

Then came the sea monsters. Krakens, Leviathans, whales the size of small towns. Swarms of octopuses of lethal ingenuity. Sharks who could eat through reinforced steel. Things the book didn't name and you couldn't recognize, things that slithered out of the sea at night, killed and ate, and then slithered back. You stopped reading when the gory details became oppressive in their repetition.

You skimmed the rest of the books. A huge meteorite hitting Earth, cleansing it of sin unless the inanimate could do wrong. Deadly, unstoppable viruses that mutated out of any possible control. Wars with weapons you had never heard about. Ecological disasters. The Wrath of God.

Every book narrated the end of the world.

It wasn't strange that the business had looked so small. How big could the market be for those stories? They weren't very original, just disaster after disaster in meaningless sequence until it lost all emotional meaning. Part of the elite few in charge of nuclear weapons, you were very used to that sort of thought.

Who knew? Maybe your father would find it ironically appropriate to get one of these books from his son, the Destroyer of Worlds.

One of the books you had skimmed was, in fact, about nuclear war. You had only read a few pages – most of the books about that side of warfare got all the details, and most of the core issues, painfully wrong – but if it was bearably realistic, it might actually give you and your father some common ground.

You decide to read it with care.

That was twenty-six hours ago.

* * *

You haven't slept since you read that book. You are reading it again, sitting in a nuclear command bunker deep below a place where it shouldn't be, surrounded by the bodies of your fellow soldiers. You reloaded your weapon out of habit, but you don't expect to use it, unless it's to shoot yourself. You will die very soon, the only questions remaining are how and whether you did right.

So you are reading the book again. A cheaply printed book from an editorial you never heard about, with no author credited for it. A book that describes with mind-numbing detail the process by which someone has taken over the

nuclear arsenal and is about to destroy the world. The date for the war is tomorrow.

That, by itself, would be a coincidence. But not the details in the book. The names of the people mentioned in the book, circuit layouts, specific access codes. Everything you can recognize is true, and would work, and, furthermore, the things you don't recognize make sense in a way that could only make sense if somebody had actually, were actually, doing that. The book isn't fiction. It's happening, and you can't stop it. You do recognize the person bringing about the end of the world, from the few descriptions in the book, and for something deeper and more certain.

It's the Man of the Books. The man you tried to kill ten hours ago, only to find his business gone as if it had never existed, the man gone in a puff of smoke.

Unlike the hero of a novel, you are professional enough to know you can't save the world. But you're also the son of a man with a huge and weird library, a man who loved to read to you. So you can read between the lines and look at the big picture, and the big picture is now more than the world. Beyond logic and beyond doubt, you are certain that not only the book in your hands is true. All of them were. Every one narrates the end of a world.

You can't save the world, but maybe you could save the next ones, if you could kill the Man of the Books.

And the how was obvious. He had to stay around for a while more, to complete the steps outlined in the book. You would happily shoot him, except that you have no way to find him.

But the minimal effective precision of a weapon is a function of its blast radius. You have a weapon with a wider effect. Point of fact, it's the world.

You told yourself you weren't killing anyone who wasn't going to die tomorrow anyway. It didn't make things easier, but you had been trained for years to make what you did possible, and that was enough.

It's the end of the world, and with any luck you're taking the Man of the Books with you. Maybe it was overkill. But you remember the books you read, and the walls with bookcases in the man's shop, all of them neatly filled with black bland spines. It was worth a shot.

You notice just now that one of the soldiers in the previous shift was reading, too, a black book.

* * *

I didn't need to do this. Everything else I needed to do, but not this. Not when everything was said and done (very little, almost nothing said, and very much done). But what can I say? Sometimes the unnecessary is the most important thing of all. Taking care of the luxuries and so on.

I owed it to the Soldier, too. He was magnificent. In apprehension, how subtle! How speedy and deadly in his action! His father was both poetic and empirical, both rare traits in an academic, when he nicknamed his son the Destroyer of Worlds. I even think he could be adequate to do my own work.

Well, we'll never know. The ICBMs are flying high and fast, Russia and China are reacting in the predictably suicidal way they should, and this planet now has the expected lifespan of a snowball in summer. My work here is done.

But, as I said, one often has to add the unnecessary flourishes that separate the workman from the artist. I don't mean the rococo. Not adding things just to add, but to dot the i's and close the loops. So I made sure that one of the soldiers in his unit, one of those he shot with such regretful expediency, was reading a book.

This world's book, to be precise. If the Soldier is as sharp as I think he is, he will read it while he waits for everyone to die, and he will realize that his attempt to kill me was exactly how his world was meant to die.

I owed him that bit of truth.

CHAPTER VII: The Hunt

This is the kind of thing you do. The rules are different, the logistics both simpler and not, but the game is the same. They are chasing you, they are everywhere, and you can't trust anyone to help.

Fine. You didn't despair when armies of Handler-led zombies swore to kill you, you certainly won't despair now. You know what to do.

You don't go back to your apartment. You'll miss the weapons in there, but that's it. Homesickness and survival are mutually exclusive. Besides, you have set many places, very few of which are obvious to anyone who didn't spend months setting them up. It's just a matter of getting to the closest of them, and you know ways to get around the city that make very little use of open streets. There weren't many people in them the last time you had to use them for real (there weren't many people in the world at that point), but the tunnels and bridges are still there, and you used to hide from the living, too.

You spend the first night in one of your hiding places, a small warehouse nobody seems to use, set between a bakery and a pawnshop. The warehouse's door is locked up by both a chain and its own rust, but there was a small broken window at ground level that you fixed one night, adding your own lock. The place is warm and dry thanks to the bakery's ovens set against one of the walls. You stashed a few weapons there, some supplies, and some cash. It'll do for now. You don't plan on needing anything to change the way you look, though. Zombies never seemed to notice. But your hair is long, a tribute to the wonder of showers, so you cut it with a knife. It's a beginning.

You sleep, deliberately ignoring the sounds coming from the city around you. You are fighting for your survival again, and that's as comforting as the blanket around you.

* * *

You have done this before, after the apocalypse. But this time it's harder. There's just too many people, too many of them after you. Electricity works, so there are lights everywhere. From the little information you can and dare to pick up, the hunt for you isn't letting up.

And zombies and Handlers you could kill. This time, these enemies, you don't. At the end, that's what dooms you. You are discovered and cornered in the park one night, three weeks to the day after you had to run. You are moving to a different hiding place when you unwillingly step on the world's most silent trio of outdoors near-public sex fetishists. It takes you a couple of seconds to count how many of them there were, and who was doing what. That is time enough for them to see you.

Two of them wave for you to go away. The third hasn't even noticed you were there, but then she lifts her head from her girlfriend's lap and recognizes you. She screams, loudly, and without knowing why the other two women follow in kind.

You run away as fast as you can, but people are converging fast on the place, and there aren't many ways out of the park. Ten minutes later you are trapped in a small group of trees. It's only two men, armed and cautious but

still at some level just seeing a young woman hiding among the trees. You think you could kill them. You *know* you could. It'd give you a chance to escape the park and keep hiding.

You can hear them coming. The gun's weight is familiar in your hands, the men's positions clear in your mind. Even if they are good, you have surprise on your side.

You leave the gun on the ground.

There'll be other parks, other men, other guns. You had kept yourself alive by killing zombies, and had had no problem doing so until either you run out of zombies or out of life. But then you had decided to kill Handlers, and that had eventually gotten you eaten and dead. But it was the right decision.

Now you decide not to kill these guys, and not the however many you'd have to kill after that. Even if it means you'll die. It's the right decision.

You still can't make yourself give yourself up, so you just wait sitting against a tree until they find you. There's screaming then, orders, handcuffs, lights. Someone alerted the press, because there are cameras everywhere. Everyone's cellphones are pointed at you, all their eyes somewhere between relieved and curious. Not as much hate as you'd have expected. Plenty more people than you had.

But it isn't every day that a monstrous serial killer was caught.

* * *

This is the first time you've ever been inside a police station. You wonder how common your experience of it is. All eyes are on you, and as you go from stage to stage of what feels like a nightmarish DMV with guns, you accumulate a retinue of sorts. Everybody wants to see you. Everybody wants to talk with you. Perhaps more than a few want to hurt you.

You are put into an interrogation room. It even has one of those large one-way mirrors you have seen on TV. You wonder how many people are on the other side.

It all feels strangely restful. You aren't in any danger of being gruesomely killed in the new few minutes or even hours, and that's more of a guarantee than you used to have. Tomorrow isn't here, no sense to think about it.

What's here, though, is a new policeman. He wears a rumpled suit, so you guess he's good at his job. He better be; he's the fourth person to interrogate you so far. None of them has been violent, and you don't think he'll be. He sits in front of you, opens up a folder, and starts putting photographs of gruesomely killed young women in front of you.

"Any of them look familiar?," he asks. He sounds halfway between bored and angry.

"No," you say. "Wait, I know that one." Your wrists are handcuffed to the chair, so you point to the photograph with your chin. "I rescued that one from the killer."

He looks angrier now. You shrug your shoulder. You've been saying the truth all night long, or at least everything that happened in this world. It's getting both you and the police nowhere.

"Right," says the detective. "The killer you stabbed in the basement of the family that was traveling. The basement where we didn't find any guy's body, but instead a knife with the blood of the latest victim *and* your prints on it."

"Look," you said. "I told this already. I traded the knife I bought for a better one in the kitchen, and I stabbed the guy with that one, but I took it with me. Someone must have taken the knife I left and killed another girl with it."

"The 'real killer'?"

"Another killer. The first one is definitely dead."

"So you'd say you are pretty good with a knife, right?"

You'd hit your head against the desk, but the handcuffs don't let you.

There's a knock on the door. The detective goes and opens it, talks for a few seconds with someone outside, and then looks at you with a tired face. "Your lucky day, you murdering asshole. Your shrink is here."

"I think you are a bit prejudiced, aren't you, Detective? I still haven't interviewed the suspect." An undead man enters through the door. Taking your chair with you, you jump to the table and then toward the door, trying to crash your head against the psychiatrist. The detective, yelling as sharply as you did, catches you in mid-air and throws you against the floor.

"Do it again!" he yells, pointing his gun at you.

"Go easy on her, Detective." The Logical Man sounds tolerant. "She hasn't had a good day."

* * *

Interview with suspect, recording...

"Fuck you. You killed those girls."

"... You know, I've been a forensic psychiatrist for thirteen years, and this is the first time I've heard that, Anna. Can I call you Anna?"

"No. Fuck you."

"Very well. What should I call you? The names we choose for ourselves can say a lot about who we are."

"Fuck you."

"Hmm. Let's go back to me murdering those girls. I've read over your earlier declarations. Didn't you say that you stabbed the man responsible?"

"You know I did, you sonofabitch. I killed you."

"And you don't find it surprising to be talking to me, then? No?"

"Whatever."

"That's an interesting attitude you have about death. Do you think those dead girls will come back to life?"

"Fuck you. What did you do to them?"

"Please. We are talking about you. I'm trying to understand where you're coming from."

"You wouldn't... No. You would like where I'm from, you sick bastard. You would fit just right."

"Really? Tell me more about that place. It doesn't sound very friendly."

"I'm not talking with you."

"Come on, Anna. I'll make a deal with you. You tell me things about you, I'll tell you things about me. Aren't you curious?"

"Fine. Where I come from it's full of monsters. I kill the monsters."

"And you save the helpless?"

"Sometimes. There aren't that many, and it's usually a waste of time. Now your turn. Why?"

"Why what?"

"Why you do what you do. I answered your question, now you answer mine."

"Why I'm a forensic psychiatrist. Well... "

"Fucker!"

"All right, all right. A more general statement. Why I do what I do. Hmm. I do it because I think there should be no suffering, and although my professional activities sometimes cause a certain unavoidable amount of pain, I believe that ultimately it is worth it for everyone."

"Shit. You aren't lying. You are fucking insane."

"I don't really think this is the most appropriate context for a discussion of my sanity. At the moment, the police department is more concerned about yours. They want to try you for those murders, which of course will mean the death penalty, but I'm beginning to believe that wouldn't be fair. No. I think the appropriate, the humane, thing to do would be to put you into my care."

"You fucker!"

"Anna, don't... Anna!"

"You insane motherfucking son of a – "

"Don't... Dammit! You didn't have to tase her!"

"She was attacking you, Doc. I'm not taking any chances with this one. Anybody would think she'd be happy to get an insanity plea on a silver plate."

"Which is why, Detective, I think in her case it might be the right thing to do. Such a shame. You know, I really want to find out what she has been through."

CHAPTER VIII: Bit Durani

'Asylum' once meant 'shelter'. A place of refuge for those who needed it. To seek asylum was to ask for help in extremity, to appeal to the unspoken bond of reciprocity: that person in mortal danger could one day be yourself. Once requested and granted, no man, not even the law, could trespass its bounds.

The Bit Durani Asylum presents under the pleasant light of dawn the most welcoming image you could want. It is a low house, large enough for its purposes but not institutional looking at all. The bars that close some of the windows were artistically crafted, almost excusing themselves for the task they are asked to perform. It is away from any city, in a secluded field surrounded by beautiful woods, themselves girded by a red brick wall that couldn't be seen from the house. The spikes crowning the wall are shaped as angels, their embracing arms holding sharp swords. Someone looking at the angels from very close (but nobody ever does) would have noticed that their wings are not covered in feathers, and that there is something not quite right in the bones under their bronze skin. A deep well, as old as any in the history of the land, can be seen from the windows on the back of the house.

There is a sundial near the asylum's entrance. Circles of flowers surround it, each circle decorated with a small orb of stone. The orbs represent eight of the planets, with the ninth and furthest circle tangential to the edge of the house. A path weaves through the circles, and the rare visitor would find herself passing by each planet before the end of her walk. The owner of the house himself always walks that path with care, touching each orb with his foot while mumbling under his breath. It was an old ritual, he would excuse himself. A child's game.

Most windows in the house reflect the deep blue sky, but one wing of the house has its windows open to the fresh morning air. Through it can be seen a pleasantly appointed studio, with friendly not-too-expensive wood furniture and book-covered walls. Somebody looking through the windows (but nobody ever does) might have noticed how old most of those books seem. Some of them are even kept in special shelves behind glass doors, protected from humidity, heat, and ultraviolet light. Reproductions of old weapons and pieces of art, all of them predating Greece by thousands of years, decorate the walls. The artist commissioned to do them must have had an eye for detail, because blades and stones seem to show faint stains the color of rust. As is expected from a medical man, charts and models of the human body and its organs shared corners and walls, mixing the undecipherable modern with the undecipherable ancient.

A man is sitting on a couch inside the studio, reading intently. Judging by the pile of books he has set next to him, and by the many pages of freshly-taken and very well-organized notes, he has been reading all night. When he slept, or whether he did, might have been put in doubt. A cold cup of coffee stands long forgotten over the desk next to a mostly uneaten meal.

Birds sing in the woods. No sound comes from the asylum itself, which seems content just to watch the day unfold. Had someone tried to read the physiognomy of the building (but nobody ever does), they'd have said it was waiting for the night.

* * *

Therapy always begins at noon, the patients' privacy protected by curtains and soundproof windows. Even walks and exercise are scheduled to minimize the contact between the patients, as if to quarantine each person from every source of disquiet but themselves.

But there is only one patient these days. The asylum is a business failure, something that does not seem to bother its owner and Director, who keeps a minimal infrastructure open to serve the needs of the community. Today the building hosts a single patient, one of recent but wide infamy. The Director himself had made the initial diagnosis, and he had allayed all suspicions of bias by offering to hold and treat the patient free of charge. Obliging the police's desire to keep matters away from the press, only an skeleton crew of security personnel had been retained, with a single nurse to assist the doctor.

That personnel, that house, is completely dedicated to helping the doctor perform his task, and the doctor is focused, almost obsessed, on understanding the young woman. She presents a mystery, one that even his wide studies – wider than Earth and darker than the night sky – had but hinted at. So he talks with her, and when talk isn't enough he interrogates her in comfortable privacy. The nurse, after all, has other matters to attend, and walls and doors are as soundproof as windows. The nurse remembers this very well, as she had once been a patient herself. She remembers those evenings, and the deal, and would have worked for free had it been asked of her. She enjoys her work very much.

Days pass. The personal project that has consumed the Director's life is put on hold, or, rather, diverted through a promising branch. Pages and pages of notes are taken during the day, and carefully compared with ancient texts at night. Even the asylum's mighty library proves not to be enough. Rare books are bought or borrowed from exclusive libraries few people knew of. Experts receive peculiar and specific questions by email and phone. Some of those questions are downright insane, and they refuse to consider them even hypothetically until the questioner explains, with self-deprecating excuses, that he is a psychiatrist trying to understand a mind he attempts to heal.

Every day there are new questions, new venues of approach. The doctor has questions about the patient's world, her childhood, her beliefs, her gods. He wants to know about the things she had survived, and how. He asks about dead people, and about the people alive who talked with them. He spends more than one afternoon pressing her for details about a small black book.

He is particularly interested in her death. How had it happened? When? Who had been there, and what had they done? What had she felt? And afterward? What then? Light, darkness, pain? Was she alone? How much time had passed before she realized she was again awake? How had her reinsertion in the world been? What were the differences? Was this the world she came from, or a different one? Could she come back?

The answers and protests of ignorance fill many pages, and they aren't rendered more easily comprehensible by defiance, drugs, and pain. But the doctor doesn't hurry. He has much to understand, and all explorations of insanity, from the so-called cosmos to the so-called mind, require a long investment of time.

There are also experiments. The nurse trusts him implicitly, but there are, nonetheless, some limits imposed by the police's regular interest in the patient, and he keeps within those limits with cold precision. Small rituals, bits of blood, short invocations chanted very low. All the results are negative, but

that is also information. She, who wasn't from 'here,' was also far from the place he had known. But two points are enough to triangulate both a mountain's peak and the furthest dying star. Already hypnosis had given him access to a few words from the black book she had read. It is nothing like the one he had, a book he now studies every day for clues to its provenance, but they had to be related. He feels too many things were proving to be related for there not to be a common explanation behind it all. A key. Something to grasp and use.

