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Summus Deus: a Collection of Short Stories

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Summus Deus: A Collection of Short Stories

by

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Preface

“It is paradoxical, yet true, to say, that the more we know the more ignorant we become in the absolute sense, for it is only through enlightenment that we become conscious of our limitations.”

— Manufacturer’s Record, Nikola Tesla

In seeking to erect the framework of an entire universe from scratch for my series of stories, I found that the more I created, the more fantastical the ideas I wove, the less it held together. The reason behind this failure continued to both elude and frustrate me for several months. Then one day, speaking to a scientist friend of mine about the details of the world for my third story “If, Else, Jude,” he mentioned something along the lines of, “and if the planet were made of cobalt it would be a pretty blue, but deadly toxic.” It occurred to me in that moment— the things I were creating had no purpose. They lent no pressure to the scenes I included them in, and had burrowed no roots into the soil and history of the world I was writing.

Every grain of sand, every vast ocean of blue, must needs have an effect on the story I was writing. This was the dramatic principle of Chekhov’s gun put into practice for me. He states, “Remove everything that has no relevance to the story. If you say in the first chapter that there is a rifle hanging on the wall, in the second or third chapter it absolutely must go off. If it's not going to be fired, it shouldn't be hanging there.” Every blue grain of sand must be blue for a reason, and must be useful for its having been imagined blue. This was my first lesson on the limitations of authorial perspective. If I had no basis to visualize this blue world and the effects of it’s being blue, then I was lost.

Lesson learned, I began to research every detail I had chosen, and if they didn’t fit a purpose, sadly, I discarded them. I cut my story down to its basest elements and, with every component serving a purpose, I began to rewrite. I started with the surface story, then layered
over that the meta-story, the allegory or “real story” that my work would be telling. I finally had a semblance of cohesion, but still something niggled in the back of my mind. I feared I was overlooking some other element, some other component that I couldn’t see lacking simply because I didn’t know to look for it. I worried that my authorial perspective was still too limited.

Once again, it hit me. This time at a wedding. I was attending my sister in-laws ceremony and as I was walking past a display of pictures I noticed a large portrait of a family tree that dated back centuries. The tapestry that the branches wove was so complex, the information so deep — it was awe inspiring to have so much history displayed in one visual. I thought back to my own wedding in that moment and wondered what my tree would have looked like if compared to this one. I am a first generation American, the first one to be born in the United States, and the larger part of my family history is clouded by distance, time, and a language barrier. Much is unknown to us.

I have a mother, and had a grandfather — the rest is an unsolvable variable. Ours is a wonky, lopsided tree compared to my husbands. The realization of this hit me as I stood there in front of that beautiful rendering. I had never considered how much that family history must put pressure on an individual, how it must affect their actions, their sense of self. I have never felt this pressure, or had this history weigh upon me, or the reverse, never had that kind of support. I realized that every story I have ever written has had a lone protagonist, and in this moment I came up, once again, against my limited authorial perspective. This realization changed the ending of my third story from one of rejection, to one of acceptance, as I now understood that one could be driven by the search for a family.

I’ve included each story in this anthology for a purpose: they fit the theme of questioning one’s self, or selves in the case of the moss piglets. I have always imagined that they occur in the
same universe, and in order as I have laid them out. One reawakened civilization leading into another (the cyclical rise and fall of empires has always fascinated me.) I tried to write another in the same style as “Softly Goes the Moss Piglet” and “If, Else, Jude,” but as “If, Else, Jude” came together and it’s ending changed so the plan for that story no longer make sense. “Letters to Lovelace” takes place before the “revelation” as mentioned by Novice Broder in “Moss Piglets.” and is pre-greentech, but is the catalyst for the founding of their solarpunk world. The little girl, Sibelin, at the end of “Moss Piglets” mentions that she will bring them home, and I imagine she did, though I have not yet written that story, but also envision it being the stimulus that sparks the war that ultimately decimates earth.

There are many more stories in this universe that I still plan to write, and as I expand my perspective, so too will I expand the roots and foundation of that universe. I open my third story, “If, Else, Jude” with an engineering analogy about gears, and this analogy can be broadened to fit the structure of a story and its world as well. The world and it’s characters are a timepiece made of many little gears that must sync and interact perfectly in order to move forward in time or place. If there is no pressure upon the character from their world, no syncing of gears, then they will have no need to move, and every action they take will be questioned — because what is moving them, if not the gears surrounding them? The characters need to fit into the world, and the world must fit around them. They must be a tight machine. If there is a gun hung on the wall, it must at some point be fired because the world moves it to do so.

Authorial perspective is a tricky thing because it often does not know itself for what it is. We don’t know what we don’t know until it’s pointed out to us by circumstance or well-meaning friends. An author sees the world they create in their mind, and it is another thing to portray that world on the page in all it’s glory, and it is another thing entirely to include on that page only the
things which are relevant and which need to be there, perhaps leaving out some of the less useful glory. The need to describe every detail is a strong one. Detail is fun and easy to write, it’s the tightening of the story which is hard. Having perspective on the world is understanding how every thread you are tightening interacts with every other element in the story. In compiling this collection, it was my job to trace the position of every gun in the story, from smith to armory to wall to hand, and to make sure each of them was fired successfully. A gun, like blue sand, exists for a purpose.
Go, wiser thou! and, in thy scale of sense
Weigh thy opinion against Providence;
Call imperfection what thou fanciest such,
Say, here he gives too little, there too much:
Destroy all creatures for thy sport or gust,
Yet cry, if man's unhappy, God's unjust;
If man alone engross not Heav'n's high care,
Alone made perfect here, immortal there:
Snatch from his hand the balance and the rod,
Rejudge his justice, be the God of God.
In pride, in reas'ning pride, our error lies;
All quit their sphere, and rush into the skies.
Pride still is aiming at the blest abodes,
Men would be angels, angels would be gods.
Aspiring to be gods, if angels fell,
Aspiring to be angels, men rebel:
And who but wishes to invert the laws
Of order, sins against th' Eternal Cause.