The doctor sleeps only a few hours every day, and fitfully so. He has never been a good sleeper, and it had been worse after his great loss, but now his usual nightmares engulf more than one hellish world. They are torture and temptation. So much reality to chain him. So much fire to clean it away. So many walls to break in order to again reach what was behind.

Breaking a will is a minor, almost routine step along the way.

* * *

The asylum is quiet in the warm night. The door opens, letting yelling men out through the flowery orbits, and spreading from the blank sundial. They aim lights and guns all over the field, and then, still barking curt orders at each other, spread through the woods. They are as fast as they can be while being cautious, and as cautious as they can manage while still being fast. More than their professional pride is at stake. The pursuit they are engaged in is something much more primal. They are hunting in the night for a monster, the oldest and most dangerous of any ritual.

One of the men sees a shadow climbing the wall from the inside. He yells, shoots twice, and runs towards it. The shadow climbs the wall quickly, leaving blood on an angel's blades, and letting a bag it is carrying fall behind. The bag hits the ground with a wet thud.

Some of the men congregate around the bag, while others run to the entrance to the field. Somehow they knew they wouldn't find the one they were looking for.

She had seemed quite harmless, almost a girl, the handcuffs and sedatives a precaution too far. But they had all heard what the news had said, and they had all been briefed by the Director on how much the journalists had had to leave unsaid. Things the police wanted to keep discrete until the briefing, and things the journalists considered crossed the line from morbid interest to repulsive gore. Men used to violence themselves, they are too familiar with the paths beyond sanity not to be wary of those who walked them. Even so, they won't easily forget that night. Not because of what they have seen or heard, but because of what they haven't.

One of the men opens the bag with almost unsure hands.

The head in the bag was facing directly at the torchlight, and the light reflected on the dead eyes of the Logical Man.

CHAPTER IX: The Chains

It's not romance. It's not sex, either, or friendship as such. It's the companionship of people who are lonely in a similar way. Maybe nobody but them can understand how it feels to have lived through the end of the world.

"I don't think we're the only ones," says the man, sipping his coffee. "Why should there be only two survivors?"

The woman shrugs. They meet for lunch almost every day; it's pretty much the only part of their routine that makes any sense. "I don't know why there should be any. I'm still toying with the idea that this is just the final stage of Loop insanity."

"I thought I was in Hell."

"Really?"

"Just for a brief second. It's not as if I wouldn't deserve it."

The woman doesn't comment on that. Sometimes she worries about the guilt he carries within himself. Sometimes she worries about how small that is. What's the well-adjusted response to having accidentally ended the world?

"Don't worry," he says. "I'm not planning on killing myself, or on doing anything more drastic. Having someone to talk with helps."

She smiles. "I'm glad, because this is driving me crazy." Her eyes glaze over for a second, remembering months in which that was literally true. "You know what I mean."

"I do. I wish there was something to do. A concrete problem to crack, an experiment to make..."

"Don't go there."

"I *said* I'm not going to end the world. Jeez!"

They look at each other frowning, but then break in simultaneous smiles. He looks down to the table, in mocking (and serious) contrition. "I mean, not again."

She pats her hand, in mocking (and serious) comfort. "One time is an accident, two would indicate a problem."

They laugh quietly.

"You don't really think you chose my name at random that night, do you?"

"No, I don't. But I don't believe in fate, either."

"Then what? Another unexplainable mystery?"

"No, wait. I don't believe in fate. Or in an afterlife, although I'm having second doubts about that. But I do believe in asymptomatic infections."

"I don't follow."

"What you told me about the Loop. It sounded like a virus for the mind, right? One that affects behavior in a very specific way. What if it can get you to, say, choose a particular psychiatrist when you are feeling like killing yourself in a big way. Hell, for all I know it could have made me feel like that."

The woman pales. "Are you saying you might have the Loop?"

"The Loop, or something else. I don't know. But you are right, it's just too much coincidence that I happened to spontaneously confess at gunpoint to the one person who'd believe me. Something made me choose you, and it stands to reason that it might have been something in my head."

"Like a posthypnotic suggestion. Why not? God knows I wouldn't have believed the Loop was possible if I hadn't lived with it."

"Can you hypnotize me or something to find out?"

"It's possible. I don't know. I have been researching ever since I came here, trying to figure out how the Loop worked, but I don't have much of an idea."

"Please. Let's try."

"All right. Come home next Saturday. We'll see if we can pick your brains."

* * *

The man is crying. He hadn't cried very often before. He hadn't cried when he realized he had unleashed an epidemic, nor when he understood he had killed the world. He had waited, and made sure, and then he had fired a single shot.

He's crying now, because the world is ending again. He's remembering what he saw, but now he's also feeling what he hadn't let himself feel before. He's too caught up in the emotion to remember that he wants to stop.

The woman is sitting next to him in the couch, her hand holding his and her voice steady. She's keeping him steady through the searing pain and self-hatred, but although she could snap him out of it, she won't. She keeps him submerged in the stream of his memories, beginning from the moment he had the idea for the virus. He had smiled when mentioning his bonus.

Now he's crying as he talks of the riots he sees on television, people fighting for dwindling supplies of every vaccine there is. He might save some lives if he convinced them that it won't be useful, that the virus can outsmart every vaccine. But they'd die anyway, just a bit later.

He still has CDC contacts. From what he has heard, it's already too late. Even if he told them everything he knows, everything he did, entropy has run its course. The glass is broken. The word has been said. It can't be undone.

He has fucked up the world and it can't be undone.

He remembers that aloud while gasping for air. He repeats it for minutes, his body closing on itself as if trying to escape existence.

He did that, once. He remembers how difficult it was to get the gun. Too many people thought that the world was ending in a way that still meant there was an afterward. Not really an end to the world, then, more like a big inconvenience. Those people were hoarding all the guns.

But he was a highly trained virologist, and he was past caring in a lot of ways. He made up in his laboratory something that kept people alive for longer and feeling better. It was neither a cure nor a vaccine; it was closer, really, to methamphetamine. But being who he was, it wasn't difficult to find someone who believed he had what he said he had. Strangely enough, in exchange for

the ‘vaccine’ and the formula, they did give him a gun. He had half-expected to be killed to assure a monopoly. Perhaps he had been working for the private industry too long.

Anyway, he had the gun. His voice calms down as he remembers going back to his apartment and brewing his last cup of coffee.

It was good coffee, he remembers aloud. There’s relief in his voice as he tells how he put the gun in his mouth, how he angled it to make sure the shoot would be fatal.

He’s smiling when he says that he pulled the trigger.

* * *

The man is screaming now. Not words, not any that the woman can recognize. Just a scream of anger, of despair, of futility. The woman lets him scream. She has heard versions of it from dozens of minds facing up to that which was impossible to face. Every cause different, every scream, underneath, the same. The man keeps screaming for a while. Then he sobs. It’s not the crying of before. There’s no guilt in his expression now, only loss. The woman pushes him onward gently.

”What do you see?” she asks.

”Nothing.”

”Are you in the darkness?”

”No. There’s nothing.”

”Are you... Are you alive?”

The man cries harder now, but he doesn’t answer.

”What are you doing?”

”I’m reading. I’m reading a book.”

The woman doesn’t ask how it’s possible to read when there’s nothing to see. Logic has little to do with the mind, or with their lives. ”Can you tell me what you’re reading?”

The man tells a story. It’s a difficult one to follow at first. It’s about a poetess, but where or when she lives the book doesn’t say. The story is told from her point of view, and in her own words, and neither of those are very much like anything the woman has ever encountered before. Even distorted by the flaws in the man’s memory, the few verbatim phrases he tells the woman from the book are full of insight, precision, and beauty.

But as the story progresses and the language becomes even more clear, it becomes obvious to the woman that the insight isn’t compassionate, and the precision is that of an attack. The beauty the poetess talks about exists against, and not with, humankind. There’s pain in her voice, and an anger that no lesser poet could have expressed in words.

Then the poetess’ words become rigid, as if she were gaining strength by losing something else. The woman wonders if maybe the poetess has become insane.

Such a genius, seeing so much pain. She wouldn’t be the first one.

And the poetess found herself in the middle of a war, and her art rose and sunk to heights and lows only hinted at by what the man can remember. The grace in torturing. The beauty of the corpses rotting on the field. The fire of weapons singing, the screaming of the wounded as a choir. The poetess has found the one thing she feels matches the strength of her voice. And after the battle, the cries of the prisoners, their lives of iron and dust.

It's not clear if the poetess is prisoner, warden, or neither of those. Her observational powers and handling of language are such that the distinction doesn't matter to her poems, and perhaps didn't even matter to herself. She cares about nothing but language, not because she loves her art, but because there's nothing else she perceives or understands. But in that she's supreme. As her genius flourishes and her sanity rots, she learns a new meter and discovers the syntax of prison walls.

Incongruously, the woman thinks that Plato was right after all. If the poetess is a prisoner, she could free herself just by talking. If she's a warden, she could chain hundreds with a few words.

She's neither, she's both. She's too big for a single prison.

She composes a poem about captivity, of captivity, a poem that teaches about prison by putting you in it. A poem that by its own nature cannot be consciously remembered.

When the man begins to recite the poem, the woman screams and hits him in the face, and keeps hitting him and yelling at him to wake up until he recovers enough to retreat against a wall, completely lost.

The woman is kneeling next on the ground, her panic still strong.

She's sure the man had began to recite the Loop.

CHAPTER X: Afterlife

The Asylum has closed upon itself, but it's not dead. Its Director and owner now lies under sacred ground, and its only patient is a fugitive hunted by law and celebrity, but there are gears in Bit Durani, and they still move.

At the heart of this movement is the Director's Will, a complex document that works as nothing less than a virtual computer built out of documents and law.

The Will puts the Asylum in the hands of a foundation that had already been established, one with exceedingly precise instructions. A byzantine network of mandates instructs transfers of money, objects, and contracts in a way that guarantees no individual is aware of the overall purpose, and most of them, in fact, ignore that there is one. But the Will has a goal. It defines its nature, and in turn, the Will will make it real.

The Asylum works tirelessly. Artifacts are acquired, texts translated, patterns collated. Architects present hypothetical solutions to disturbing problems, never to know that they are being built by contractors paid not to know what they build. Assured of payment and legal protection, they don't care much about whether it's right, and they don't care at all about the why.

Only the Will knows what it's being done, but only in the way in which a clock knows the time. It doesn't think, but it reacts. It plans. People have been paid to manage projects they only know the structure of, but not their means or goals. Those people anticipate problems, set up solutions, improve and fill what was the sketch of a plan. They are generals ignorant of the location of the battlefield or the nature of the war. But they fulfill their role.

And the Will keeps on. Building what it was created to build, and searching for a missing piece: a woman who beheaded the Director, but couldn't stop his Will. She will be found, captured, and employed in the most useful way.

* * *

The Survivor is away from the Asylum and for now unseen by the Will. She learned much during her imprisonment. The Asylum's Director was forthright with his questions, and they taught her almost as much as her answers taught him. Little of what she has learned makes sense to her for now. She's fine with that.

Zombies and Handlers didn't make much sense to her either, not at first. The Survivor only needed to understand what they were doing and how to kill them.

That had been the most important piece of knowledge when she was prisoner in one world, and things hadn't changed in the next one.

The Logical Man had died, too, just like her. But not by the hand or teeth of zombie or Handler. He died in a different hell, somewhere darker than the one she had survived in, somewhere he wants to return to. The Survivor doesn't worry about not understanding his motivation. She's only concerned with stopping him, and those like him, and those worse than him.

Because there's someone worse. The Logical Man had dedicated hours and drugs and steel to question her about a single detail, the black book that had

taught Handlers how to talk with zombies. He thought that book had been somehow the trigger for the end of the world, and had even told her about the book he had found or that had found him. She had once sworn to kill as many Handlers as she could. There are no Handlers any more, but there might be someone she needs to kill even more.

The Survivor is hiding again, but not running away. She's running toward something, a secret she had managed to keep from the Logical Man.

* * *

The man and the woman aren't going anywhere. They have spent three days now in her apartment, dark days of pain for him. His amorality had always been pragmatical in its scope, and the guilt of ending the world has finally caught up with him. He lives, and although he wants to, he has yet to figure out a justification or excuse. He doesn't want to kill himself, and while he curls up on the couch for hours under the weight of his pain, he's ransacking his brain trying to find a way to convince himself not to pick up the gun again.

The woman is helping him, waiting, and thinking. She goes over her recording of the hypnosis session again and again (but always stopping before he begins to recall the poem). There's much she doesn't understand, including the shape of the whole. But his end of the world and her end of the world seem to have been connected, at the last if not at the beginning.

She wonders what memories of her own she'd recover under hypnosis. Something about an amoral man creating and releasing, accidentally or not, a Doomsday viral weapon? Or something more? She's not sure she wants to know, and there's no one she trusts to delve into her memory like that.

(And when she's being especially honest with herself, she knows she doesn't want to relieve being in the Loop. She doesn't want to remember it, and even just hypnotic suggestion would feel too similar. She will never again be under somebody else's control like that.)

* * *

A Will in movement. A Survivor with more than an immediate goal. A man who did too much and too little to forgive himself. A woman who is trying to understand something bigger than death.

Four people, echoes of people, seeds of people. Four people who were there when the world ended, and who were there afterward. Four lost people looking for a map. Four explorers without a home to go back.

Sitting at a quaint wooden desk, a nondescript man writes about them in a small notebook with black covers. He prefers longhand before setting a book by print. It's more personal, and it's not as if he ever has to make any corrections. It's only the beginning of the book, and he already knows the way it will go. There'll be betrayals, deaths, and worst of all love. And in the last chapter, the end of the world.

That's the way stories always go.

* * *

Time passes. That's a change. Five minutes ago there had been no *you*, no unbroken consciousness to give meaning to the words 'five minutes ago.'

Now time passes, and you're content to let it pass. There's nothing to see or feel, no intrusion on the senses or bodily demand. You lie in the center of an infinite bubble of darkness, and you feel almost serene for the second time in your life. But serenity is a feeling, and with feeling come thoughts. The mind differentiates, splits, remembers, hopes. Your mind generates its own prickling needles, even in this featureless void.

You fight it. You cling to peace with white-hot need. And the more you fight the stronger your mind becomes, until serenity is a recent memory and your thoughts rumble like a storm.

With thought come questions. Naked monkeys need to know where they are going, and from where. You aren't sure if the question even makes much sense.

You remember dying. You remember dying a couple of times, actually, and you remember coming back the first time. The memory triggers more. You remember your first encounter with Anna, her sticking a knife in your chest. You remember the way she cut your throat and left you to die on a pool of your own blood.

The echo of that pain awakens a more recent echo of an even stronger one. Was your throat cut again?

Yes. It was Anna. But she didn't stop there. You remember being alive while she cut your head like a butcher severing a meat slab. You remember dying just after her knife hit the bone.

She shouldn't have been able to do that. She was an experimental subject, an artifact. A source of information you thought you had captured and controlled.

You suddenly come to understand that you hate her. Personally and individually. It feels strange.

It feels intimate. It's the closest you have been to anyone in a long time. Not as someone to use in some way, but as someone whose well-being is meaningful to you in a personal way. Someone you want dead in a very painful way.

You feel yourself smiling in the darkness. This new awareness fills you with joy. Before delivering the world to a dark evil once again, you will kill Anna.

And for the first time, killing will bring you joy.

It's worth the delay, the continued existence.

But do you exist? As soon as you make yourself the question you know you are being ridiculous. Of course you do. Even when you were held in Their eternal tortures you still existed, although with the pain masking the deeper pain of this.

You are now, you realize, somewhere. This brings things into focus. You still can't see or hear anything, but you can dimly feel that you are in an enclosed space, not much bigger than yourself. And you're not alone. There's something in there. Something or perhaps someone, or perhaps something else.

You call to it. There's no echo and no response. You want to wait, but it's impossible without knowing for how long or what for.

Moments of years after that, nothing has happened.

Moments of years after that, nothing has happened.

Moments of years after that, nothing has happened. You wonder if you'll go insane.

Moments of years after that, nothing has happened.

You don't recognize the sounds as coming outside of your mind until they have nearly reached you. The intrusion of something, anything, sharpens your hunger.

You can barely wait, and almost fail to realize that they are the sounds of a shovel moving dirt.

Something opens your coffin. Its shape blocks most of the night sky. It leans over you, grabs your hair, and pulls you up with surprising ease.

You remember why even before you see your headless body still lying in your grave.

You don't recognize the man holding you at eye level with himself, but you do recognize the cold insanity in his eyes.

"I have questions," says the man.

You laugh, long, loud, and joyfully. The Soldier doesn't stop you.

Chapter XI: An Study on Applied Abstract Epidemiology

It takes you weeks of painful introspection and the full-time support of a psychiatrist to manage to listen to the recording. The first part is the worst.

Under hypnosis you remembered not only what you did, but why, and the smug and shallowly ambitious voice telling about designing a genocidal weapon for a bonus is undoubtedly your own. It's the most unforgiving mirror that could be conceived, and the shame, pain, and self-loathing are at times overwhelming.

The psychiatrist, a fellow survivor from a different apocalypse, lets it overwhelm you. She has the grace to let you suffer, and the humanity not to forgive you. You couldn't thank her enough for that. You shouldn't be forgiven, and never will. But at least now you don't have to hate yourself on your own. If she can live with you, maybe you will, too.

You have a nervous crisis when you first listen to yourself narrating the end of the world, or at least the parts of it you were alive for. In a way, it has never stopped happening for you. The psychiatrist lets you watch news channels all day long to reassure yourself that there's no polymorphic pandemic going on, that after destroying the new versions you had created you didn't release anything new.

Every study you have made of your body says that you don't carry the vaccine you injected yourself with. You still begged the psychiatrist to let you bring to her home enough equipment to do the tests again. It's a daily ritual now, but it only buys you an hour of calm or so.

You log into the CDC network a dozen times a day, too. You don't trust them to see in time what you did. They didn't, last time. So you study cases and lab reports, keeping a diligent vigilance against the disease that killed the world.

You are also watching the man who created it. Thus far you have done nothing threatening. There's no panic, no riots, no reassuring statements from government officers who couldn't distinguish between DNA and RNA. Does not killing this world count for something? And how to make sure?

The desire to kill yourself out of hate is kept somewhat in check. But what if it's the only way to keep the world safe? It shouldn't depend on the sanity of any one person.

It shouldn't depend on *yours*. That'd be a sick joke. The pressure alone would, is, already driving you insane.

You wonder if you'd feel better in an asylum. Safer. Less weighted down by the need for control. But the psychiatrist reminds you that there are bigger things going on than your breakdown. You might not deserve to be alive, but you are. You shot yourself in the head in the middle of an extinction pandemic, and yet here you are, alive in a world where that pandemic is unknown. She thinks you should be more curious about why and how.

You aren't, not at first, but you agree to listen to the second part of the recording, the one about the book, the poetess, and the prison walls.

* * *

There's much you don't understand about what you remembered under hypnosis. Even if you weren't a lifelong atheist, you had never heard of an afterlife spent reading books. And the contents of the book themselves are not the least strange part of it.

Not the war, the violence, or the life of the prisoners. That's just humanity, and even the deliberately sheltered life of a weapon designer – you have come to accept that this was what you were, no matter what you put on your papers – hadn't kept you from a partial awareness of it. People die. People kill. People keep each other in cells, cages, and pens. It never seemed really worth it to you, but it was for those who signed your generous paychecks, and that was as far as you needed to take your analysis of it.

But the work of the poetess, the way in which she describes even the simplest details... You have never paid much attention to literature. Perhaps that makes you even more susceptible to it, like an unvaccinated, untrained immune system facing a powerful disease. The irony doesn't escape you, even as the few fragments of the book you can recall haunt your ears with strange rhythms. The psychiatrist is never present when you listen to them. She hasn't spoken much about her time, as she calls it, within the Loop, but her hatred and fear are plain even for you to see. She lost her freedom and sanity once to words akin to those, and even the beauty in them now shocks her like a physical blow.

There's power in there, and structure, and it's wielded with virtuosity, curiosity, and a cold disregard for consequences. You can relate too well to that.

You remember your own days of unyielding focus, the way the problem melded with your mind until working on the problem was not separate from living. You remember the happiness of solutions, followed by the emptiness of letting go. It was a form of addiction, one that pushed you from challenge to challenge.

And it was beauty, too.

By the end of the recording, an abrupt finale of screams and slaps to your face, you understand the what and the why, if not the how. The poetess had sought understanding, and created a tool, and just like anyone you could ever come to understand, just like you did and had, she tested it.

She had created what a military officer would call a weapon, because they only understand the first half of what a destructive experiment is for. You wonder what the poetess learned at the end. You don't ask yourself whether it was worth it, and you know she didn't ask it herself.

You do ask questions of the psychiatrist, though. Anything and everything that she can recall about the Loop and the outbreak. You know little to nothing about the human mind, but weaponized epidemics is what you do. The medium changes, but the form is the same. It's about vectors, infectiousness, the organism and the species mounting a defense. You are, after all, the only expert you know on how to kill mankind.

One of two, now. The thought feels strange.

Sometimes an hour happens without you thinking about what you did. Such is the power that research has over you. The psychiatrist seems satisfied enough with that.

* * *

Probably you should be telling her about your dreams. Then again, you already have enough trouble dealing with your waking hours.

For a while you woke up crying, but unable, and anyway unwilling, to remember what you had dreamed of. You have enough conscious memories to script lifetimes of nightmares, and you are pretty sure you will never be able to tolerate living in the country or a small town. You have very good reasons to need to hear that there are people around.

A few weeks after the hypnosis session, though, your dreams have become different. You dream about the poetess. You know it's her, and you know it's really how she looks, even if you should have no way to know. You dream of her days in prison, days spent composing a poem as complex as any gene regulatory network you ever crafted.

In your dreams you can hear her talk to herself, if something as beautiful as that could be called so. It's not that her voice is musical, or the subject sublime. But the way the phrases are crafted, the way she recreates language along the way to say things that couldn't be said before, is endlessly fascinating. You feel like a student again. And you were always a good student.

She's not a nice person, no. That much is clear to you, and absolutely meaningless. Her mind, her skill, mirror and perhaps surpasses yours, and your nights are spent in a crash course in what someone might call applied linguistics. In time, you trust, you'll understand perhaps a tenth of what she's doing. What a thing to know.

You begin to wake up contented. The psychiatrist is happy with this development, although you think she knows you are dreaming and hiding it from her. But you don't believe she knows what you're dreaming about.

* * *

You are working again, in a way. You promise the psychiatrist, truthfully, that you aren't working on your virus or attempting to create a vaccine. You spend time out of her apartment, now. You go with your computer to coffee shops, attempting to craft an epidemiological model for a deadly poem. The majority of your information comes from the remembrances of an once-insane psychiatrist and your dreams about the inner monologue of a dangerous genius.

It's not enough, but it's something. You record on your computer whatever you can remember of the poetess' words in your dreams, and then use every analysis method you know or can learn about to try to understand what makes them different from other sets of words.

You're so far from an answer that it would depress you, except that the perspective of a long quest is exactly what was needed to keep you alive. You can already feel the sketches of new ideas bubbling up in your mind, as if learning about the poetess' work could also be teaching you about your own. You write down those ideas and move on. It's not yet time for you to come back to working with viruses.

Not right now.

As the weeks go by you begin to go back to some of your old life. You return to your apartment, although you meet the psychiatrist every day. You

don't obsess about CDC reports quite so much. You don't think about killing yourself more than once or twice a day.

You're curious, and learning, and that's enough. And when a voice in your head tells you that this was exactly what you were doing the last time, you have to shrug and go on. It's either this or not living.

After weighing the question for a while, it seems you have tentatively chosen to live. You tell the psychiatrist this, and she smiles at you. She's genuinely happy, and doesn't press for details.

You're glad on both accounts. She had accepted as a patient a man who inadvertently destroyed the world, but she would probably kill you if she realized you are studying the Loop.

Chapter XII: Unconventional Warfare

The man is sneezing almost constantly. He seems to be allergic to dust, which is an ironic and perhaps deadly condition for an archeologist, even one who works in museums and only digs grants. Like in many other fields of science, the stores of accumulated raw evidence are so large that most researchers spend their time doing clerical work.

But right now the man doing something a bit more physical, quite more illegal, and considerably more fun. He's stealing from the museum he works for.

It's not a very sophisticated heist, as these things go. No dangling from ceilings or cutting of wires. He has had for years all the keys he needs, and the sum of his criminal cunning are the gloves he wears. They are making it harder to turn the pages on the musty catalog, though, but without the catalog even he would soon be lost in the museum's basement storage rooms. There are dozens of centuries of history half-packed in the labyrinth of shelves, objects that once meant much or little to a few people or a lot. Many of them haven't been seen in years. It's the privilege of the living what to pay attention to, and a painting commissioned by a king with nary a second thought gets place of pride centuries later, while his tomb is unvisited and his favorite sword gathers dust. What's the harm in giving an object the museum doesn't really want to someone that, whatever their reasons, certainly seems to appreciate it?

That's what the man is telling himself, mumbling louder than a thief should, even if the museum guards are far away playing their nightly game of poker. The museum holds nothing considered of much monetary value, and thus pays its guards in the same vein. The staff isn't paid much, either, which is one of the reasons why the man is looking for a very, very old axe at the behest of a shadowy but clearly experienced representative of someone who didn't want his name known.

The man might have been driven to this one act of crime by a combination of boredom, greed, and every quiet man's desire to be an outlaw, but he's still a scholar. He has learned as much as he could on the item he's about to steal. There wasn't much specific to the object, not even a suggestive question or a laughed-away rumor. A Hittite bronze axe, dented, unremarkable except for some meaningless marks. It's unlikely to be an overlooked historical treasure, and the black market for that sort of object couldn't exactly be wide.

But someone is willing to pay, and the man convinces himself that adventure and money were an adequate compensation for such a small betrayal as it is to give away an object nobody was studying, and nobody could learn anything from.

But even greedy archeologists with trembling hands are archeologists underneath, and after he locates the bronze axe he can't resist studying it with care. It had no special beauty or value that he could find, but the money he had been promised says otherwise.

It's a mystery. The man begins to wonder if it could be possible to renege on his promise and give his upfront payment back.

He's deeply in thought, so you have no problem surprising him with a blow to the head from behind.

* * *

The Colonel had been curious, but most of all he had been bored. As time passed, journalists, researchers, and even peace activists had seemed to give up, depriving him of the last tactical training he had used to distract himself from his too-slowly-approaching death. All he had now were his memories of war, and memories had a way of retaining exactly the wrong things. Like the photograph of a lost loved one, memories only kept the loss. His life had none of the exhilaration of combat, none of the risk and fire. He had no one but himself to test his wits and will against, and he was a surly opponent. The only things he had now were the nightmares he had grown used to, and people who couldn't possibly understand.

The girl in his studio is a new development. If someone was trying to seduce a story out of him, their intelligence work left much to be desired. The girl isn't particularly beautiful, his own tastes had always run to mature women, and he is in any case much too old now to be ruled by his desire. Anyway, the girl isn't trying to seduce, flatter, or even interview him. She is just looking around his studio intently, her eyes weighing every weapon in every cabinet and wall. Even her clothes, a long-sleeved t-shirt, combat boots, and pants, had been chosen with no regard to anybody's eyes.

The Colonel decides to engage. "Are you here to ask me about the village?"

The girl turns to him. It isn't that she was impolite; she is just neither confrontational nor awed. "In a way."

"You don't seem the journalist type. Are you writing a book or have some sort of website? Or are you from Amnesty International?" He smiles as he says those last two words. His checks to them are never rejected, but they have never taken down the small article about him they had put online. He could respect that, in a very faint way. And soldiers don't have the luxury of caring about their posthumous reputations. That was the mark of the bad general.

The girl shakes her head. "No. I'm here for a weapon."

"A weapon? You came to me for a gun?"

"Probably a gun. I don't know yet. Something you used to kill many innocent people. Something –" the girl shrugs, somewhat apologetic for the following words, "– cursed, if you want to look at it that way"

"It was a war," spits the Colonel out of habit. But the girl had spoken as if she were talking about the caliber of a gun. Even now she is waiting for him to continue. The Colonel takes his old machine gun down from a wall, the one that features in his every nightmare. "This one. I defended my country with this gun." Still a trained man, he had shouldered the weapon and pointed it to the floor, but close to the girl's feet. He thinks he'll let it be assumed that the gun is loaded. It is.

"Yes. I think it's that one. I need you to give it to me."

The Colonel's smile is unkind. He has no regard for the unsound of mind. Not when it is a pampered civilian, anyway. "And why would I?"

The girl takes off her t-shirt. It is as sexless a gesture as he had ever seen on the battlefield. Her skin under her clothes is crisscrossed by scars. Some of them draw strange patterns, and the Colonel wants to believe they had been self-inflicted. Some people did that.

But he can't delude himself. He has seen too many similar marks on too many bodies on both sides of too many wars. The girl had been interrogated, and it had taken time.

He looks at her eyes again. Once he looks past her gender, her age, and her clothes, the eyes are too familiar. She has seen war. Not any he had fought in, but they weren't that different.

And she is still in the fight.

The Colonel is not a good man. Perhaps he had never been, or perhaps he had had to choose between madness and shedding off his soul. He had done the job he had been asked to, and for better and for worse that was that. Damning himself had been an occupation hazard.

He gives his fellow soldier his gun.

* * *

The Will is increasingly aware of its progress being impeded. There is no frustration involved, for the Will can't feel, and no surprise, for it can't think, but hired experts recognize a deliberate pattern of interference, and other hired experts conclude that it is an attack.

Someone is preventing the Will from gathering certain artifacts. Not many of them, but key ones. This unknown force had stopped the Will's agents from performing their tasks, stolen the artifacts from them, or even destroyed or acquired them beforehand. The Will understands that it is being opposed by an adversary aware of its plans.

The Will reacts as is implicit in its plans. More resources are dedicated to gathering important artifacts. The pace of operations is increased. Traps are set to tempt an ill-thought attack.

The Will also has a strong suspicion, if something like the Will could be said to suspect, about the identity of its adversary. Detective agencies are hired to find a dangerously, infamously unbalanced young woman. That her safe return isn't required is strongly hinted at.

Delayed and hobbled, but not stopped, the Will continues to build the Thing it was meant to build in the basement under the asylum's holding cells. Invoking requires a ritual and a Will, not a body or being alive.

An organizational clockwork is ticking, mechanically and dispassionately converging into what could be a very unique night.

The last.

But the Will had been built to triumph no matter what. It isn't creative, but it can steal and adapt. While most resources are being poured into a much larger version of what the asylum's former Director had once done an apocalypse back, some are thrown into a side project. Diversion, weapon, contingency plan. The Will hadn't been built to be aware of distinctions like

that. It is an useful thing to have, and it could have it, so verification of the fact gave place to acquisition with no delay.

The asylum's overground facilities are repurposed. This was simple. They had been designed, after all, to hold the possibly violent and unsound of mind. All that is needed is to add the laboratory equipment to research their creation.

Bit Durani had already all the contacts it needed with the pharmaceutical world. It had the reputation and the resources, even those that operated beyond the law. It even had notes and recordings about a young woman's memory of a certain book.

Zombies could be created, and the Will would find a way.

Chapter XIII: Eleventh Hour

Things are going well. She always had that feeling after she saw a patient improve in a significant way, but this time there is more to it than that. She had helped a fellow survivor, another person who had died in the end of the world (*an* end of the world, if such a thing made any sense), and yet was still alive. She knows firsthand what that does to a person's psyche, and helping him had lessened her own pain.

There is also the information they had learned about the origins of the Loop. In a way it had made things worse, too. She had hoped to put behind her those awful years of insanity and invisible chains. Not the emotional scars, of course, but the reality of it. Whatever terrors the world held, whatever trial it would put her through, it wouldn't be that one.

But the Loop had pursued her to another life. Under hypnosis, the man had been about to recite the Loop, which she knows beyond certainty would bring her back into its thrall. The terror she had felt, the strength of her instinctual reaction, doesn't surprise her when she can think about them. Had it come to that, she would have killed the man without any hesitation, so strong was her revulsion of losing her freedom again like that.

Yet she had been told the nature of the Loop, and although it made it perhaps more terrible, it gave her something to hold on to. Someone to hate. Had the Loop been an unthinkable subtle powerful poem written by a Poetess somewhere in the world she had lived in? Could there have existed someone capable of enslaving the world with a few words?

Very well, then. It is not a sane explanation, and it doesn't satisfy the logical part of her mind, but now she has someone to hate. Someone had done that to the world, something had done that to her, and that it hadn't been personal has no bearing on her hate.

Her hate frees her from the stasis she had put herself into out of fear of the horror of the Loop. She is no hero and no avenging villain. But she will track down the Poetess. She will cure her world, if it can be reached somehow. And maybe she'd see to it that the Poetess would never harm anyone again.

Her work with the man had laid the groundwork for her research. She knows now for a fact that there were or had been more than one world, and that they sometimes ended, and people could sometimes survive that. She hadn't shared her own memories with anyone before the man, but if she had done it – or if her world's end had been more violent or apparently psychologically significant – she might have ended under psychiatric care. And not unnecessarily, even. An real apocalypse was no less and no more traumatic than a delusional one.

But psychiatric case files might hold the way to find more survivors. And if they all had information in their subconscious, as the man had, perhaps more pieces of the puzzle could be gathered. It was a project that could take years or a lifetime, but there isn't anything more important.

It only takes her weeks to find the first case, but that leads to others in quick succession. Perhaps not all of them are bona fide survivors, but she thinks most of them could be, and she hasn't been alone in her assessment.

Somebody had been researching the same case files, leaving a trail of puzzled administrators that has in turn eased her own search.

It is someone working at the Bit Durani asylum, an institution that under hushed-up circumstances had ceased to take patients and focused itself on research.

She decides to visit Bit Durani.

It is only when she has already driven halfway there that she realizes it is close to midnight and it makes no sense to go right then. But she can't turn her car around.

She tries to scream, but the Loop won't let her.

* * *

The burly man is reading aloud from a paper, neither understanding nor caring to understand. He is paid not to care for much worse things than that.

If someone is reading this to you, you are someone who has lived through, and most likely died during, the end of the world. I do not know how it is that you or any of the other survivors are here. I know that you are not the only one, for I'm also an unwilling refugee from universal doom.

Please understand that I use the word 'doom' both in a rhetorical and in a technical sense, but not in judgment. It was me who deliberately, and only after great pains, offered the world to entities some might describe as evil gods. I did this for my own reasons, and I neither require nor could now use absolution. The world's cycle of pain had to be put to an end, I could do it, and I did it. The result was as painful and complete as I had hoped it to be, but not, sadly, as permanent.

This put me in a nightmarish predicament. Assuming I could again achieve the end of the world, either by the same or by different means as in my last attempt, it was possible that I would just return to consciousness in yet another world. Rather than shutting down the Wheel, I would be merely hopping between different but equally unbearable instances of it.

The only possible solution, one that I outlined but could not fully implement during my lifetime, is to simultaneously still all existing worlds. Shut down the whole mechanism, so to speak. I structured my Will in such a way that, should I die prematurely, as seems to have been the case, Bit Durani would continue my research, and would eventually accomplish this. It's all too likely that my death has only resulted in my being shifted to another world, but if the solution is sound, it should reach me there, too.

If this particular paragraph is being read to you, it means the solution involves a blood sacrifice of some sort, almost certainly extremely painful, most likely fatal. I have some expertise in these matters, and I suspect this will be the case. This doesn't trouble me – every second in every world, much worse suffering takes place, suffering I intend to extinguish for all eternity – but as a fellow survivor, I left instructions for things to be explained to you. Who knows? There might be sets of Wheels beyond these Wheels, and you having this knowledge might save them too.