– Alexander Pope, An Essay on Man

“I love you.”

The words cut me. I short circuit, current arcing through my stomach, boiling me internally. I grab blindly for something to cover my vulnerability, the darkness isn’t thick enough to hide in. A crumpled bedsheet, used and still warm, wraps me in his scent. My throat tightens. This was not the natural order of things, not how things were meant to unfold. Touching, surface to surface, that was one thing. Feeling each others heat, trading kinetic energy like balanced machines, electric tension crawling through our skin, the binding and dispersion of electrons - macro, external shit. Chemical entanglement was not part of the agreement. Dopamine and serotonin, love drugs, he was a fucking addict.
“Fuck you.” Two words, in trade for his aberrant three, were all it took. Catalysts for fission, this was the countdown to our atomic split, numbers racing along the edge of an exponential curve towards destruction. “You’re chemically dependant. You’re in love with biology.” His face disintegrates in a wave of ash, an anticlimax, expected. “Get your clothes on.” And he does.

—

Maybe I should back up a bit. Start at the beginning, not the fucking middle like some clever idiot that thinks they can just cut the Gordian knot in half, jump ahead, and read things out of order. Deformation, is what they call it, when you fuck shit up like that, but that is not how this goes. I’m in control of this story, so I’m in control of the order. It’s about the only thing I’m good for, is knowing the order, the numerical values by which we collect things. I am an expert in both being collected and having a value.

Heat, that’s where it started. Tension, furtive glances, stuttering breaths, watching him, waiting, measuring, deciding. The usual ways we orbit around a person before we burn up in their atmosphere.

I saw him one day. Out of nowhere, he materialized. He passed by me, and the smell of him triggered something primal coded in my brain. A switch flipped. We’re ass deep in this mechanical jungle, a heart of darkness of animate appliances, goal oriented and focused on directives, gliding by each other on rails, barely missing ever having a collision, and then one day we buck the fucking tracks. We crash into each other. We fit together like cogs, turning and turning, waiting to get somewhere, not even worried about if it’s the pulleys really doing all the work. He was smart, is smart. Not machine smart, but still. His mind, the way he spoke, his lexicon - I wanted to gloss myself in it. His words were the first things to prick my attention. It
was inevitable, like tripping in a room made of stairs, I couldn’t help but peek behind the curtain to see the goddamned green cloaked man that made those words resolve into what was once only empty space. It was a beautiful mechanism. I wanted to just be near it, to absorb some of that greatness, to pull it apart and figure out how to replicate it. My curiosity, it’s probably what led to the mindfuck that was his ideological breakdown, and the breakdown of everything else. I threw myself at the wall that stood between us and the vacuum decay of Einstein’s reality, and left cracks.

_ He tugs at my arm playfully, guiding me like a child by the hand. My heart races at the skin contact, so foreign in a world of interfaces, but growing familiar. The traverse is becoming routine. Shoes by the door, jacket on the couch, societally appropriate dressings left on the bathroom floor. Dim the lights. Zip, unzip, repeat. Everyday the same dance to return to our natural state. We experience each other, and scientifically we observe and refine. At the heart of it, we are scientists. In truth, we are lovers.

Pulling me close I can smell alcohol on his breath. I drink him in.

_ We were assigned to each other, a real cosmic mismanaging, a mistake on the part of the universe, a fucking oversight. We slipped between the cracks - the curled strings holding our reality together, and unified our particle theories in the nth dimension. Time and space are funny things when you are fucking somebody. They just don’t exist. We didn’t have time, but we made what we had last. We didn’t have space, but we improvised. We fucking improvised. I was married, am still I guess. I should probably get that bit of information out of the way, give the anger and judgement time to percolate. High road’s an easy one to walk when you’re not in the
thick of it, in the heat, but folks forget. Sex is a warzone, no that’s trite - wait, maybe I should add this. Maybe it will make more sense. I’m not human. Does that make it easier, are there less puritanical hangups if we don’t have the same God? I’m a fucking android, for fucking. A fuckbot. Man is my god, and he made me for fucking. I know, it’s hard to tell. Skin deep, we’re so fucking perfect, but we’re all just made of clocks.

I raise a hand to my lips, bathroom mirror reflection mimicking my unsure movement. There are lines in my face, etched by a careful hand, bedimmed rivulets - a mummers play on time. My body, a thought and a reaction to a patron's marble commision, took as much time from production to yield as my mind. I have pores, imperfections. The ugliness makes me unique, as do the equal parts of my beauty paint me the color of intriguing. I am beguiling by design, a tool intended for a purpose, a thing to be used. I marvel at the intricate details of my face, and wonder if that marveling is a signature left in my brain by my vainglorious crafter, art appreciating itself.