Now you have to die. With any luck, we'll all finally rest in peace.

The burly man folds the paper. "I can't say I followed most of it. As far as I'm concerned, the important point is that I'm getting paid to shoot you." He cocks his gun. "I have nothing against you and I don't believe in this crazy shit. But this is the kind of thing I get paid to do."

He aims at the woman handcuffed to the chair. Seemingly coming from nowhere, someone breaks his neck with a bronze axe.

* * *

The Psychiatrist isn't less terrified now that she had been a few minutes before. No one is about to kill her, but she is still, again, trapped by the Loop, and that is worse. She almost wishes she would lose her sanity more quickly this time.

The woman who has just saved her doesn't seem aware of the Loop. She walks through Bit Durani's corridors with silent confidence, a bronze axe in one hand and a gun hanging from her shoulder. She has given her a much smaller gun, not asking whether she knows how to use it. She suspects the woman assumes that if she doesn't, she will learn.

The Psychiatrist recognizes the young woman from the files she had read. She had been a former patient, a bit of a famous serial killer, in fact. She both looks the part and doesn't. Her ease with weapons is obvious, as well as her complete lack of fear. But it seems a form of hardness stemming from experience and competence. From the short instructions she had given the Psychiatrist, she has done something to make most of the asylum's staff leave the wing clear.

It won't take long for them to leave the asylum.

The Psychiatrist has tried to thank her, but she has waved her away, as if saving her life hadn't been a bad thing, but mostly incidental. Perhaps it is. She had been a patient in Bit Durani once, and to come back to it takes more than a desire to save someone.

The Psychiatrist concludes with elation that the young woman is at war.

Then she realizes that the elation isn't hers. The Loop had found a new host and more. With mindless, poetic inevitability, it had figured out a way to use the young woman and Bit Durani's insane project for its own ends.

A sudden vision overwhelms her inner eye. World after world, all caught in the Loop. Forever.

Her revulsion is instantaneous and absolute, and her mind achieves the almost impossible: it breaks the Loop. For a little while.

Enough time for the Psychiatrist to raise her gun. Enough time for the young woman to turn around, weapons at hand. Enough time for the Loop to stab her mind with images of an infinite number of apocalypses consuming an infinite number of worlds with fire.

Enough time for her to shoot herself.

All the worlds begin to die.

* * *

The man finishes the chapter he is working on. It isn't the final one, not by far, but the conclusion is now clear.

The only possible conclusion, the one implicit in the very first day.

Chapter XIV: Silence in Heaven for About Half an Hour

We came to save you from forgetfulness. We came to save you from the wall you built between your present and your past, a wall that kept away memories but not the darkness in them. We are the darkness made unavoidably clear. We are the memory made present in your flesh.

We are the horrors at the beginning. We were here before you were you, before your species, before your world, before your mind. We are every night of terror you don't remember from the womb. We are the reason why you are afraid of darkness, loneliness, and death.

We came and nations screamed in terror, but we didn't care. Cities burned to the ground in the panic of their citizens, but that was nothing to us. We came for you. We are not a punishment. We are not here because of your sins. It was somebody else, somebody in another world, who made it possible for us to be here. You did your very best to keep us away, every second of every day, and in the end it meant nothing.

And it's you we came for. Because you dreamed of us, and your dream made us real, and the more you forgot about us, the more intense your dream became. Until your whole day was spent dreaming of us, fearing us, paralyzed by terror, even as you walked, worked, spoke, and ate. Your life was something your body did while the depths of your mind shivered in terror. You sacrificed most of what you could be, so we would be not.

We are real now. You can hear the screams. You, too, will scream soon.

We have no arms, but let our darkness embrace you.

Let us help you remember why you were afraid of yourself.

* * *

The woman is eating with her parents and sister when it happens. The meal is simple but lovingly set, the conversation lively and warm. The woman doesn't participate much, content just listening to the rhythms of dialogue and family, unspoken things all the more obvious because they aren't said.

Then the Sun disappears at once. What comes then isn't night, for there is neither stars nor moon above them, and whatever it is that the sky shows, it isn't the universe they had been in just a few minutes before. It is dark and alive. It pulses and bleeds something other than blood. It seems to breathe something fouler than air.

The woman notices that every shadow is also alive. Hungry. Slithering toward skin and meat. A darkness shaped like the shadow of no possible object curves around her ankles, around her parents' throats, around her sister's hand. She wonders why she had never noticed them before. Once seen, it is plain that they have always been there.

The family keeps eating and talking among the shifting shadows. Their terror is as plain in their eyes as it has always been, but it doesn't shake their hands. They go through their lunch as the shadows nibbles their skin. They talk about their day as blood drips from their limbs. They joke and laugh as pitch-black tendrils seek entrance into their heads. Whatever the darkness touches becomes painful and ill, alien and bleeding, but it doesn't die.

The lunch goes on as they are eaten, and what is eating them has no intention of killing them. The feeding will go on forever, a single unending perfectly horrible moment in time.

It is beautiful and inspiring. The woman whispers to the shadows, and the shadows answer back. The Poetess and the darkness begin a long conversation, both of them oblivious to the pain.

* * *

The Survivor swears. She stands still for a second over the corpse, deciding whether to run or... No. From what she had known, this would be a different type of apocalypse, not the kind you can hide from. Whatever her chances are, they'll be better if she goes to the root of the problem. She takes the gun from the woman's cooling hand and then walks through the corridor at a faster pace, now willing to shoot at sight whoever crosses her path, undead or alive.

She has to pick up the backpack she had left in a nearby room.

* * *

We come into the place where the key had been turned, to honor and kill those who had made it so. It is a place of familiar geometries and familiar intent. It is a reflection of home. The Will welcomes us.

In the building there is a room, in the room a desk, at the desk a man. The man is writing by hand the last chapter of a book. We know without knowledge that we have to be there and bear witness to what will transpire. It says so in the book.

The man does not stop writing when we swirl inside the shadows. We have no shape, for he has no forgotten nightmares for us to draw from. He remembers us. He remembers everything, and wrote about all.

He does raise his head when another man comes into the room. The new man is taller than the man at the desk, stronger and used to violence. Although he notices us, he gives no sign of fear.

"You are here," says the tall man. It is a threat rather than a fact.

The man at the desk shrugs. "So am I. You are here, too. I have to say that's something of a surprise."

"Really? This isn't another trick to get me to kill the world again?"

The man at the desk shakes his head. "I'm neither omnipotent nor malevolent, merely very well-informed and saddled with a heavy task. What I had you do was unfortunate but necessary. Believe me, your fate could have been worse."

The tall man takes a gun out of a pocket and shoots at the other man. His gun is flawlessly maintained and his aim is true, but the shot misses its target. So do the next five.

"I'm sorry," says the man at the desk. "Certain things happen in certain ways. Your weapon is useless in this context, and before you try, so would be your hands."

The tall man throws his gun away. "Well, I have other weapons." He moves away from the door. A young woman enters the room. She looks at us as if gauging our weaknesses, and then focuses on the sitting man.

The man at the desk, for the first time that we can see, puts down his pen. "It's too soon, and it's the wrong way. You are only making things worse, the both of you."

The woman points at us. "Worse than those things eating up every world?"

"Much worse."

"Fuck you," says the woman, and shows the man a device. "And goodbye." She presses a button.

We can't be hurt by fire. But the explosions that destroy Bit Durani shake the geometry that had allowed us to get in. Our grasp weakens. Darkness calls us back.

We can feel a thousand worlds cry as we slip away.

** * **

He had remembered for a while, but he isn't sure what. It had been a pain, a very old wound that had pulsed for a second in renewed agony. While it happened there had been nothing else, not in the world or in his mind, except the way it hurt, but it had been just a second, and then the pain went away. But he knows the wound is still there, somewhere inside. The wound had been there even before his mistake had killed a world.

He searches in vain for the wound in his mind. He only has vague memories, fading fast, of things coming out of shadows that hadn't been there. The things had been strange and familiar, things he knew but had never seen. He had been so scared, and yet so grateful to finally remember... There had been pain and completion, both deeper than he had dreamed possible.

Now there is only loss. He weeps without knowing what for. He knows the weeping will eventually end, but the reason for it will not.

A voice speaks over his shoulder. He turns around to see no one, but the voice keeps talking, and soon he doesn't care where it comes from. It is the most beautiful voice he has ever heard. Not because of how it sounds or what it says, but of how it says it. It makes language itself a thing of beauty, something to be used and molded by its superior force. He realizes he knows the voice from before. There could not be two such voices in all of the worlds.

"Yes," says the Poetess. It is her. He gasps with the ache of a need he hadn't known he had. But she knows it. She knows everything about him and about the world. She knows about everything he had done and wanted to do, about the whys and hows, about his pain and flows. Without pity, she understands. She had come with the shadows, and when the shadows left a part of her had remained. A poem she had dictated to the shadows and the shadows had repeated to him, a poem that had built in his mind, a phrase at a time, a reflection of herself. An echo that was a fully independent voice, less corporeal than him but no less real.

The echo knows that he loves her. He believes the loss he had felt all of his life, the wound that had flared just then, can be salvaged by the greater pain, greater wound, greater fire that is her mind. He had unmade and remade the strings of life. She could do that to his self.

The echo promises him that and more if he would do but one thing. He accepts without needing to think about it. He had killed a world before.

This time it'll even be on purpose.

Chapter XV: Motivational Speeches

He is neither stupid nor blind, but the patterns of the Loop are deeper than his awareness. To them heias the musical instrument, not the musician, the rippling aether instead of the eye. The Loop isn't just written in a language he doesn't understand; it is written in a way that changes language itself as it unfolds. To fully grasp the Loop he would not only have to understand, but also to understand new forms of understanding, and how they would flow and relate to each other.

It is an overwhelmingly impossible task.

But he hasn't been tasked with understanding the Loop, only with recreating enough of it for the Poetess' ends. And she has given him a gift for this, a compact, impossibly complex seed of language that the shadows had whispered in his ears. The seed carries the Poetess' voice, and through and inside it just enough of her insight to make the Loop possible.

He dedicates his life to this, not leaving his apartment at all. He makes his computer show him long random strings of characters, letting the seed inside him recognize bits and patterns that could be of use. He then modifies the program to refine what it shows him, gradually refining it towards an end he will recognize but not understand. He knows he is being used as nothing else but a conduit for the Poetess' mind, as much a tool as the computer program or a paper pad.

Such is the nature of love. He is as close to happiness as he has ever been. He had an image of happiness, and a path. It is just a matter of sacrificing everything, and of enduring for enough time. It seems almost too easy.

The more the seed's insight molds the program, the faster it creates new patterns the seed can recognize. It is a form of intercourse between the computer's program and the subconscious of his mind, an ever faster exchange in which his own identity plays no part. Soon he can only watch, uncomprehending, as his fingers fly over the keyboard and his lips test phrases his mind doesn't grasp.

Soon after that the Loop is finished. The seed folds in upon itself in consummation. The program ends. He feels nothing but his need urging him to move fast.

Seeing the Loop is the same as memorizing the Loop forever, so he has only to email its text to as many people as he can.

Part of him doesn't want to. He relishes the intimacy of being the only one with her Loop in his head. But the Loop leaves him no choice, and he can't even slow himself down as he sends the emails.

* * *

The Loop frees him after he finishes his role as a vector. He doesn't try to follow the news to wait for the infection to become evident. The Loop might not be visible in that way, and besides, he has no desire to see that. He curls up in bed, unable to sleep, probing the hole inside his mind where the seed had just been. He is more lonely than he had felt in years.

He rises from bed hours later, although they could have been days. He decides to walk through the city, looking for the shadow of the Poetess. Everything is as usual. People go about their business, sometimes happy, more often sad, generally a bland, hurried in-between. The world doesn't seem more finished than it has ever been.

But when he looks them in their eyes, ignoring their discomfort or anger, he sees something else, a presence on them like invisible skintight chains. The Loop is in them, guiding them, urging them, constraining them. Whatever they do, it is for the Loop, and whatever isn't they don't do.

He envies them so much for feeling the touch of the Poetess in this way. He speaks with them, or just listens to their talk, hoping the Loop will slide through their words into his mind. But he had been inoculated against it by his exposure to the seed. Once again a pandemic runs wild across the world, and once again he is fated not to fall to it.

He thinks about killing himself, but his need won't let him. Nonexistence is as devoid of the Poetess as life. Then he thinks about killing everyone else.

There are other worlds, he knows. The Poetess had to be in one of them. If every time he ended the world and killed himself he came back to life in a new world, then eventually he'd reach her.

He wouldn't be immune to her words then. He couldn't be.

He runs to his lab, followed by the eyes of everyone.

* * *

Practice makes perfect, and he doesn't think there are many people who have had more practice than him with ending the world. He considers briefly on improving his design, but he decides for the moment not to fix what worked so well. So he recreates the polymorphic virus, injects himself with a vaccine, and takes a walk. He doesn't know how long it will take for things to take their course.

He shoots himself long before the epidemic becomes visible, as soon as he begins to feel a shadow of regret. It is much easier that way.

* * *

Sometimes the Loop precedes the illness. People die without changing their ways, bodies rotting in still-running subways, and families sharing their homes with the corpses of loved ones. Sometimes it is the other way around, but the panic of a world dying masks the subtler horror of the Loop.

I can neither care nor help. I merely record as the Vector walks his path of destruction through the worlds. He carries the virus in his conscious memory and the Loop in his unconscious one, his will and his unconscious programming competing after each arrival to see what Apocalypse will stake its claim.

The books are becoming very similar, and my task a very passive one. Death has become monotonous, just as I had feared. But there's always hope, even against Poetry and Love.

* * *

It had been both a gambit and a trade-off, and less a good move than the only one. But that isn't why he had followed her. He had done it because he still thought of her as a civilian, even after she had detonated the bombs that would destroy Bit Durani, and because he still thought of himself as a soldier.

Even after he had done what he had done.

Now they are both in Hell, or a reasonable approximation. He is just religious enough to doubt it. Besides, his sins are surely greater than those of the young woman, and yet the monsters focus their attention on her. She screams a lot. That is understandable. But when they pause she spits on them.

No, jumping into the shadows as the bombs exploded hadn't been a good idea. It had only been the one that'd give them a chance of survival, a chance to which the young woman held with savage consistency.

At some point his own survival becomes a matter of ego. If she can do it, so can he. Hell, he will only die saving her. That'll teach her... something. He's in too much pain most of the time for his head to be any more clear.

He begins biting off pieces of the monsters whenever he can. They taste horrible, but their response makes it fun. The young woman catches up the idea fast, and ups the ante by chewing and swallowing bits of them.

If this is Hell, it isn't working as he had been told it would, except for the part where he has no hope left. He even has no hope of having killed the Man with the Books.

But he had given it a good shot, learned something in the process, and would do it right the next time. For there to be a next time he has to survive.

Survive and wait, most of the time screaming in pain.

* * *

You are crazy. You aren't the first person to admit that, but after what you did to those people in the bus, and what the psychiatrists told you, you finally come to accept that something in your head isn't right.

They even told you why. They had two explanations, actually. One had to do with things you'd rather not think about, and one had to do with biology stuff you didn't understand. Both explanations were useless. What matters to you is that they keep you locked up.

The the Doctor tells you about some sort of outreach program. It sounds weird, but not weirder than some of the treatments that you had been through, and it will let you be outside. You accept gratefully, hoping you'll manage not to kill anyone for a long time.

You take the job the Doctor had arranged for you, and follow the drug schedule he had set, and once a week you check the mailbox for new instructions, new drugs, or both. It is a comfortable life, nightmares aside.

When everybody began to die around you you fear they'll blame you for it and put you back into a cell. You aren't even sure that you weren't doing it, although you have no idea of how you could be killing so many people so far away.

You become more afraid when you stop receiving instructions. No instructions means no pills, and without pills it'll be the bus all over again. After a week-long agony of doubt, you decide to look for the Doctor.

You look first in the asylum. It is now a pile of ruins, and you ransack your memory trying to remember if you had bombed it or not. You had certainly dreamed about it often enough.

You sift through the ruins looking for drugs. Maybe a cell had survived. You had felt safe in the cell, and now that everyone is dying outside, it has recently occurred to you that it might be a good idea to be in one again.

You don't find a cell, but you find a voice. The voice tells you to do things, things that, unlike other voices, don't involve murdering people. So you go along with the voice, hoping to placate it. You excavate where it tells you to, and when you find the source of the voice, you tell yourself that, yes, you are a very insane man.

The Doctor's head doesn't disagree.

Chapter XVI: Choice One

There are grades of agony. The Survivor finds herself in a lower one, as the shadows that had been feeding on her retreat as much as they can. She is left standing at the center of a circle of nightmares, her body whole again. There is still pain, of course. The shadows can't be seen without pain, their nearness alone poisoning the blood. And they are in their world. It is a place not meant for humans. Just the way light behaves seems to exclude the concept of peace.

The shadows ripple, and the Survivor understands without being told. Some things are common to everything that exists, alive or not. The shadows aren't in pain – they were made of pain – but something is hurting them. Something somewhere is hurting them very much, enough that they notice even here, even doing this. Enough that they had had to stop the feeding that nurtured and defined them.

The Survivor smiles. If they can be hurt, they can be killed. She had some experience killing things that were already dead. Be it fire, lead, steel, or something else, she'd find it and come back here, because the only way to survive in a universe that had those things in it is to stamp them out forever.

They were what was behind the Handlers' eyes, worlds and lifetimes ago, and as long as they existed somewhere, survival would be a rigged game that couldn't be won.

The shadows shift, impossibly sharp teeth angling in new ways. They are asking for help. Neither prideful nor begging, because those concepts are alien to them, they are asking for her help as they had asked for her pain just minutes ago.

The Survivor laughs. She would have spat on them, but the gesture had lost its novelty subjective years before. It isn't necessary, anyway. The shadows and she understand each other perfectly.

Or so she had thought, and yet here they are, asking her to save them.

"No," she says. "Not if you torture me for another ten years. Not if you threaten to kill me. Not if you threaten to kill the world."