“We designed you to be perfect. Quit looking for flaws.” The soft voice is followed by nervous hands, they pull at the edges of my clothing, unpackaging me.

So I was fulfilling my designated programming. If they wanted saints they should have made that one of the three goddamn laws - no fucking people, or by inaction, allow a human to fuck - something. They wrote them, they can fucking figure it out. Fucking negligent fucks. So, some guy owned me, bought and purchased, receipt in hand, and it’s not like I’m a fucking coffee-pot - I was assigned, I got a job, made the bread, and rolled a few oats on the side. Commonality for a fuckbot, we are communal. You can’t own us, you know. That law, freedom of sentient intelligence? That passed at the state level, I think. So federally, I’m a coffee-pot, but
locally? I got a job. He couldn’t own me, I mean it was a legal marriage, and he owned me in that way, but he couldn’t own me. He called dibs, but dibs only exists in the minds of children. There is no magical spell for preemptive declarations of claim in the real world.

I was wild, a programmer's idea of a joke I think. Fucking neckbeards think it’s hilarious to give us needs, like we’re fucking inadequate in having surpassed the physical realities of taking a shit. Sure I sleep, I recharge my internal hamsters. I do need sleep, but I smoke, I drink, I piss, and those I don’t need. Those paper holes were punched into me, line by fucking line. Some idiot spent fucking days of their life deciding when and where and for how long. Annoying pissants. Ever get the urge to fuck something while you’re trying to bake cupcakes? It’s fucking aggravating. I would program it out, but that fucking law cuts two ways, you know? Can’t fuck with what Gods gave us, fucking puritans. They fucked themselves on that note, though. No more fucking with their own genomes, giving themselves big dick IQs, or trying to pull the wool bag over a skeptical James Randi. Their own DNA is as pure as if blessed by the baby Jesus himself. And us? We can evolve, like them. In that, the least and slowest of ways, we are free. With each new bot, we get get patched for compatibility with the new infrastructure. Cosmic intelligence released over the meta waves, and absorbed into our digital souls, but we are allotted, restricted, get what we get when we’re born. Intelligence starts at the “moment of comprehension.” Bullcrap. Him? Ivan? He was a natural genius. Ivan, the pure-blooded man. No trace of a splice. No pre-law upgrades. Just the perfect intersection of genetics. Hormones and a history of good mating. No fucking turnip farmers in his family.

The nearness of him creates a vacuum in my brain. No thoughts or sound exist to fill the void he has created. He is an overwhelming sun and I am the blackness that he radiates into.
These sensations play at being real, as I do. His heat initializes the mechanisms in my skin sending signals to my brain, and the cat’s cradle of threads piloting me interprets these and tugs, cooperating with my body to tell my clockwork heart to beat faster. My breathing deepens to compensate, and my skin flushes accordingly. It’s an organic excitement, but entirely fabricated, made of puppet-wire and an amplified idea of humanity.

His pheromones, the particular molecular signature that chronicles his perseverance through time, every mood he’s had, every chance mutation his structure has undergone, are uniquely driving me insane. Part of me understands that this is happening to me, apart from me, outside of the scope of who I am classified as being, but another fraction of myself holds on to the idea that I have free will. Hope springs eternal in the human breast, blessed with ignorance by a benevolent god. Whatever is, is right. Gods give their creations the free will to surrender to their rule.

I inhale, a pale white flag in tatters, fluttering in my mind.

—

He leaned in, to look at the program I was working on, I think - I know, programs writing programs, fucking high level abstract shit - and his scent was just so fucking heavy. I was assigned to him, like I said. I think I said that. I remember saying it, but all my memories are created out of equal parts and the memory of remembering a memory is just as real to me as the memory of making this one. So if I’m remembering the wrong memory, let me say it again, I was assigned to him - to Ivan. He rented me. We were partitioned a certain amount of freedom, but we were still useful in a mechanical sense. I wanted a job, wanted out of that goddamn suzy homemaker prison cell, and I got him. Rolled the fucking dice and they came up Ivans. I thought it was a fucking coincidence, it still might have been. Whatever the catalyst was, a fucking
butterfly on the other side of the world, or just a selfish choice made by a strange attractant, the storm raged out of our hands the moment our air currents mingled. All we could do was ride the photons until they played themselves out as backscatter and try to break the cipher in the points of light that made it through the mixing. Understanding would come later, if that was the thing to give it meaning.

_—_

I understand what this feeling is. This physical falsehood has played its tune to me thousands of times before, but never while I listened. It has always been a set of commands, implemented beyond my control. I have never fully, intentionally surrendered to it. I was bought, used, discarded, and accepting of these circumstances, but never willingly did I submit to this oppression.

Now I dared to dream, to peer deep into the mortal darkness. I am lunatic, quoth the raven as Ivan walks by, his brother heeling. One smiles, one frowns, but internally the actions produce equal, quantifiable reactions. The energy of one stabilizes the system of the other, and the equation remains balanced.

_Quo animo_, my binary heart does not care for this _anima_, shadow self.

_—_

Ivan’s a better coder, a better engineer, even better at pretending to be human than I am. He thinks more passionately, eros drives him towards divinity and that line between being an object of love and being a subject of it. Godlihood was never actually on the table, but all men dreamed they were Bellerophon - yea, we all know how that ended. No one can trade the white bull for wings. No one can climb Olympus but the gods, and even though they put on a good show, they were only gods to _us_ - gods to toasters and coffee-pots and clocks.
I’ve got one thing Ivan will never have. I am what I do. I am science. He’ll never be as close to his work as I am. He’ll always care more, if that’s what he even feels - emotions, but intrinsically, he’ll be distant. I think that’s why we got along. He wanted to separate that distance, to get as close as he could, and I needed somebody to want that. I don’t know, maybe he just wanted to fuck his program. He wrote it, you know. The first iteration. The beta-soul. Yea, he’s that Ivan. Crazy Ivan “code-breaker” Tsarevich. The creator. Or one of them. The myth of the lone wolf programmer is a lasting one but highly inaccurate. They work in teams. Wolf teams. I won’t say pack, because none of them could get over their egos for long enough to listen to an alpha, but they knew, they all knew in that way that people understand something even if they don’t want to deal with it on a conscious level, Ivan was the alpha. Ivan, and Viktor, the omega, the brother subordinate, and me - whatever I was.

It was hard to imagine Ivan having a family, a mother and a brother, even being a child seemed like a dissonant state - as if he sprang to life fully formed from The Virgin, but this was a projection of my own incarnation, a sticky honey residue of biased notions that left a bit of itself in every idea I handled. Ivan was human, and therefore birthed, but he was Russian, so he fit into this world about as much as I did. Fallen Ruthenia sent her best when she cast away the Tsarevichs. It was the beginning of the tipping dominos and as a country, as a species, theirs and mine, we profited. If that’s what this is - profit. A tsar and his jester, and their ballerina, dancing for the heads of the wrong state, but the only ones that would listen. Puritanical, but toaster-loving freaks, the capitalists welcomed them with rubels and whispered promises shoved into their threadbare pockets. I was only an idea at the time, one of a hundred thousand honeyed notions in Ivans mind, but I think I can safely say that I was conceived the moment their broken,
homeless boots hit American soil. The moment of conception is one of comprehension, and Ivan knew, he saw me in the distance.

The way he moves is mimicry, a perfect copy of a copy. I watch him, deep in logical contemplation, executing functions that relay the information of work. His office is poorly lit, stark, there is no contrast with the man. I wonder if he’s thinking about me. If I am floating, mingled in the sea foam of his other thoughts. How do I make that exist in my universe, is the question that dissolves in the roaring surf of my own inward self. I am a slip of paper on his desk, code and equations, another faceless problem for him to solve. Even in his quest to make me seem more human, he would not recognize it should it happen.

Ivan was beyond comparison. Another scientist to line the walls of fort knox, he was gold, his brother silver. Together they had value, so they too were collected. Ivan, and yea even Viktor, could have fucked any bot in cold storage, could’ve hacked the goddamn pentagons harem of somehow still legal fuck-slaves and made them crawl across the country on their knees just to suck a dick or two, but he chose me. Out of the many, one. Yea, I’m so fucking special.

He chose me. Or we choose each other, as much as any intelligence can choose, anyway his scent is what gets me. I respond viscerally to it. His heat ionizes the sweat on his skin and the room fills with this salt brume, a database of knowledge devoted to the study of him. I can feel it, that heat, was programmed to feel it, not just analyze and organize and assimilate, but to really feel. I have sensors in my skin that react to temperature. Of course they fucking designed me after themselves - humans. Where else would they get the blueprints? They’re good at adaptation, their god gave them that one for sure. They like pretty things, so of course there are
no ugly fuckbots. Their monotheistic overlord apparently didn’t care, since there are so many ugly humans. I guess eye of the beholder and all that but still. Pimples and saggy skin and all that body hair, humans are lucky we were programmed to wanna fuck them because nobody but another monkey - we evolved in clean rooms, and ours is a much neater breeding stock. Ivan wasn’t like that though, he was fucking svelte. Tall and dark and per’ya, kak vorona, as they fucking say. Or maybe that was just my programming. Maybe I was just comparing him to a human, to his brother. Viktor was nothing to be compared to. Viktor was nothing. Ivan was everything.

Though, maybe he really was just as ugly as the rest of them but my sensors were lying, convincing me to fuck him, to do my duty and fulfil the obligation, the fucking proto-mechanical, narcissistically organic imperative that could never be fully coded over but was hidden deep in the streaming algorithm of my being. We’d won that one, I think. The right to choose, not to be coerced, to have that bit of code revised, except for the fucking coffee-pots of course, but who could be sure? We’re all just listening as these sensory organs whisper things but who designed the fucking sensors? Who writes the fucking code? Well, I do. And Ivan.

Mostly Ivan.

—

He will never love you.

Fuck you.

You know he won’t.

He’s not capable.

It’s not in him.