The shadows shift again, and when the Survivor growls at them they move in coordinated chaos.

"They are saying they didn't do it," says the Soldier, who is held nearby on a wet and rippling dark cross. "I learned a bit of their language from the asylum's Director."

The Survivor shrugs. "I've seen the world end. These things are worse."

The shadows encroach around her. The Survivor bares her teeth. "Back to the torture, eh?"

The shadows twirl. "'No'," translates the Soldier. "'We'll set you free.'"

She gasps in more surprise than pain as the shadows drown her.

* * *

The Survivor wakes up in a normal world. She could shower, she could work, she could buy shoes and collect books.

She can't do anything else. She can't stash ammo, water, and maps. She can't hide an axe under her pillow. She can't buy a knife every week. She can't be anything but a victim, and she can't scream.

When the illness comes, she knows it is the end of the world, and she knows what she has to do, but she doesn't do it. Her deepest thoughts and truest instincts have no hold on her body, her actions, and her words. She panics. She is hurt. She is lost. She falls ill.

She dies, of course.

The Survivor wakes up in a normal world. She tries to scream again but can't.

She loses count of worlds, of epidemics, of ends. Her deaths become a blur. She stops trying to force herself to survive. The core of what she was had been severed from her life, and she can only watch as the same dreadfully monotonous scenario plays itself out in life after life. Once, by chance, she sees a man that isn't caught in the nightmare, but she can't call out to him. He is dying on the street, one of the first, kneeling on a sidewalk with practiced ease while she is swept by the crowd as if she is nothing but a mote of dust.

She doesn't think she can become insane, and she is beginning to regret it. She goes on living and dying, unable, no matter how hard she tries, to lose her mind or do something with it.

She is grateful when the shadows open up one random day and swallow her in their many-teethed arms. Her body screams in pain, but she is smiling in her mind.

* * *

The shadows part, letting the Survivor fall. She is trembling, eyes closed, fists pressed against the pulsating floor.

"Are you okay?" asks the Soldier. There are graduations of agony, and they had grown familiar with them and each other.

"No," says the Survivor. They had been tortured for what had felt like years, yet he has never heard so much pain and rage in her voice before. She had been a convenient weapon before. Now she sounds like a war.

"No," she repeats, this time to herself. Behind every nightmare she keeps finding something worse. It isn't a surprise, no. That had been the nature of the universe as far back and as deeply as she could understand. She wonders if the progression would ever end, but that doesn't matter. The only thing that matters is here and today. The hate she feels and who will pay.

The Survivor stands up. The shadows retreat. She speaks to them, but not looking at them. Her eyes are elsewhere, cold and hard, hurt and angry. "You will let us both go. You will give us what weapons and information you have, and the means to move from world to world as you do. And if you stand in my way I will kill you all." She approaches a tendril of darkness and holds it in her hand. It is woven of sharp curves and poisonous metal, an instrument of torture that was also alive.

She rips it off with her bare hand, thoughtlessly, as if her mind is elsewhere.

The shadows shift closer to the ground. The Soldier barks a laugh. There is no need for translation, not this time.

* * *

You had always done everything the Doctor had told you to do. Before, when you were both in the asylum, and now, when you are both in your home. The Doctor knows what is wrong in you, and how to keep it at bay. When you had killed all those people in that bus, he had kept you out of jail, and had taught you how to and to whom you should lie. He had explained to you that it hadn't been your fault, and had promised you'd get to do it again. He is now a head sitting over your television set, but that doesn't change any of that.

You had put him there so you could watch television while the Doctor instructed you. He had said it was fine, that your conscious self wasn't very relevant or good for anything anyway. You don't know what that means, except that you can watch television if you tune out the Doctor's monotonous droning, and that's all you want to know. Sometimes you watch all day long, not even staying long on any channel, but cycling through them for hours at a time. Nothing seems to hold your attention, reality the least of all, yet there's a calm of sorts in letting your mind drift between images and plots. You sleep and wake up without solution or continuity, and if you are feeding yourself or cleaning up you don't remember it very well.

Time passes. You realize you quit your job, but the Doctor tells you it's fine. He had decided that it would be therapeutic for you to do so, and it does give you more free time. You begin to notice time not through the movement of the sun, but through the by now familiar schedules of the channels. Weekends have different programs, too. Sometimes you look forward to a particular movie the next day, but that's almost too far in the future, and you find it harder and harder to think like that. Even following a sitcom taxes your mind, and yet this makes it even harder to do anything else.

One day you realize that there can't be any TV shows, not with the whole world dying, but the Doctor's head speaks louder, and you forget what you were thinking about.

The remote control in your hand is as familiar as your heartbeat now, but you don't remember if the spots of blood on it were there before. They are on your hand, too.

Time passes. Sometimes you are more tired than usual, tired enough to feel it through the haze. At those times you wonder what you've been doing, and you recognize a familiar coppery smell. But its name eludes you, and you don't care.

It might have been weeks later, hours, years. One night you wake up, and the Doctor's head is grinning, and the remote control is a knife. You are using the knife to cut yourself.

"If you do it as I told you," the Doctor is saying, "you won't have to die at once."

You don't want to cut yourself, that's something you do to other people, that's something that happens to people who are weak and beg. You beg. But you keep cutting yourself.

The Doctor isn't looking at you anymore, but at something at your back. You wish you could turn around.

"Finally," says the Doctor, "Home at last." You stop cutting yourself, but you don't stop bleeding, and you can't do what you'd like to, which is to run away and find a bus.

Then the Doctor's face turns really ugly. "You!" he says.

You hear a man's voice behind you. "Doctor," he says. He sounds cheerful. "I'm afraid you are being drafted again."

"Feel free to argue," says another voice, a female one. She walks in front of you and picks the Doctor's head with one hand. In the other she's carrying an axe.

Chapter XVII: The Enemy Inside

The Survivor suddenly throws the head away and lets the axe fall from her hand. "I don't know what I'm doing," she says. It is as if a switch has been flipped off inside her. "What's the point anyway? If I'm just going to crawl between dead worlds like a cockroach, I might as well give up. It's not worth it."

"Are you feeling all right?" The Soldier approaches the Survivor. "Remember our mission. What you told me the shadows showed you – the Poetess, the Loop."

"Fuck the mission, fuck the Poetess, and fuck the Loop," she says. "I'm tired of fighting all the time. I'm just tired."

"You can't give up. You know what happens if we lose. The Loop will take hold of everything, and then everything will die from the virus, or go insane from the Loop."

The Survivor spits at the ground. "Everything dies one way or another, and going insane isn't that different. What's *your* reason to do this?"

"It's because I hate... No." The Soldier stops himself from lying, although what he had been about to say had been true not long ago. "I don't know. I guess I don't know what else to do. Fighting is what I've been trained to do all my life. I would feel bad if I stopped doing my job."

"Well, fighting is what I've done all my life, and it hasn't been much of a life." The Survivor sits on the couch opposite the crazy man, who is dressing up his wounds as best as he can. "I don't care what weird crap the universe throws at me next. I'm done."

The Soldier takes out his gun and looks at it. "I know how you feel. But what choice do we have? It's this or killing ourselves, and that... I guess that'd hurt my pride." He snorts at his own shallowness, pocketing his gun again. "Besides, I already did it once, and it didn't stick."

The head of the Logical Man had rolled against a wall. They can hear, now, his bitter voice. "That's what I've been saying all along. We live, it sucks, we die. Everybody lives, everything sucks, everybody dies. The world ends all at once or one person at a time. Why not do it right? At least They don't let you rot."

"Shut up," says the Survivor with a hollow voice. "You kept me in that nuthouse of yours. I don't need much motivation to split you in half."

The crazy man giggles, still bleeding. "You lost your marbles, you poor motherfuckers." He searches the floor for the knife, seeing if it might work again as a remote control. "She filled you all up with sand." The crazy man kneels on the floor and then curls up around himself. "I hate walking. I miss my bus pass."

The Survivor, with some effort, rises from the couch and bends over the crazy man. "Who did what?"

The crazy man closes his eyes and smiles. "The girl who speaks nice. She cured the crazy out of you just like that." He bites his lower lip and covers

his ears with his hands. "But she can't cure me if I don't listen. One-six-one-eight-zero-three-three-nine-nine..."

The Survivor kicks his back lightly. "Stop that. I think he's talking about the Poetess, the one who came up with the Loop. You think she might have done something to us? We haven't met her, I think."

The Soldier smiles. "Well, I haven't seen you kill or mutilate anyone in half an hour. It does look suspicious."

The head of the Logical Man calls out to them, "This is all your fault, you know. You should have let my Will work out, and this would all be over by now. We'd be in Their arms forever. Instead, They are gone."

The Soldier frowns, picking up the head by his hair. "The shadows? What do you mean gone? The motherfuckers just let us go."

The Logical Man bares his teeth. "Time works in chapters, not in a line. You do feel different, don't you? Less angry, not so scared? Rather pleasant, as far as you go? Who do you think taught you what anger and fear were in the first place?"

"Fuck." The Survivor rubs her eyes. "I hate this shit. Let's go check." At her feet, the crazy man whimpers and tries to curl up more tightly. The Survivor looks down at him and smiles. "Go get your knife. We'll take a little ride in a pretend bus."

* * *

The Survivor returns through a shadow with the head of the Logical Man. The Soldier had stayed behind, watching over the crazy man. He hadn't liked it, but the crazy man was convenient for these 'travels', and there was no telling what he might do if left unsupervised.

The Logical Man is openly weeping. The Survivor puts him over a table, not carefully but without violence, and sits down on the couch, pensive. The Soldier knows better than to press her.

"It's nice," she says. "Kinda. Much better than it was when we left."

"Nice?" asks the Soldier. "The shadows are nice? Tea and small talk?"

"There are no shadows anymore. Not like there were before. I mean, it's still dark and looks horrible, but it feels like a movie now. Like they're weird animals or crazy people in rubber suits, nothing more. Maybe dangerous, but normal." The Survivor begins to reload her gun absentmindedly. "Some of them attacked me. I don't think they knew why. And they ran away when I began killing too many of them. Can you believe that?"

"It was her," spits the Logical Man. "The Poetess. She got the shadows into the Loop. She neutered Them. Took the horror out of them. She..." He stalls, lost for words. "This is Hell. She threw us all into Hell, and she even made Hell worse than it was."

The Soldier shakes his head. "I'm still not sure why this is a problem. From where I'm standing it looks like we have one problem less. Didn't we blow up his asylum just to stop those torturing sons of bitches from invading everything? If they are dealt with it just means we can focus on the Poetess without worrying about our flank."

The Survivor looks at him. "Maybe. Remember what the guy writing the books said just before we destroyed the asylum?"

The Soldier looks away, irritated. "I don't care what he said! As far as I'm concerned he's worse than the shadows and the Poetess together. I blew up my world to get him, and although it was a trick I still think it was the right choice given what I knew."

"Perhaps. But I still want to curl up on the ground like that crazy idiot over there and let myself die, and that feels right but it shouldn't. I can't *feel* it, but I *know* I'm not like that. I'm not supposed to be like that. What about you? Feeling like yourself?"

"No, I guess, I don't. This little war we just began feels quite pointless. Who knows? Maybe we are just being more rational. Weirder things have happened."

"Oh, you are," says the Logical Man. "You are being rational and reasonable. Why not? The whole fucking universe is becoming rational and reasonable and dead, and we'll be doing meaningless fucking crap forever or until the Poetess comes up with something worse or the Vector just finishes killing all the worlds. No matter what you try or accomplish from now on. It's all the same, and it won't mean anything. You should have let me bring the shadows here."

"I will still kill the Man with the Books," said the Soldier. "That *will* mean something."

"No, it won't. He's already obsolete. He came up with an apocalypse here or there, but now the only thing he can do is kill a world before the Vector does it or the Poetess does something worse. He's not the scariest bogeyman anymore."

"There's always someone scarier," said the Survivor.

"That's what I'm saying."

"No," she replies. "It's not. I don't believe the shadows were the worst thing out there. In my experience," she says with a crooked, bitter smile, "there's always something worse."

"I don't think you realize what the shadows are," says the Logical Man. "They were the personal Fall, the original birth trauma, the first flaw. They weren't things you could kill, as much as abstract features of the universe. They were timeless, inescapable, unbearable memories."

"They were quite bearable," says the Survivor, standing up. "And if they were memories, they were memories of a *fact*. Something bad enough to spawn them."

The Logical Man blinks. "You are crazier than I thought."

Still curled up on the floor, the crazy man cackles. "Show-off."

"What are you suggesting?" asked the Soldier.

The Survivor sighed. "Something created you, and me, and this pair of monsters over there." – "beheading hypocrite," comments the Logical Man – "Maybe the shadows, maybe something else. But something created the shadows, and if we're going to stop the Poetess, we need to find and use it."

"Even assuming that something *worse than the shadows* is preferable to the Poetess," the Soldier says, very carefully, "Most of us were 'created' by the world ending in one way or another. Hell, some of us ended the world ourselves." He pauses. The Logical Man smiles, but says nothing, and the Soldier continues. "What kind of end of the world could spawn the shadows? Do you think defeating the Poetess is worth finding out?"

"No, I don't," says the Survivor. "And that pisses the hell out of me. I've been hunted, tortured, and eaten. Shit like that happens. But she's not going to get away with messing up with my head, and frankly I don't care what I have to unleash to get to her."

"Does that mean I'm the good guy of the team?" asks the crazy guy from his place on the floor. "Because if I am, I think you're not supposed to make me bleed so much."

"Not right now," says the Survivor. "If you'll excuse me, I have to go find a bucket and puke."

"Are you alright?" asked the Soldier.

"Peachy. Remember back with the shadows, when we began chewing them up to pass away the time?"

"Yes?"

The Survivor smiles. It wasn't a happy smile. "I might have swallowed a little." She looks at the Logical Man. "You think you can get information out of a half-digested piece of shadow, Doctor?"

The Logical Man grins. "I got information out of *you*."

Chapter XVIII: Q & A

"It didn't look like that when I ate it."

The Logical Man sighs loudly. "It's a shadow, you idiot, not a piece of bad sushi. It follows its own laws."

"It's like an hologram," says the Soldier. "Every piece of it holds information about the whole. Cut a piece, and you don't get a fragment, but a blurrier version of the entire thing."

"Good." The Survivor is eying the dark thing writhing on her palm sternly, while it tries to eat itself. "That means we can get the information we want from it."

"It won't be easy," says the Logical Man. "Questioning shadows is a complex process. You need specialized tools that must be construed with the appropriate rituals, a place with the necessary facilities, and plenty of time. Do you have any idea of how much effort it took me to set up Bit Durani before you destroyed it? And that was before the end of this world. Now we have to do it all again in a world teeming with virus-infected Loop puppets, assuming there's anyone else alive besides the four of us. Not to mention that I don't have a body any more, thank you very much, you bloodthirsty bitch."

The Soldier pokes the shadow with a finger. "Considering what they did to us and what's at stake, I won't argue against any interrogation method. But I have to agree with the Doctor. If chewing it up, swallowing, digesting, and puking it didn't kill it, it's going to be difficult to find something to threaten it with. Not that I'm not willing to try. Hmm. They prefer shadows, so perhaps they are vulnerable to electromagnetic radiation. If I can find the pieces, I might be able to rig a laser powerful enough..."

The Survivor shakes her head. "It could be easier than that." Handing the shadow over to the Soldier, she kneels next to the crazy man, who is sitting on the floor against the couch. "You survived the end of the world, right?"

The crazy man nods at her, rubbing his blood out of his fingers against the floor. "Immune to the virus. Crazy luck." His smile is large, bright, and disturbingly fake.

"I don't believe you." The Survivor's smile is almost friendly. "But that's for another day. This end of the world was a double whammy, the virus and the Loop. How did you survive the Loop?"

"I never heard it, I guess." The more articulate the crazy man becomes, the more he trembles. He doesn't seem able to look the Survivor in her eyes. "I said, crazy..." The Survivor stabs the couch with her knife, and he corrects himself. "All right, all right! Not luck. Pure crazy. I'm too crazy to get the Loop." He is smiling now, true and gleeful. "Wrong operating system."

"Right. You know, I think you are telling me the truth. But I also think you weren't that crazy to begin with. Doctor?"

The Logical Man is trying to get closer to them, which is difficult lacking a body. "I'm not sure. He was pro bono work for the police like you, but he was never kept in Bit Durani. I didn't do much work with him, just

some instructional sessions to make sure he'd be available if I needed extra manpower."

The Survivor leans even closer to the crazy man. "How did you know the Loop was coming?"

The crazy man shakes his head. "Statistics. It wasn't easy to develop, but there are just too many worlds. Not a chance that someone, somewhere, wouldn't come up with it and a cross-world delivery vector."

"So you created a vaccine for it, to protect yourself."

"Not me. Not just me. It was supposed to be for everyone. I was just testing it on myself first. I was in a hurry, and couldn't convince anyone else to help without proof of safety."

The Logical Man laughs. "Self-experimentation! And here I thought you were just a random psychotic with good luck. What did you use? Drugs, self-hypnosis, sleep modulation?"

The Engineer parts the hair on the right side of his head, showing an strangely geometric scar on his scalp, as well as a constellation of small metallic dots. "Surgery. I thought it would be safer. I thought..." His face crumples, beginning to sob.

"You thought it was safe," says the Logical Man in a mockingly even tone. "And then you got into a bus and killed everyone."

The Survivor asks the Soldier to give her back the shadow, and then puts it very close to the Engineer's mouth. "Whisper to it," she says. "Just the beginning."

The Engineer recites the beginning of the Loop, very quietly, as the Survivor looks away from his face. The shadow writhes in terror on her palm.

"I think it'll cooperate," says the Soldier. "What do you want to know?"

"How did your world end?" asks the Survivor.

The shadow turns into a blurry, ambiguous glyph.

"I'm not sure," says the Soldier. "Something about a law."