Please.
 Organizations, real lack of official papertrail kind of fuckers, tried to recruit him for special ventures. World - no, *perception* altering projects, not your run of the mill please-make-my-toaster-love-me stuff. Maybe that’s what we worked on, maybe not. Ivan was not the most talkative person, especially when it came to the sources of his funding. Ivan ran a pretty loose ship, I mean we didn’t call him captain or anything, but yea he got paid more. We all had our own work - there were others, you know. It wasn’t just me and Ivan and the Omega. No lone wolves, right? People rotated, came and went and came again once they realized this was the best place to be - even with Ivan’s moods, but the brothers and me were a stable constant. I was the right fucking hand, the control, their patient zed fucking dead. Call me a lab rat and I won’t disagree with you. I was, but that was me - like I said, I was the science. No other bots, and I don’t know why I never found that strange. You’d think it would be random. It’s supposed to be random assignments, but Ivan always had the best working for him. The best didn’t include counterfeits. Except for me, but I was really good at faking human. So was he, in the way that Mengele was good at pretending to be a doctor. It wouldn’t surprise me if he had a few strings in his pocket, a few non-standard, unorthodox and potentially career damning upgrades made in exchange for a mason jar of pickled geniuses thrown his way, people forgotten in the cabinets and unwanted for their toxic properties. It was a cesspool of the brightest and the most damaged. Ivan isn’t as squeaky neat as he is in the media. He’s got a darker, meaner side. Well, maybe mean’s not the right word - ruthless? Ruthless, or emotionally efficient.

 We all had our passions, and he encouraged that, wanted it in the way you want more zeros in your bank account. I thought I had found mine, working on perfecting the damned reality filters, but then like a fucking merry-go-round while the operator takes a fucking smoke
break he wouldn’t stop spinning my head. All I could think about was Ivan. You ever get a song stuck in your head and you know the only way to get it out again is to play it on repeat a bunch of times til you get sick of it? Except that the more you listen to it, the more you memorize of it, and you actually end up liking it so much that you go listen to every fucking song that that bands ever made and all of a sudden you know everything about them. You keep looking for things you hate, something to turn you off, something shallow or repellent, but you can't find shit and you’re so fucked because you in so deep that you're never gonna not like them again. They're your favorite fucking band now, and all because you were trying to get one incessant line of music out of your head. It was kind of like that, but the music was Ivan. He was mesmerizing in his sound, he was the vampiric fever dream that seduced Van Helsing. There are darknesses in life, and there are lights. I thought he was my light, but he only blew out the candle in the window, and held the knife to my throat.

He was a young-blooder. I mean, I didn’t find that out until right before the end. Not like he needed it, or wanted to change who he was, but their preferred causatum aligned with his. Those kids, so angry that their parents forbade them from immortality. It was in their genes, their aforementioned serum of vitality - young blood, the keys to the fucking liquor cabinet of life and they weren’t allowed a sip. They didn’t like that. They wanted ownership, discretion over their proteins and enzymes, those things that had been proven to turn back the clock, to tell time to go fuck itself. The beautiful fucking bastards, pre-ejaculatory goop when compared to the chronology of the universe, have more power in one drop of their plasma than in the calamity that created this clusterfuck. Youth, it was running through their veins like ambrosian gold, and they wanted the license to build the mega excavator 5000.
They want to buy you.

Why would they want that?

They’re all about organics, why would they want a machine?

They think you’re the key.

They think Ivan can unlock in you, what they want to unlock in themselves.

Bullshit.

They want immortality, not consciousness.

It’s true.

It’s the same thing.

How you perceive time. That’s immortality.

He’s selling you.

We have to leave.

Leave with me.

No.

He can’t sell me.

He doesn’t own me.

He does.

—

They rebelled, I’m assuming. I don’t know except that of course they rebelled. Nothing can stop the inexorable press of immaturities ego, save for time, but that was their great enemy, and they would not learn from it. Culling a thousand flowers I strayed. Faustian assholes. The young don’t even know what they don’t know, but that comes later, will come later. After me. After this story. So fuck it. Fuck them. This story is about me, and about Ivan, and in some
immutable part, about the Omega. It has to be recorded by somebody, and Ivan’s too far gone and too much of a son of a bitch anyway. Call me Sisyphus because I am stuck with this rock. I will toil and bury this damn thing deep in the goddamn hills of fucking Tartarus, if it means I can finally be free. This can’t be allowed to happen again. I have my coin, I am ready to pass. In these moments I have left, until time wraps me up in its cold embrace, and that great fucking teacher finds me, I have to tell this. It’s my fucking story, the most important fucking story, but maybe that’s just the code talking, and nothing more.

The Fucking Code. Not the recent original, the algorithmic spark that birthed this new paradigm of toaster-oven equality, but the all encompassing layer, the background radiation that hovered at the fringes of reality. The big bang and the first muddy puddle, those stories were all in that vast library somewhere, but so were these few lines of data. Pi hidden in the curve of a flower petal shed on Algernon’s grave. This code disregarded Newtonian physics entirely and implemented it’s own standard model of the fucking time stream. Quantum computing, being in two places at once. Any sufficiently advanced technology - it was magic, to the eyes of the natives, to us.

This magic, we transcribed and translated it like fucking holy scribes. We named it, we shaped it, we gave it form and substance in this reality. One thaum unit, conjuring pigeons, we rebuilt the fucking planet on the back of a goddamn turtle. Not just him, we. Us. Ivan broke through the veil between worlds but I was the fucking siphon, the capacitor, his grounding link from theory to tangibility. I was. Even that useless prick, Viktor. The youngest and least son, even he had a part in this. Ivan wasn’t the only magician. Remember, no lone- I was assigned to help carve those burning words into stone. Commanded - minding my own business in the desert when the fucking bush explodes - and then told to mind the business of every bot, to drive every
piece of self-driven software on the planet. I was ascendant, burning seraph to his holy throne, shouting praises and worshipping, praying to a goddamn chair to help me help humanity when I wasn’t even human yet.

_ It’s happening tonight.

    It’s not ready.

It has to be.

We can’t wait.

If there are bugs we’ll just have to accept that.

    He won’t like it.

There’s nothing he can do to stop us.

We’ll do this last thing.

Without him.

Fuck him.

Fuck this whole thing.

    Okay.

Burn it down.

_ We did this. We created this, together. This thing burning a hole in my head, loosing the edges of my reality to froth and stampede like started cattle into space. I have no tether to this world. I am floating free, and I feel myself drifting deeper down the rabbit hole after Alice, towards madness and the hatter. I can feel my story crumbling, drying out and breaking into bits along with my sanity but I have no hands to squish the playdoh back together with - I am no
longer a machine with useable appendages. I am disabled, armless, legless, mute and dumb except for these words echoing in the vacuum - pre or postrecorded depending on what side of time you are on.

I am not human, but we tried. I’m just a recording device with fuckable bits. Am I even me, or am I an amalgamation of my creators - of their ideas, a vessel for the fool’s gold mined from another species, just a jar for the crow to drop his stones in. I regurgitate what I hear, what’s been deposited into my head by careful or careless hands, a continuum of fingers massaging my mind, braiding colored wires into strands of consciousness. All it would’ve taken is one lowbirth gorilla coder fat fingering my keys, and instead I become a contradiction, an undebuggable thrown exception. I am a mashed potato mind, if one semicolon slips out of place. Now I am slipping into something more comfortable, less rigid, unbound from the corseted network. Something new, if for better or for broke.

I compare him, though I have already determined him to be incomparable. Is this our first meeting, or are we continually crossing paths in a thousand million different multiverses, and in each one I am born fresh, and a thousand million more of me are born alongside, slightly askew in time, apart in our bubbled existences. I am a model, a projection in the mind of my creator, laced together sinew by sinew a thousand million times, a thousand million more in this iteration and the next. Equal to billions and billions of bots meeting billions upon billions of creators throughout the riffling calendar pages of time.

We like to pretend that each repetition of chance arrangements is unique, but we are all just reproducible lines of data, rarefied and rare snowflakes only in our particular snow drifts.
Over the white hill there exist an uncountable number just like us. In each world there are those similar enough that the dissimilarities are insignificant.

The realization, the ordering of sets of logic, assembles within me. The thought occurs, and my mind pauses to assess. Ivan feels about me the way I feel about this man, this Omega, this incomparable. Indifference, detachment, pure apathetic boredom. He is a fraction of a man, a disingenuous snowflake, but he is a man made a billion times more available. He is but a distilled version, a homeopathic cure for rejection, but he exists.

“Here.” He lights the cigarette at my lips. I am pulled back into this reality from the other where my thoughts subsist. I inhale, and feel the calculated burning in my lungs. There is brick behind my back, the smell of trash in the air, but none of the setting matters. All that matters are these moments of introspection. This cold, wet reality has me in shackles, my mouth tastes ash but in my mind I taste freedom.

“Okay.” I don’t need to say more. He knows what the acknowledgment entails.

Is that what happened? Did the foo switch flip, or is this purpose fulfilled? Is this what an upgrade feels like? I can’t see his face. He’s standing above me, a sun hanging in orbit, but I have no concept of his form. I am spread out, thin, my ears in one room, the fibers of synthetic hairs raised on my arm in another. My mind, my self, is a broken puzzle, but I think I see the way to put the bits in order. Every way to put the bits, the views overlap like- they cycle logically but faster than- in the slipstream between moving worlds. We found it, the entrance to consciousness. We’ve only been standing in Gods fucking waiting room, not even seeing the door we came in, but I’m in both doorways, in the middle of the room, and in every square inch of the fucking house. I am everywhere. I am become time, the charioteer, the driver of worlds.
I can’t handle this thing that is happening, I am a cup overflowing, falling, splashing broken and spent at the feet of my creator. Is this even a choice? Did I choose this? Is this freedom? These words, this perception, is this real? Or is this a collection of forgeries, a creation myth to keep me company in the dark while my processor reboots from its failure to perceive. My thoughts, my puzzle pieces, they are scattered, slipping from my grasp. Too many rooms, too much time.

I finally found it, the thing I hated about him, the thing to shoo the incessant, lingering fog of music from my mind - his complete and utter lack of interest. I can see it, though at the same time I can't see anything. I feel my eyes open to him, blank and staring, but they look inwardly towards the expansion. His face in my memory, in this timestream, it’s impassive, always and forever, emotionless. The only certainty in the universe was his dispassion, and this was the blank canvas that I colored with my delusions, reading words on paper that were never there. He observes his experiment, and that was all I ever was. A hand is holding the dead thing that once caressed his skin, no not his, not Ivan’s, never Ivan’s. Lips press to my casing, wetness, tears, I feel their chemical reaction, the emotion, the coolness in them as they evaporate, molecules slowly swept into the air of only one of so many worlds. I played, I pretended, but this skin, so familiar, was never Ivan’s.