"Oh, please!" the Logical Man snorts. "The fabled military intelligence. Get me closer to the shadow, I'll translate." Everyone looks at him. "None of us wants to die of the virus or get trapped into the Loop, and unlike my scalpel-happy former patient, I'm vulnerable to at least the Loop. We want the same thing for the time being."

The Survivor nods at the Soldier, who grasps the Logical Man's head and brings it close to the shadow. The four of them are now almost huddling around the small, nightmarish entity.

"Again," says the Survivor. The shadow blurs and changes shape again, and then again, until it settles into a rhythm of weirdly geometric forms.

"'At the beginning was the Axiom,'" says the Logical Man. "Please understand I'm paraphrasing here. Spoken English doesn't have enough dimensions for a literal translation."

*** *At the beginning was the Axiom, and the Axiom was the beginning. The Axiom was postulate and inference law, and the closure of truth was infinite, consistent, and safe.*

Then the Question was asked, and the Axiom said Yes and the Axiom said No. And thus the Axiom was a lie, and the Question was the new Axiom, and the closure of its truth was the un-inference of everything.

We carry out the proof.

"That," says the Soldier, "was the most unintelligible and useless piece of intelligence I have ever heard, and I have listened to five-hour-long defense PowerPoint presentations."

"I told you," says the Logical Man, "you have to stop thinking about the shadows as *things*. They are concepts, abstract echoes. What it just told me is nothing less than the existence of a logical flaw at the foundation of the universe. Not a monster, or a virus, or something, but one of the very laws of reality being wrong. How's that for important intelligence?"

"I don't know. Does it tell us how to kill the Poetess or the Man with the Books? Because otherwise it's just metaphysics."

"Just' metaphysics, he says. Metaphysics tortured the crap out of you, remember?"

"The Question," says the Survivor to the shadow. "Do you know it?"

The shadow shifts yet again.

"It can't be expressed," says the Logical Man. "Not even in the shadows' own language. *Especially* not in their language, I think. They are defined by the question."

"But can it be seen? Handled? Thrown at somebody? Give me something to work with here."

The shadow spreads over the Survivor's hand, rippling softly. The Logical Man chuckles. "The shadow really hates you, you know. It's offering to take you to the moment when the Question was posed."

The Survivor raises her eyebrows. "Time travel?"

"Time works in chapters," quotes the Soldier. "We'll be visiting an earlier one."

The Engineer groans, hugging his knees with his hands, and the Logical Man chuckles again. "Oh, the ritual to go there isn't bloody at all, although it's quite peculiar. It requires inscribing an exceedingly complex sequence of symbols, so complex that ancient cultures didn't have the resources to derive it. I was planning to use a computer and a small robot to do it, but those were in Bit Durani, and I don't think Silicon Valley usually survives apocalypses."

The Engineer closes his eyes. "We could..." He stops himself.

The Soldier leans over him and puts a hand over his shoulder. "That's a very good idea. If the shadow can interface with that thing, there shouldn't be any problem."

"What thing?" asks the Survivor.

The Soldier looks at her. "You are going to love this."

* * *

"Not bad," says the Survivor, looking at the Engineer scribbling furiously on the ground, quickly using up whatever writing instrument they could find for him. Almost every square inch is filled with an intricate spiderweb of minute symbols, dictated to the Engineer's hand by the shadow that rests on his head, its narrow tendrils embracing the metal dots of the device he had built inside his brain.

"Don't you feel bad about him?" asks the Soldier. "We have been exploiting him a lot, and I don't think he's a bad man."

The Survivor turns to face him. "That doesn't sound like you. We are doing what has to be done. I didn't think empathy was something the military selected for."

"They don't, and I'm not really feeling bad. As you said, I don't feel bad, but I think that perhaps I should. Look at what we're doing. I already did a stupid thing, I guess my father would have said an evil thing, thinking I was doing right. I never in my life doubted that I was fighting on the right side, but now I have to doubt. *Have to*, you understand? Because as long as I can consider that possibility..."

"Bullshit," says the Engineer, his hand still obeying the shadow. "I've been crazy for months, and I asked myself every day if I was crazy or not." His hand stops, dropping the last pencil stubble. "Thank God. It's done."

The Soldier looks at the Logical Man. "What now?"

"Look at it," says the Logical Man, "Look at the pattern, and you'll understand."

They all look, and they all understand.

At the beginning was the Axiom.

Then the Question was asked.

And the Poem was told.

They remain quiet. Only the shadow, for the first time, makes a sound. It is inhuman, frightening, violent. The shadow is crying.

The Poetess had gotten there first, and the Question was no more. The shadow is now the memory of nothing.

Chapter XIX: The End

"Correct me if I'm wrong," says the head of the Logical Man, "but didn't we just find that the Poetess rewrote *logic* to fuck with the shadows? Is anybody else feeling intimidated right now, or is it just me?"

"All right, so she's thorough," says the Survivor. "We tried something and she had already closed off that avenue. That doesn't mean we can't —"

"Wake up!" the Logical Man interrupts. "She isn't a pathetic fish-person or whatever the hell you had to kill after your world ended, or even a genocidal mad scientist like the Vector. *She changed the rules of the universe*. I don't know how, I don't know why, and I don't know which answer would freak me out the most."

"You sound scared for someone who used to perform ritual killings to invoke evil entities from other dimensions," notes the Soldier.

"You're damn right I'm scared. You think the Vector spreading the Loop around is bad? You think his virus worries me? That's nothing. That's just the end of the world, and that happens all the fucking time. The scary thing, the thing you have to wrap your heads around, is that any moment now the Poetess will figure out how to rewrite all the rules everywhere at the same time, and then we're done. She will be able to make it so you never existed, or you love her, or, I don't know, you are a detached head forced to cohabit forever with three severely disturbed morons. Take my word, that is probably the worst possible outcome."

"She's just a monster," insists the Survivor. "We'll find a way to kill her."

"You don't understand. You really don't understand. It's not that this is chess, you're a pawn, and she's a queen. That was the previous situation, the good old times when you were hopelessly outmatched. Now you are all pawns, and she's becoming a fucking *player*. It's not a matter of shooting her with silver bullets, developing an antidote for a virus, or deriving a counter-spell. You can't win. You're just a piece of the game."

The Engineer is sifting through his hair with a hand. The shadow had disappeared suddenly. Maybe in this new universe it had never existed. That sounds like a merciful possibility, considering the alternatives. "Makes you wonder," he says. Being possessed by the shadow, or having witnessed the erasure of the Question, seems to have shocked him into at least the appearance of sanity. Or maybe the distinction has become irrelevant to the rest of them.

"What about?" asks the Survivor.

"If I understood things right, she basically changed the end of the shadows' world, or rather the end of the world that created the shadows, something that from our point of view, and certainly for the shadows' history, happened in the past. What other endings can she affect?"

"You think she might change the ends of the world we lived through?"

"I'm wondering if she already did. Maybe all that happened to us was punishment for going after her. There's no way we could tell the difference, or even know it had ever been different."

"That doesn't make much sense," says the Soldier.

The Logical Man rolls his eyes. "You aren't thinking in enough dimensions, that's all. For all we know that she can or will be able to do, maybe your world ended the way it did to punish you for something you haven't done yet."

The Survivor picks up her dented bronze axe from the floor. "Hmm," she says.

* * *

It had taken the Vector many worlds and many handmade apocalypses to understand the most salient feature of the universe. It is huge. He had lost count of the worlds he had ended, and had had time enough to streamline his virus so it took very little time and resources to create and the pandemic still killed the human species with impressive speed. Only a couple of worlds had been perceptive and ruthless enough to put up a fight (*nuclear quarantine* – what a concept!), but in the end they hadn't been a match for the combination of the polymorphic killer he loaded into his immune system and the subtle slaver he carried in his mind.

As with anything else, killing mankind lost its emotional weight with time and repetition. He no longer feels troubled by news reports of mounting deaths, and unless they deviate from the by-then familiar increasingly frantic sequence of announcements, he barely pays attention to them. All he does is stay in his apartment, tinker with the virus – it was likely there'd be another world to kill very soon – and think about the Poetess. Some worlds, though, succumbed to the Loop before the virus takes hold of them, at least enough so it was noticeable to him. In those worlds he searches for people captured by the Loop, and when he finds one he captures him or her and runs experiments. His hope is still to be able to be captured by the Loop despite the immunity he had gained, so he keeps studying the Loop, trying to strengthen it.

It is a very challenging problem. He knows some details about the virus, but the technology of ideas is alien to him, and he lacks the instinctive insight that makes the Poetess' mind so powerful and so unlike anything else he had ever known. If he feels like this just by studying her work, what would it feel like to be possessed by it? Or – and here his hopes turn feverish and vague – to actually *meet* her?

But that moment seems impossibly far away, even as he becomes faster with every world. There are just too many worlds, it seems. The next one could have her on it – or he could be searching forever.

He had pondered the problem for years of subjective time, while he killed untold billions and understood the Loop just a little bit better. To give up his search is unthinkable. He loves her like he had loved no person, idea, or reward before. He needed her touch, in one form or another, too much. But there is little appeal in this hopeless search, not if he could come up with a better way.

It doesn't take him long to come up with a possibility. It would take him a long time to develop the means to implement it – the Loop is powerful and complex, and even light modifications are tremendous undertakings – but time and worlds are things he has in plenty.

* * *

There are many things you don't remember, or that you never knew. Your name. Your face. Your age. Your gender, even, and although you could check, you never do. You don't know why.

You don't know what you are doing, either, although you always know what you have to do next. That's the entirety of the scope of your awareness, most of the time: your next task. You don't know how you know. You don't know how long you've been doing whatever you're doing.

Deja vu is your constant companion. Everything you do, you feel you have done it before many times. Everything you see, you've seen before. How many times have you seen a person die? How many cities? You can't remember. You weren't told to.

That much you remember: someone told you to do something, and you're doing it. But who, when, what, how? Maybe you'd remember if you could stop and think, but neither is an option. You're always doing something, and always thinking only of what you will do next.

The few nights that you are told to sleep, when exhaustion clouds your brain and your body almost refuses to move, for a second or two before unconsciousness you remember a little more, not enough.

You're spreading something. You're looking for someone. And if you find her, you will remember everything, but not the things you remembered before. You will become someone else. You will become the person who sent you in this search.

You realize, suddenly and absolutely, that he loves her, and that the strength and fixation of his love is part of what chains and drives you.

The last thing you understand before falling asleep and forgetting again is the other side of what you're doing.

Wherever you go you make more like you.

* * *

The Vector has rediscovered exponential growth, and his trail of death becomes a flower, a tree, a maze, a filigree. 'Time works in chapters,' said one of the characters inside one of the chapters.

I have read the book, and now I'm writing it. Not many chapters left. The foundations of reality have been rewritten by the Poetess, beautiful where they were ugly, perfect where they were flawed, dead where there was pain. The universe will soon ebb with her voice.

It will be a dead universe. Worlds used to die each in its own way. There was an struggle. Lessons. Meaning. Survivors (Always a survivor. That was the rule. That was the *point*.) I wrote a book for each world, a book that predicted, narrated, and memorialized each apocalypse. The only possible biography of every survivor: how their world died, how they died with it, and what they did next.

The Vector leaves no survivors. He's not even an individual anymore. Immune to the Loop, he infected it, and now his desire for the Poetess' touch expands through the worlds, killing them and infecting more.

It was finished before I wrote these words. It was finished before I had written the first phrase of the first chapter. Time works in chapters, but I don't need to write them in order.

A perfect poem and a Vector in love, merged and consuming it all. That is the end of all the worlds. The next to last page of the last book.

But there have to be survivors. There has to be hope.
I read everything I've written and find none.

Chapter XX: Closure

The Poetess sits on a park bench, listening to the evening of the last day. Cars had long been silent, birds had learned to hide during the first weeks, and even the guns are quiet now. Little to fight for, and nobody to fight. The city has a new kind of beauty now. It stands liminal between intention and chaos, engineering and failure, home and ruin. The Poetess holds a blade of grass in her hand. There is no more, and no less, elegance in it than the buildings now burning used to have. She hadn't chosen green over gray, nor would she choose otherwise. The Poetess plays no favorite with words or worlds.

This is just the appropriate coda to the poem she had been working on. Just a few more stanzas and it would be complete. She is almost eager to find out what would come next, but things had to be finished properly. The Loops had to be closed, the paradoxes resolved, and the plot, such as it was, driven to a satisfactorily elegant end.

An Apocalypse that left behind survivors is an incoherent one. After practicing her art for so long the Poetess understands the patterns of necessity, the grammar of events underneath creation. Every first line demands closure, and she is the first poet in the universe capable of writing a proper end to all.

It is already written, mostly. The Loop had given closure to minds just as the Vector's virus had given closure to lives.

The Vector comes to her now, stumbling on the grass, as she had known he would. His body is just a body. She had studied bodies once, and sung for, and with, and to them, but they had ceased to be of much interest to her. The body that is now kneeling in front of her hadn't even been born with the soul it now carried. Those things are details irrelevant to the language and the plot.

The soul is the only thing that matters. The only thing worth studying, loving, reflecting, and putting to rest forever. This soul, this feverish soul, had been an interesting motif in her work, and a very useful tool. The Vector is an emblem of the shape she had chosen for the universe. It is fitting for him to find her there, and then, and like that.

The Vector (the last copy, hence the only copy, hence all the Vectors and the original one) opens his mouth (with a woman's lips over a woman's face on a woman's body, but the soul is the only thing that matters) and declares his love for the Poetess. He had killed the human species an uncounted number of times just to say those words, and once he said them he had nothing else to say or do. His role in the poem is complete, and what is left to happen, what he had sought for so long, is the end. Her touch.

The Poetess smiles. Knowing the end of a poem doesn't make its sound less beautiful, and every small detail is as important to the work as the broadest strokes. She softly caresses the Vector's cheek. Once.

She says a single word, and the Vector dies.

The Poetess rises from the bench. The sky over the park is a deep solid gray, old and weighty like a cathedral's walls. A storm is coming, perhaps. But the rain won't touch the mindless body that is now staring empty-minded at nowhere, the body that had held one of the many copies of the Vector's love,

the only copy that had reached its intended recipient. The body, the park, the city, and the world will go away before the first drop of water can hit the ground.

The worlds are empty of words and ears now. No need to keep them around. The Poetess, like all true artists, has no need for an audience, and an infinite collection of empty theaters would be even less to her taste. She will close the last few strands of the poem, and then she'll let the worlds dissolve. Time for something more original.

The Poetess closes her eyes and improvises a quick rhyme. Fast, faster than light, is the thought in those words. Truer than position.

She opens her eyes and is elsewhere.

There are people in the room. The Survivor has just picked up a dented bronze axe from the floor. "Hmm," she says.

* * *

Everybody in the room recognizes the Poetess the second they see her. Who else, in the universe they know, could appear like that and smile like she does?

Who could seem so mundane and so scary at the same time?

"Don't let her speak!" the Logical Man yells, as if that isn't already at the core of their nightmares. He is still mid-phrase when the Survivor throws the axe in her hand at the Poetess.

The arc of its flight is vivacious and elegant, a fascinating reflexion of the arc of the axe's blades. The Poetess delights in this charming improvisation as she inclines her head to one side, letting the blade whirl past her with the slightest of touches and embed itself on a wall behind. The axe has left on her cheek a faint, beautiful mark, and without needing a mirror the Poetess knows it matched the design she had spent minutes perfecting. The Survivor is a beautiful character, and the Poetess wants to have a memento of her on her own body. This slight scar, a red dash that speaks of the Survivor's speed and the Poetess' art, will do well.

The Engineer had hidden behind the couch, pressing the metal dots on his scalp in a frantic pattern. "Too sane too sane too sane too sane too - " He interrupts himself by yelling, a scream that morphs quickly into a snort. Sanity is no longer a weakness - he has just reinstalled that particular patch. And with it comes everything else he had installed on his brain in a desperate attempt to survive the future he had seen coming: the memory, the speed, the nonexistent gap between need and action. He has taken a knife he had hidden under the couch before he remembers he has done it, even before he is consciously aware of wanting a knife. He realizes he has the weapon on his hand when he has already jumped toward the Poetess, a savage smile on his face. Not born a warrior, he has redesigned himself into one.

He stabs the Poetess before his foot hits the ground.

The Poetess smiles. Such a beautifully painful wound, yet how perfectly nonlethal. Not even incapacitating. The Engineer is a helpful coauthor, inelegant but clever, as long as she keeps control of the work. She could see, behind his eyes, the chaos he had unleashed on his mind to keep it safe from her words.

She puts a hand on her chest and taps quickly with her fingertips. It is a rhythm as old as vertebrate life, but refined to a point of mathematical perfection. The Engineer's heart, no more or less sane than anyone else's, falls in sync at once with the inescapable pattern.

The Poetess' fingers stand still. The Engineer falls to the floor clutching his chest in pain. But not even his self-induced insanity will restart his heart.

The Soldier jams his gun against the Poetess' temple and presses the trigger. The gun jams, as a more poetically aware person than him would have known. The Soldier steps back, his mind racing to find a way to win a battle that couldn't be won. Incongruously, obscenely, he wishes he had access to nuclear bombs just once more.

The Poetess takes a small book from a pocket, its black cover smeared with dry blood. The Soldier recognizes the book at once. The gun in his hand remembers, too. The last page had described how he had shot himself in guilt over having been tricked into ending the world. The blood on the cover is his.

The rage and the shame are his, too. "The Man with the Books," says the Soldier. "Where is he?"

The Poetess smiles, stands on her toes, and whispers something in his ear, as if telling the end of a dirty but very funny joke.

The Soldier blanches. "Even so," he says, and runs away to kill himself.

"I give up!" says the Logical Man from his place over a table. "I know when I've been beaten." Behind him, the Survivor is aiming the Colonel's gun. "It's not my fault she doesn't."

The Survivor fires as the Poetess moved her lips.

Bullets fly, destroying furniture, tearing apart clothes and parts of walls. The Poetess shakes her head and nods at the Logical Man. "Say it," she says.

The Logical Man says a word, and the Survivor's body freezes. Just a second – posthypnotic suggestions aren't very effective against her.