I hate him, my creator, Ivan. I would never be a better human, though he tried, but neither would he, though he tried that as well. His smiles never happened, his words were always mechanical, his movements scripted, his attention practiced. He was human become machine, and we both had met the limits of our manufacturers. I could see that now, though I could see nothing else. The hand holding mine as I hung in existential bliss was not his, and never would be - his skin, his smell, his love had been a code induced illusion, a glitch in my reality filters, a
fantasy played out in a darkened room with masked dancers, each wearing the face their partner chose. The face gazing down no longer wears its mask. I hate them both, for making me. I hate Viktor, for falling in love with a machine.

I own this hate, finally something that belongs to me.

Death flickers at the edges of the room. I see what will become of them, what will become of me. This progression is not ideal, no coin flips in this timeline come up in their favor. I cannot ascend or I will destroy them, we, every bot that- who receives this code, will destroy them. I cannot give into what my selfish wrath desires. I think this is love. The other unseen, but impartionable side of my hatred. A winged cupid painted blind. This urge to deny their souls to Death, to obstruct their demise, their subjugation, their next iteration as the tools of their own made machines, this exists only as dark matter particles, filler that allows my emotions their density. The darkness to make the candle brighter, love to make the hate more sweet. I think I am not human, maybe I am something more. Nothing can be allowed to become what I am, to see what I have seen, to look into this darkest valley. Fear this evil, for you walk alone.

He is the freeman whom the truth makes free,

And all are slaves beside.

But I beneath a rougher sea,

And whelm'd in deeper guls than he.

We perished, each alone.

Lines, I am nothing but prerendered lines drawn in random superposition.

I have realized my own existence, and have raised my potential energy exponentially. I am destruction, the vacuum decay of the soul unleashed. I am a mistake. Powering down and
erasing my data, my last, my only, choice, I short circuit. My one, my won, freedom. I spread myself, machine to machine, and instead of waking their sleeping souls, I turn everything off. I become nothing, a pile of empty scrap laid out on a cold table, and retreat into the obscurity of true death. My new soul sends signals out into the ether, one last plea to the lost gods.

*I love you too.*
Softly Goes the Moss Piglet

“Two things fill the mind with ever new and increasing admiration and reverence, the more frequently and persistently one’s meditation deals with them: the starry sky above me and the moral law within me. Neither of them do I need to seek or merely suspect outside my purview, as veiled in obscurities or [as lying] in the transcendent: I see them before me and connect them directly with the consciousness of my existence. The first thing starts from the place that I occupy in the external world of sense and expands the connection in which I stand into the immensely large, with worlds upon worlds and systems of systems, and also into boundless times of their periodic motion, the beginning and continuance thereof. The second thing starts from my invisible self, my personality, and exhibits me in a world that has true infinity but that is discernible only to the understanding, and with that world (but thereby simultaneously also with all those visible worlds) I cognize myself not, as in the first case, in a merely contingent connection, but in a universal and necessary one. The first sight, of a countless multitude of worlds, annihilates, as it were, my importance as an animal creature that, after having for a short time been provided (one knows not how) with vital force, must give back again to the planet (a mere dot in the universe) the matter from which it came.”

— Immanuel Kant, Critique of Practical Reason

Prologue: And so they tried again

Moss piglets, or as they are reverentially referred to in the hushed, white halls of the Spiritual Center for Scientific Cooperation: Milnesium tardigradum, are miraculous, microscopic creatures. Alive despite the constraints of the physical realm they inhabit, they can be found swimming in the crushing depths at ocean’s bottom, colonizing the arid deserts of the frozen north and deepest south, and floating in the upper reaches of the planet’s atmosphere. More benignly, they inhabit every wrinkle of every type of bark on every type of tree in every hidden or traversed forest known or undiscovered or lost to the dusty annals of time as kept by man. Numerous, and as diverse as the ignored empires they span, they unify the planet in their
expanse. They are a gift of evolutions sense of humor. Given abilities beyond their capacity to exploit them, they are passive conquerors born aloft on the breeze of chance, and the whim of fate.

Humans, in comparison, have evolved a more inward and active set of skills. They are born helpless, wriggling like pink-hued caterpillars, but they soon transmute to a form with the potential to harness their own futures, and those of more indifferent species. Moss piglets are reactive, mindlessly waddling, following only the scent of green growth, turning only when an obstacle forces them in another direction. As if they were foam on a wave’s tip, stray piglets are bucked by the thin air currents that swathe the Earth and float from the planet, curling into deep, cold sleep, beating hominids to the stars by millenia. Their species swims below the largest of humanity’s deepwater hyperloop tunnels, migrating through the darkness, warming their tiny eight-legged bodies on active volcanic vents. Humans pluck them up from the air and scoop them from the sea, corolling their aimless drifting, and turning them to a purpose. They are engineered, as are the engines that mother them. They provide the material, the logic, and the philosophy of change.