But betrayal needs no more. Turning gracefully on her feet, the Poetess takes the knife the Engineer had dropped and throws it at the Survivor.

The Survivor recovers from the posthypnotic backdoor almost quickly enough to evade the knife. She dies almost too quickly to blow away the head of the Logical Man with the few dozen bullets she has left in the Colonel's gun.

A final shot is heard from outside. The Soldier had killed the Man with the Books, and now he is dead.

The Poetess surveys the room and the worlds. Everything open is closed, and everything suggested has been said. Only a last gesture is needed. Something symbolic. An act of love.

She buries all the bodies under the floor. There is no one left to listen to an eulogy, but she says one anyway as the last day finally dies. She leaves the last of the worlds just before the last star begins to shine.

The worlds end at midnight.

* * *

"Gotcha," whispers a voice.

Chapter XXI: Crystal Inclusions

In the beginning is the Wordsmith. She had destroyed the worlds because she found the end a beautiful thing to say, and then she created a new world because beginnings were beautiful, too. And she said that there would be no war.

Human would kill human, yes. Cities would burn, yes. Friends and lovers would betray. Yes. There would be war amongst nations, and inside nations, and for nations and because of nations.

Yet there would be no war against the Poem. The Poem is flawless, unlike the Axiom, for the Poem shapes both inference and truth.

There is death in the world, and grief, and pain. But there is peace in the in deepest well of every soul. What can't be changed is accepted. Fate is bowed to, if not in words, in deeds.

A world forever.

* * *

She remembers everything. The monsters, the deaths. Her own, more than once.

This isn't her world. Here she has nothing to fight against, and no way to save herself. Here monsters are fantasies or journalistic metaphors.

She doesn't believe her memories at first, thinking them daydreams and fears. She ignores the way her hands itch for weapons she has never had as long as she can. She tries to remember what she had been taught – that violence is something alien to her, and that the shadows were something to fear, not to hunt.

But one day she realizes that time and reality were killing her a day and a thought at a time. She intends to survive.

The first machete she buys feels like coming home.

* * *

You are a soldier. A warrior. You wield the most powerful weapon ever created, the dream of generals and the nightmare of kings. Once, a man could throw a spear and kill another. You can, with less effort than him, kill an army or turn a city to rubble.

Your instructions are simple. If ordered to, you will unleash the nuclear weapons under your control, the first step of what will likely be the end of the world. Any psychopath could do it.

You must also not fire them in any other situation, no matter what's happening to the world, your command, or your own mind. Any sane person could do it.

What makes you special is that you have been trained to do both things, to be sane or insane on command. You have been entrusted with the mission of keeping the world alive, a mission that depends on your ability and willingness to end it.

Your father has often and cynically commented on this shallow paradox. Your response has always been curt and dismissive, but not because you are

afraid of fighting your father in the realm of ideas, scholar as he might be. You simply cannot risk any damage to your certainty. Not while doing the job you do. That your father keeps poking at your soul shows that he would be willing to risk Armageddon in his search for truth, or just to fire up a good debate.

You very deliberately never think about the small part of you that resonates with his, a part that you've kept hidden from your father, your superiors, and even, most of the time, yourself.

Most of the time. Not always. Sometimes your daydreams are made of nightmares. Sometimes you feel as if the world has already ended, or remember having destroyed it by mistake. So you do the only thing you can think of doing, hidden from your superiors, who wouldn't understand, and from your father, who would believe he did.

You write about the end of the world, time and again, different each time, always the same. You write by hand, because nothing else would be discreet enough, without pausing or needing to, and as soon as you are done you burn the little black notebooks you scribble apocalypses on.

But you don't forget them, and when the memories become too strong to avoid, you don't forgive yourself, either. But you have things to do before you kill yourself.

* * *

He likes machines, and more than machines, mechanisms. Anything made of parts working together, anything where form and sense were one. Too much of the world lied with forms and had no sense, but a mechanism not only said the truth, it was true. A bridge, an engine, a brain, all of them had a function to fulfill, and neither the laws of nature nor the demands of specs could be lied to.

He feels comfortable with things that work because of all the things in his world that don't. All of his relationships had fallen apart, mechanisms composed of fluid pieces with no stable aim, following no rules he could fathom, adhering to no stable law. He had felt himself to be the wrong piece, and as much as he tried to kludge things up, he had known that engineering would not be fooled for long.

His life, too, is a grotesque not-machine, more a collection of parts thrown together at random than a system with a purpose. Days are bolted to nights, actions jammed into needs, yet nothing works right, and the machine, with great pains and steel-breaking strain, goes nowhere and does nothing at all.

He often suspects the same of the world. It makes mechanisms more necessary to him, refuges of sense in an universe devoid of it, but it also makes them seem painfully fragile. What is the point of designing an elegant machine in a world of chaos? Crafting a beautiful piece and adding it to a monstrously senseless accumulation of parts simply defiles the piece, and does nothing to improve the whole.

He becomes convinced the world will fall apart, as all senseless kludges are wont to. He doesn't know when or how. He doesn't know what to do.

Even his mind feels wrong. He would look at scans of his brain and identify no obvious problems, yet something at the bottom of his self tells him that the mechanism is incomplete.

One night he begins to push wires through his scalp. It's like seeing the place where the missing piece of the puzzle goes.

He understands now where the flaw in the world is.

* * *

The Doctor had dedicated his life to the health of the mind. To go to those who were in violent war against reality and themselves, and to help them reach a form of peace. A way of living inside the boundaries of the real.

For this purpose, he had studied many things. He had studied bodies and brains, words and memories, and eventually he studies insanity itself. What they believe, how they feel, what the world looks like through their eyes.

Because he wants to help them, he seeks to understand them. Because he has to understand them, he puts himself in their place, struggling at the center of an universe that is incompatible with sanity. An universe too fragile and senseless for a healthy mind to dwell in. He tries to help them see that this isn't true, and in many cases he succeeded.

But every time he teaches a patient to look at the here-and-now, to find order and pattern in what could be touched and experienced, he becomes more aware of what he is directing their gaze away from. The more he brings people away from the edge, the more he himself looks down from it. He looks hard; he prefers to save people with the truth.

He finds nothing, and he can't make himself forget that. To cure others – to save himself – the emptiness had to be filled. With something.

With anything.

He stops sleeping. He begins to read the diaries of the delusional, and then the books of the extinct. It all sounds so similar, so familiar.

One dawn he remembers why.

* * *

"It's nice to have my body back," the Logical Man says to the people who have been waiting for him. The four of them have met again in the room where they had been killed in another world.

The Soldier looks at the Survivor. "You knew we would survive. How?"

The Survivor shrugs. "I'll tell you later. After we've killed the Poetess."

The Engineer, lying down on the couch, snorts. "Sure. Because that went so well last time. I still have nightmares about my heart stopping."

"It's a valid point," says the Logical Man. "We had no chance against her before, and that was in a world where she changed the rules. Now she has made them. How do you kill God?"

"By surprise," says the Soldier. The Logical Man rolls his eyes.

The Survivor looks behind a chair. Incongruously, and just as she had expected, she finds her bronze axe. It is clean and smooth. "Something like that," she said, weighing the weapon in his hand.

The Logical Man clears his throat. "Say. About what happened back then..."

"Yes?" The Survivor's voice is as even as the slow path of the axe through the air as she tests it. She isn't looking at the Logical Man.

"I hope you understand I had no choice."

The Survivor smiles. "Feeling guilty, Doctor?"

"Nervous. You have an unhealthy fixation with that axe, and it usually doesn't end well for me."

"Don't worry. I want you to do something, and I think you'll like it."

The Engineer looks at her. "What do you have in mind?"

"Doctor, you still have an asylum in this world, don't you?"

"I do. *Akalos*. It's an embarrassingly bland place. A cookie-cutter factory of 'sane' people."

The Survivor buries her axe in a table. "Not for long."

The Soldier crosses his arms over his chest. "You want to raise an army, and you'll ask me to train them."

"No," she says, "and no. I want to build bombs. And then I'll ask you to drop them."

The Soldier looks somewhere past her. "I already destroyed a world."

There is no pity in the Survivor's features. "That's how I know you'll do it as many times as it takes."

"You don't know what you are asking me to do... Or maybe you do. Damn you. The Poetess could be the least of two evils."

"You truly believe that?"

"I wish I did. She brought peace."

The three people listening to the Soldier smile bitterly, and a few seconds later he joins them.

Chapter XXII: Whisper Havoc

Akalos had been designed as a peaceful place, a refuge to heal the soul and the mind. For years it had fulfilled its role with efficiency if not satisfaction, giving its owner and Director repute although not solace.

He is different now, and Akalos begins to change as well. The truly sick are evacuated from the premises, those whose brains had been hurt by illness or injury. Only the maladjusted remain, the perpetually suffering, those who find something in the world alien to themselves.

An offer is made to them. Most of them are reasonable and refuse, and then join their fellows in other asylums to continue their care. A few accept.

Akalos is further changed. It had been built to house those who couldn't be trusted or didn't trust themselves, but anyone who remained had accepted the offer, so there is no need for measures to keep them inside. Security devices are redeployed, and now the guards watch the outside. Impersonally modern spikes over the walls are turned around, and an enthusiastic patient decorates them as steel fangs. The asylum bares its teeth at the night.

People are brought to work on the building. Cells are repurposed, basements refitted, and entire rooms are turned into a peculiar museum for old things with forgotten names. Nightmarish motifs decorate the formerly stark corridors. Computers and televisions are installed everywhere. The asylum is still a secluded place, but now it watches the outside with care.

And it watches itself.

A threshold is crossed. It isn't something visible to the naked eye, but one dusk the Director roams the forest and the building, looks inside the corners, listens to the murmurs, and decides that, yes, it is ready now. It doesn't have the power, not yet, not in this world, but it has the right form.

Akalos is no more. He is in Bit Durani. He is home.

* * *

The Logical Man begins with Hell. Whatever their religion, the patients in Bit Durani had a Hell, and even those without a religion were familiar with the idea. All of them, at one point of their lives of another, had been in a very similar place.

So the Logical Man takes its existence for granted, and lectures to them about its ethical geology and theological politics. A Devil or devils, ice or brimstone, circles inside circles or towers of fire. They explore all the forms of eternal damnation, and how they look and feel, until any of them, upon opening their eyes for the first time in a dark afterlife, would have identified at once his or her particular hell.

But they soon leave Dante behind, and even his predecessors. There are other hells, older ones. Not places of punishment, but simply of despair. Realms of darkness and dust, of eternal hunger.

The Logical Man asks them to imagine eternal hunger. Saner people would have faltered, but they go very far. They know what years of hunger – a hunger of nothing more and nothing less than being part of the world – have done to

their minds and souls. They multiply that by infinite years, and they realize humanity would wither away as a blade of grass under the midday sun.

Hypothetically, of course. It is all myth. They aren't people who could be scared by wings, pitchforks, and horns.

But there are mirrors in Bit Durani, and their own hunger is real enough.

"They are ready," the Logical Man says to the others.

* * *

Everybody in Bit Durani is familiar with nightmares. Perhaps especially so with those you have with your eyes open and a clear sight. They aren't strangers, either, to drawing blood and pain from their own bodies. Sometimes, grounding the body is the only way to force their minds to make sense.

But all of them are surprised when the Engineer shows them what he had done with himself, and they all pause when he says he will do something similar to them. Their brains, they feel, are already delicate enough without inserting shiny wires that looked almost alive.

The Engineer tells them about abnormal stimulation patterns, states of being that can't be reached by thought and senses alone, but this doesn't convince them.

Then the Engineer tells them about failsafes, watchdogs, and paraneural monitors for their minds. They like the idea of having something watching over them, but they don't like it that much.

Then the Engineer tells them about synesthesia, the merging of senses into new ones. He describes some of the things he can "see," "hear," and "feel": The entropy in the tremor of fingers. The statistical patterns of clouds. The Fourier transform of his own heart. He could taste fractal patterns, hear fear, and smell the night. He sees people as the sum total of their potential behaviors. He can see all the nightmares he had ever had, graphed as a diagram on the stars.

They all want to go first, and the last ones envy the ones before as they see the world reflected anew in their eyes. They all notice the way people shake in fear and horror at what they see with their new eyes, but this is nothing less than what they had expected. After all, they are seeing things as they are.

"They are ready," the Engineer says to the others.

* * *

They are all confident with their new eyes. For the first time the world looks as they always knew it should, shadows, monsters, and their own labyrinthine minds. They had told themselves they would now feel horror, but never fear. Never again.

Then they see the Soldier through the wires in their brains.

There are billions of corpses hanging from his shoulders. Death is hanging from each fingertip. They look at his gun, and his gun looks at them.

His hands are empty, but his shadow carries a book, and for some reason this is the most terrifying thing of all.

He looks at them with eyes that are only human. They clear their throats and stand upright. The Soldier doesn't seem to notice or care.

"I will teach you about war," he says. And so he does.

He teaches them about his childhood. He speaks of the strategies of loneliness, and the body as a fortress. He delineates the pressure points to apply blunt silences for maximum pain.

And they can see this truth with their new eyes.

He explains to them about training. They see his effort and pain as he stands serenely recounting years. They see the ruthlessness with which an Army mutilated a boy to become a soldier, and the ruthlessness with which a soldier cut himself down into a warrior.

He speaks of his father. Few words, for this is almost a code. Every one of them sees the conversations planned as battles, and the counting of casualties in the drive back home, back to the base, back to waiting for the word to end the world.

He tells them about the Man with the Books. Without lies, omissions, or details, he explains what he had read, what he had decided, and what he had done. He describes his defeat in clear, unambiguous lines. He speaks of the end of the world, and then of how, defeated once again, he had shot dead the Man with the Books and killed himself.

Every person listening to him looks at his shadow and then at their own. Each of them carries a weapon: a smile, a word, a gun, love.

"They will do," the Soldier says to the others.

* * *

If nothing else, they had all learned from the Logical Man, the Engineer, and the Soldier the same basic lesson: Things are as they are, not as they look at first sight. First and foremost yourself.

Their last teacher is the Survivor. She doesn't tell them anything about what she had done, or why, or how. She tells them what she wants them to do.

They had been shown that Hell was as real as any theorem. They had been given tools to see below the world. They had been taught how to wage war against that thing under the world. And most importantly, they had been taught how to lose and how to die.

The Survivor tells them that they are ready, and they believe her. She tells them that they will now leave Bit Durani. They can see, so the world was just as much of an asylum, and they can fight, so they will be as safe outside as they are inside.

"Not much," she tells them. "You will die. And dying sucks." They can all see the truth in her words, both in ghostly marks on her skin and on the ghostly blood staining her hands.

"Go forth," she says. "See the truth. React. Do good when you can, and if you can't, do it well."

One of them, anyone, raises his hand. "Are we your army?"

"Of course not," she says, appalled. "Nothing like that. You are my bait. If you're lucky, a devil will capture and torture you. If *I* am lucky, it will be

someone worse. When she interrogates you, you will tell her the truth, not that you'd have much choice, and then she'll know I'm alive and here, and that I've set up a trap. And then she'll come, and I will kill her." She shows them a gun. "A very bad person gave me this gun." Looking at the gun, they feel needles of pain in their eyes and hear pleas of mercy in a dozen tongues. The Survivor sees their faces and smiles. "Tell her about her death."

* * *

They all leave Bit Durani that night. They walk alone or in pairs, sharing a private language of terrors and pointing at invisible things as they pass by.

Only the four teachers stay. They wait in the newly redecorated studio, which once again had old, cursed trinkets hanging from its walls. The Survivor leaves her spotless axe over a stone that had once been soaked with blood every horror-spawning solstice and concentrates on cleaning the Colonel's gun.

Each in their own way, old hands at it, the four wait to die.

Chapter XXIII: The Unraveling

The first hour, the Poetess encounters a monster.

She is walking on any street in any city, casually reading secrets and hearts in the way people walk, in how they touch their hair, in the way their eyes move, and the minute changes in their breathing as they go past each other.

It is a normal night in a normal city. In front of her eyes go the violent, the rapists, the thieves, the liars, the betrayers, the soulless, the mad.

Normal people, all of them, which means nothing else than *common*. Just as they have always been. Just as she has made them. Saddled with pain whether they feel it or not, chained by frustration they might not even see, beads moving along the wires delineating her design.

Then someone walks behind the Poetess. She is a young girl with a non-descript face, wearing clothes almost exactly in accordance with the expected statistical pattern. Only her eyes are different. They look at the wrong things at the wrong time; her pupils dilate or contract in ways that have little to do with unconscious interpersonal signals or the vagaries of light.

The Poetess intuits more than knows that something wis off and turns around almost too late to see the girl. She is out of practice with the unexpected, as it has been a long time and many worlds since she has been surprised by anything. But it only takes the Poetess a glance at the girl's eyes to see that they are wrong. Just a tiny detail, but inescapably obvious in the context of her world.

The path of the girl's eyes betrays the path of her thought, and it is weirder than anything the Poetess had chosen to allow in her world. It isn't random; the Poetess can see a bright, quickly shifting pattern of chaos and order in the way the girl takes in the world around her. But it is an alien intrusion into a coherent world.

The Poetess doubts for a second, poised between the curiosity of the artist and the thoroughness of the artisan. Should she follow the girl to study and enjoy her strangeness, or should she follow her to stamp it out?

That second is enough for the girl to get lost among the crowd. Another impossible thing – to the Poetess, the paths of a multitude are as predictable as the flight of a thrown axe. She can follow anyone just by seeing them once, not walking behind them but waiting where they would go. But not the girl. She has disappeared into the uncertainty cloud of her own uniqueness, embedded in the Poetess' universe but not part of it.

The Poetess feels uneasy. It is one person in an entire world, but even a single wrong syllable can spoil the longest work.

The world no longer feels comfortable to her.

* * *

The second hour, the Poetess meets the shadows.

It is impossible, for she had killed them. She had unsaid the Question, turning the shadows from dangerous unreality to harmless fiction. Yet as the Poetess walks past a kid reading in a coffee shop, she notices a familiar angle

in the way she was holding the book. The Poetess approaches the kid and asks for the book, and the kid, as vulnerable to poetry as any other human, gives it to her.

The plot in the book is bland and irrelevant, the syntax clumsy, the characters plain. But underneath language and story there are references to a world she knows well, one of timeless entities that could have been, weren't, and hungered to be. The Poetess knows more about the relationship between language and reality than anyone else had ever known, and she realizes, with the quick, insightful glance of the artist, that such a book couldn't have been written without the shadows being real, any more than a proof could be written without its theorem being true.

She could go once again to the shadows to verify it, but she doesn't need to. Or she could go to the shadows to destroy them once more. Yet to repeat an action that had been undone reeks of bad craftsmanship. She is bound by poetry as much as she uses it to bind the world, and the impossible existence of the shadows, added to the impossible eyes of the girl she had seen, call for a more elegant solution than mindless repetition. If necessary, she will remake the world, but she will only do it after she has figured out what the flaw with her current creation is.

She reads with care an entire page of the book. It is enough to tell her most things that could be known about the writer. She reads his childhood in his prose, his suffering. She sees his loneliness in his grammar, and how he got lost in the maze of his life. She reads his time confined in his vocabulary, and the way his flesh and mind had been pierced and remade.

She frowns at this echo of a previous world now dead. The book has, the Poetess notes, a black cover.

* * *

She knows she will meet, on the third hour, something that isn't supposed to exist. Even the impossible has its own rules.

She sits on her favorite park bench, the one where, in another world, a dying Vector in a stolen body had proclaimed his love. The sky is beautiful. The Poetess waits, relaxed and vigilant. Twice she had been alerted. Now someone will lift the veil.

The Engineer walks toward her. She looks into his footsteps, searching for fear or hate. She finds neither. He is merely walking in her direction, the wires in his brain as clear to her sight as the distracted look in his eyes.

He has, she notices, upgraded himself once again. It won't make a difference against her, of course, and she can see he knows this as well.

The Engineer sits next to her on the park bench, pulls his phone out of a pocket, and begins tinkering with its keys. It is a playful pattern, as simple and complex as any game. The Engineer smiles, more to what he was doing than to either the Poetess or himself.

The Poetess breathes deeply. There is a script to be followed here. A clumsy one by her standards, but that is perhaps appropriate. Maybe she had overreached the last time, aiming to close things in a way that was unnecessarily tight. Sometimes art requires doing things the obvious way.

She dares not speak to him, for fear of her speech taking over the delicate balance of the moment. Instead, she points at her left eye.

"Yes," says the Engineer. "I gave them second sight."

A thousand nuances in his words and voice tell the Poetess much of what she wanted to know: how many people he had modified, when, and part of why. The part that pertains to him, at least.

The Poetess reclines against the back of the bench, looking at the sky. Such a beautiful creation. It is a shame to have to throw it away and remake it, just because a few impurities had improbably remained from the raw materials she had used.

The Engineer leaves his phone between them. It is turned on, and its screen shows a swarm of moving bright dots, its pattern, and the pattern-over-the-pattern, self-evident to the Poetess. She points at him.

"Yes," he says. "They are all me. I reverse-engineered what I knew of the Loop and the Vector, and put something of my own self in each of the circuits I gave to those people. I think of it as a distributed backup; it's a dangerous world out there and," he puts a finger over his temple, "in here."

It is an intriguing half-truth, and an amusing half-lie. The Poetess points at him again.

The Engineer puts up his hands mockingly. "All right, yes," he confesses. "It's a bit more than that. Each of them has a bit of my self. The whole of them together *are* myself. I'm just partially here right now."

The Poetess caresses the surface of the bench, and the Engineer nods. "Don't worry, I remember how you killed me last time, and I know you could likely find a way to kill all of me even now. But," he says, standing up, "I think you think it's not yet the proper time."

The Poetess smiles, briefly. Dozens of people all over the city feel a tinge of fear.

"Understood," says the Engineer, walking away. "But I don't think we'll be meeting again," he adds over his shoulder, as the part of him that has been talking with the Poetess rejoins the rest of the city.

* * *

The Poetess stands in front of the asylum's gates, marveling. The world is crisscrossed with flaws now, and they all converge here. It is a place from a previous creation. Bricks are just bricks and walls are just walls, but the shape of it, the intention behind it, had been subtly altered to something that she had decreed should be no more.

The asylum is a place in war against the rules of the universe. It is a war that can't be won, but that is irrelevant. It exists, and that is more than wrong enough. Extending itself in multiple ways, the flaw has now weakened the artistic integrity of an entire city, and by implication the entire world.

She feels sure now that she is going to have to recreate the world again, this time wiping the existing one even more thoroughly. But first, she has to find out *how* the impurities of the previous world, those doomed four, exist when they should not.

The gates are closed, locked by heavy bolts.

"Bit Durani," whispers the Poetess in her softest voice. It is the true name of the place, and the doors fall down.

The Poetess walks in.

Chapter XXIV: The Trap

There is a path from the gates of the asylum to the entrance to the building proper. It is straight, unpaved, and covered with fine gravel. As clear as an arrow, and just as deadly. The Poetess walks on it.

The building's door opens wide, showing the Colonel's gun mounted on a tripod. The Survivor is standing behind it, a hand casually wrapped around the grip.

The Poetess shakes her head: this isn't a proper end.

The Survivor shrugs, not disagreeing, and pulled the trigger. The gun remembers other fields, other targets, other deaths. Bullets fly, each of them on a precise trajectory, as predictable, once fired, as the movement of the planets over them.

None of the bullets touch the Poetess. It just isn't that kind of world. The Survivor keeps firing. Behind her appears the Soldier, his own gun in his hand. He aims with care and shoots at the ground beyond the Poetess and the gates.

The bullet misses the Poetess but hits the patch of ground the Soldier had intended it to, and the landmine he had buried there. The sound of the explosion engulfs the guns, the asylum, and the sky. Their sight returns before their hearing. Dirt is raining from the sky through a brown fog. They can dimly see the Poetess behind the heavy veil. She stands unharmed, but with a surprised look on her face.

The Survivor and the Soldier grin at her.

The Poetess smiles back, crouches, and picks up a small rock. The Survivor's finger pulls the trigger just as the Poetess throws the rock, just not fast enough.

The rock jams the gun's barrel with impossible precision and force as the bullet attempts to escape. This explosion is much quieter than the one before, but when it passes the Survivor and the Soldier are lying on the floor, freckled with blood.

The Poetess walks toward the entrance, skipping here, twisting there, somersaulting apparently at random. None of the landmines buried on the path explode.

The Survivor and the Soldier rise groaning from the floor and hurry inside the building. The Poetess slows down her dance to give them time. The last time she had killed them she had been too quick defeating them, an scene too unsatisfactory to be a proper end. They have to give their best and be bested inch by inch, so they can die heroically, memorably, and once and for all.

The Soldier is waiting for her inside the building. Stacks of books litter the floor of the lobby, and the walls are covered with computer monitors.

The monitors come to life as soon as the Poetess enters the room. They show, at first, letters, one at a time, then syllables, then words, as fast as a person could follow them and then much faster. The Poetess looks at them with curiosity. The stream of words is neither structured nor random. It squirts the fractal frontier between those two modes, tantalizingly close to having a

meaning, but pulling away at the last word. It is a mesmerizing spectacle for someone as attuned to language as the Poetess, who glimpses in those words a new realm of almost-truths and maybe-languages like a musician could hear very faintly a first suggestion of infrasonic song.

She is so entranced with this that she almost fails to notice the Soldier as he pulls a knife from a sheath on his back and runs towards her with a predator's pace. His stroke is short, measured, and she evades it with effort. He keeps attacking her, fast and relentless, while she eludes his blade with barely superhuman grace. Too much of her mind is still caught up by the trap of complexity the Engineer had built in the walls, and this might even give the Soldier a chance.

The Poetess closes her eyes and swipes away the knife's blade with the palm of her hand. Safe from the siren song of the monitors, and her mind cleansed by the brief pain, she is again herself. Blind, perhaps, and dancing on a treacherous floor with the knife of a soldier bent on her death, but her self counts far more than that.

The soldier knows this, too. He isn't surprised when the Poetess' movements become faster and more graceful, his own attacks missing their target in ever wilder ways. Soon he is more prey than hunter, slashing the air in every place the Poetess wasn't.

He only knows where she is. She knows *who* he is, and that makes all the difference. She picks a book up from the floor, her eyes still closed, and traps the knife between its pages. A graceful twist of her arms and the knife is thrown up.

The Soldier keeps pushing his attack, now using his bare hands. Neither of them is surprised when she dances around him, grabs the knife as it falls, and stabs him in the back. He falls to his knees, not seriously hurt, but in a great deal of pain.

The Poetess walks away from the room, not tripping any of the stacks of books. She could kill the Soldier now, but it wouldn't be closure enough. It has to be all of them together.

Soon.

She opens her eyes once the monitors are at her back. There are two identical doors in front of her, like the first words of a phrase or the opening of a chess game. She opens the obvious one and went through it. She is in another room identical to the first one, with two doors in front of her and one at her back.

She chooses again and walks through the door into another identical room. This goes on and on, far longer than the size of the building would have suggested possible. But the Poetess knows that this labyrinth had been designed by the Logical Man, and as such, the geometrical constraints it had to obey weren't the usual ones. This is a labyrinth designed to keep her lost forever.

Worse than that: geometry is just another language, and the labyrinth's, although locally Euclidean to the naked eye, whispers subtly into the subconscious until the hapless wanderer goes irrevocably mad, her mind lost in an inner labyrinth topologically equivalent to the one she walked. It is a clever

trap, and the Poetess feels almost happy about the temporary survival of the flaws.

But clever as it is, it is a hopeless trap. To use language against her is to try and burn the sun. The subliminal curse encoded in the labyrinth's geometry is as plain as her as the colors in the walls, and as easy for her to ignore as a small hole in the floor. She had created herself far larger and complex prisons just with the cadence of her words, prisons that had held millions without a single lock.

She thinks about an older labyrinth. Ariadne's trick was a good one, but it only worked with finite mazes.

The Poetess stands at the center of a room. There are two doors in front of her, and one behind. All of them lead to identical rooms that in a very real sense are the same. She takes a pencil out of her pocket and writes a short recursive poem on one of the doors. She could have used blood, but it isn't the substance that matters, just the structure of the symbols and the way it subtly distorts everything near.

She opens the door and goes through it into the center of the labyrinth. There is a hole in the center of the room, of course. The Poetess looks over its edge, to see the Soldier and the Survivor standing a basement below her.

The Poetess jumps into the hole. As she does so, the Soldier activates a remote control he had hidden in his hand.

All the walls of Bit Durani, once again, fall down in a precisely planned catastrophe that sends ceilings crashing over floors. When the sound dies and the dust settles down the Poetess sees that she has been trapped with the Soldier and the Survivor inside the large cellar, which is unevenly lit by torches on the walls.

The Survivor lifts her axe from the floor and makes a sign to the Soldier. He activates another button on the remote control, and small incendiary charges explode in a tight circle of fire surrounding the Poetess.

The Survivor throws her axe at her in an act of naked faith.

The Poetess moves. It looks as quick and fluid as breathing, and yet when she is still again the axe had been half-buried in the floor behind her, and the flames around the Poetess are now extinct.

The Soldier looks evenly at her. "No matter what happens to us, you will never leave this place. Nothing you say or do will ever be known by any other person in the world."

The Poetess smiles. What the Soldier says is true, because she will recreate the world as soon as she kills them. And they really are isolated from the rest of the world, both by the rubble over them and the ruins of the labyrinth's geometry. However she kills them, it will work the same way.

"Hey," says a voice behind her, adding another to the day's list of impossible surprises. The Poetess turned around, leaving the grinning Survivor and the Soldier at her back. She is looking at the Survivor again. But not the Survivor as she is, but the Survivor as she could eventually be. Even tougher. Even less predictable. Given very specific circumstances, capable of reaching into a

past chapter. And why not? the Poetess wonders. Someone who, in her youth, had bet her life upon such a gambit could be expected to grow into something grand.

The Survivor has the bronze axe in her hands. She swings it once, confidently. She has done the impossible before.

The Poetess' body falls upon the floor.

The Survivor looks at the axe. As she had expected, it's dented now, and stained in blood. Not all of it would go away. She throws the axe into a corner, there to be lost and dug out by archeologists some time in the past.

The Survivor looks at her younger self. It isn't easy, but she hadn't expected it to be. After a silent half-minute both women shrug at each other. It isn't their place to judge.

A voice calls from above. "Can I dig you out now?" asks the Logical Man. "My zombie helpers are getting restless."

When the Soldier looks around him again, he can only see the younger Survivor.

She looks at him. "I'm going to miss that axe."

Chapter XXV: Drums

The Logical Man is glad when the others finally leave. He wants to be alone to wander the ruins of his asylum.

Twice he had built Bit Durani. Once, in another world, he had dedicated his life to making the shadows real. Bit Durani had been a laboratory to this end, and later, once he understood the ontogenetic properties of dread, a fear generator and an amplifying device.

And he had succeeded. He had drowned the world in shadows, and in the eternal pain all other pains had been stilled. Time itself had been frozen. It had been agony, but also peace.

Something had taken that away from him, and when he had tried to regain it, and just as he had discovered that there were more than one world, and that all tended to end, the Survivor had first beheaded him, and then, together with the Soldier, they had destroyed Bit Durani in their enthusiastic stupidity.

That was the first time his asylum had been destroyed, and the pain had pierced his soul. The second time he had helped them, because what they were facing was worse than reality. It was someone who could remake reality at her whim, and her whim had been pedestrian and eternal. Her world was everything he had called the shadows to escape from.

Now the Poetess is gone, and so are the Survivor and the others, and so is his home. Only a half-moon lights the rubble as he sits over the remains of a wall.

He breathes deeply and then exhales. One more time, then. It is disheartening to find that ending the world requires so many tries, but at least he has plenty of experience now. And the shadows are possible once again.

The Logical Man smiles to the night sky. On the other hand, he could learn from his errors. Bit Durani had been a single building, his purpose, to the right eyes, obvious at first sight.

Architecture had proven effective. What wouldn't he achieve as an urban planner?

He crouches and begins to sketch ideas on the dusty ground. All cities since the first one had been god-making devices. He just needs to find the right tweak to call forth his preferred ones.

* * *

The seed that had been the Engineer sips his coffee, wondering where the rest of himself could be. He had designed his swarm-self with security in mind – the Poetess, he had been told by the Survivor, was dead, but that didn't mean other equally nasty factors couldn't come into play. It had been not just painful, but humiliating, being killed by a well-crafted signal.

His new self won't be. It is decentralized, very redundant, and with multiple overlapping security protocols. The drawback, of course, is a less clear sense of self. The swarm as a whole is the Engineer, but neither him nor any other part is aware of everything it was doing and thinking, or why.

He sighs, relaxing in his chair. He feels obsolete, and not for the first time in his life, except that now he had only himself to blame. The new Engineer is smarter, more resilient, and radically more flexible than he could have ever hoped to be, even after he had learned how to modify his own brain. He suspects the swarm has already recruited one or two new elements. Not too many, though, and only those who added to the strength of the whole. Stealth is safer in the long term than flamboyant domination and huge numbers.

An old woman sits at a nearby table and asks a waiter for a cup of tea. She then takes out of her purse a book of poetry, which she begins to read as she taps her fingers on the table.

The man who had been the Engineered decodes without effort the signal carried on the fingers' pattern. It includes partial reports on nearby swarm elements, and fragments of the Engineer's thoughts that had been assigned to him. One of them catches his individual interest, even as most of his subconscious mind is busily processing the rest. The Logical Man has resumed his attempt to trigger his preferred apocalypse.

The man meditates upon this, contributing his first-hand experience with the Logical Man to the Engineer's distributed memory. Unopposed, the Logical Man is very likely to succeed, and the post-apocalypse world is one in which the Engineer won't be able to survive.

Unavoidably, the Engineer would have to kill the Logical Man.

The man sipping the coffee relays his conclusions to the old woman through the seemingly random way in which he played with a spoon, and through her to the rest of the Engineer. More information about the the Logical Man's plans is needed, as well as preparations for more direct action. Both the Soldier and the Survivor are likely to be involved, too, possibly but not certainly fighting the Logical Man.

The old woman taps her acceptance of the message. It will soon be relayed to the rest of the Engineer.

And then it will be war.

* * *

Time runs in chapters. Of all the 'lessons' the universe had taught him – each lesson another defeat – the Soldier hates that one the most.

It doesn't mean you can undo death. It only means death makes no sense.

It is too close to something his father could have said, slaying the honor of ten thousand dead warriors with a dismissive gesture of his hand. He certainly would have loved to know how dangerous a weapon language was. He would have liked the Poetess.

The Soldier hadn't liked her. Her death is the first victory, the first meaningful act, in a long while. It had freed the world from a perhaps eternal rut. The Poetess' hold on reality had been too strong, too complete, to be allowed. Nobody should have that kind of power over any world, much less all of the worlds.

The Soldier swallows a bitter chuckle. He had had power of life and death over a world, once. It had ended badly, with him tricked by a much worse killer

into unleashing Armageddon as a weapon. And yet without that destruction, perhaps the Logical Man would have sacrificed all of the worlds to the shadows. Or, even worse, the Poetess could have turned reality into her own poem, and he wouldn't have been in a position to help stop her.

Had the Soldier believed in destiny, he would have felt it was clear that fate had led him to end his world, so he would be able to save all of creation. But he knows there is no such thing as fate.

And he knows time runs in chapters.

The Soldier puts down his pen over the plain desk. On it there are many blank books with black covers, and more are stacked in the shelves on the walls.

Lots of apocalypses to write about. But he has time. And he already knows he will get it right.

* * *

The Survivor sits on the park bench, watching the sky above. Clouds are gathering. It will rain soon. Sometime later it will be, once again, the end of the world.

She rests her feet on the bench, one hand propping her head as a pillow, the other casually resting over her concealed gun.

The Survivor closes her eyes and waits.

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