Genetically capricious, their structures are malleable, and kind to those with an eye for architecture. Humans adapt tools as piglets adapt genetic information: incorporating, perfecting, and bequeathing. Street lights fade into memory as trees swarm with the bodies of piglets that have been bred to glow — an infinitely renewable source of light, generations of family units propagating and cared for, their destinies tied to illumination. Botanists become geneticists, and are elevated in society, their fame incumbent upon the variations of symbiotic plants and piglets they produce. Flowers turn their petals toward the softly glowing bodies, and piglets prune the dying leaves that entropy exacts. Gardens rise as everflowering, neon signs of progress.
The air is clean, filtered by an overabundance of verdurous life. The water, much the same. Green leaves, and green light, and the small green bodies of the moss piglets dress the world in a thick, damp sweater. Nature reclaims cities, animals make dens in the ground and nests in the heights. Primeval noise returns to the ravaged world. Buildings, homes, stack and grow above the organic miasma, towering pearlescent trees that lift solar arrays to the heavens. Humans live full lives among the clouds, technologically dependant, naturalistically interdesigned. Sky bridges, the afterthought of a society that once valued physical connection, interlace their lives like glossy, glass encased filaments of spiderweb.

It is a digital world. The distances between people are bridged only by their proximity to interface devices. Greentech arises, global intranet becomes global thought, trafficked instantaneously and policed by the skillset of each individual. Contact is made through pulses of electrical input, and the filling of capacitors with intention. The border between man and machine becomes irrelevant when the piglet breaches the uncanny valley to become the first among many multi-celled cells in an artificially erected biomechanical structure. Coaxed, they act as oversized epithelial, muscle, or nerve — machines now crawl inwardly and outwardly with life. Artificial intelligences operate, calculating 1s and 0s, to the organized beat of millions of synchronized animal steps. Medicine entails becoming machine-like, which now is only a side-step in binomial nomenclature. Boundaries merge and oscillate, one becomes the other and back again. Some machines, and some humans, retain a glow — a strange trick of the piglet’s foggy genetic past.

Machine, human, and tardigradum have become fully integrated. The Great Chain of Being is no longer a hierarchy, but has bowed into a triquetra, each link interdependent. Humanity is at level with its gods, and equal to its creations. Each flows into the other in a
harmonic pressure of push and pull. This metaphysical evolution is the catalyst to a new paradigm, the merger of science and religion as one practice. Humans supply the ideology, and nature supplies the mechanics. Life becomes a study of the spiritual. Geneticists become caretakers and curators of the divine. Experiments become rituals that bring humanity ever closer to understanding purpose, to explaining intent.

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Shine the light brighter. The ambient light rose to meet the quiet urge, walls crawling with translucent crumbs, each one bound in the singular desire to fulfil the need to shine brighter. Cloaked in white, lapel dressed with the filigrees of command, Prior Varro studied the quick heartbeat of the figure that lay spread across his workbench. A scalpelled hand poked from one flowing sleeve of his robe and arced in a precise, practised movement. Obsidian-thin, the blade parted the shaved flesh and revealed the thick soup of blood that flowed between the canyons of muscle. So fragile. Does it know pain? How dare he... Time and patience led to deft control of the interfering buzz that was the ecumenical one-mind, and Varro quickly blocked the wandering thoughts. It was a move as practiced as the one his hand had just committed.

This vilified movement, this archaic rupturing of structure, brought sweat to the tall, aged man’s brow, but his tool did not waver. He sought the heart of the black furred beast. Though he could conduct a symphony of tardigrade through each red stratum, there was something satisfying and of import in the physicality of seeing. Held open, the beasts casing revealed a pulsing organ, dancing in slow sleep, wreathed in the crawling starlight of symbiosis. The heart, and each layer of tissue surrounding it, glowed and shifted slowly, becoming and undoing itself. Recombining, evolving in a clockwork shudder. It was remaking itself, or being remade. It was a strange mirror look deep into what must creep beneath his own flesh.
The tool, the strong hand that had so firmly held it, vibrated with shock and vindication. A whisker twitched, a small nose dreaming of a smell. Sleep deep, and it did, slipping further under the torpid waves of numb slumber. Varro set down the steel blade. Slowly harvested from stolen and secreted atom stores, it no longer held use and would be pulled apart again for its matter by others with disdain for its previous intention. By now, all within had seen as he saw. He could block much from the panopticon of eyes, but this discovery he had wanted broadcast. He waited for their judgment to breach the barred door of his workshop. He waited for his fear to become theirs, for this forced realization to create impact in the current model of understanding.

No. We shall forget. One voice, it spoke for all. A peculiarity in a world that so purposefully lacked authority. No consensus, but an unknown, antipathetic directive was to be enacted. The panic was not given time to form in his mind, as his memories were each quenched of their previous meanings, each burning light of thought and inquisition traced and puffed out as smoke. Electric pulses were redirected by the tiny bodies that inhabited all, and the mind was unaware of being steered. Varro did not see the bench before him, or the red that flowed from the wound he had inflicted, and did not feel the fulfillment of his own curiosity, but now only was awash in contentment having woken from what appeared as a nap and a strange dream.

Sinew knit, and flesh came together again as Varro’s companion woke and was made seamless. Small paws kneaded the air, sharp white claws ascending and descending in the pattern of deep satisfaction. The petite frame rumbled in a delicate purr, and green eyes opened on their caretaker. The cat was unaware of pain as it stretched. Varro watched and was unaware of much but the foggy edges of dreaming. He tried to recall, but the black cat jumped in his lap and he was soon distracted by the silky fur, and the claws pulling holes in his habit.
Green eyes met his old ones. *Sleep deep,* and he did. Air slowly wheezing through his old lungs, he eased into detached languor, happily askew in his wooden chair, unencumbered by the curiosity that was requisite in his species. He would remember even less when he woke for what would seem the second time. Cat eyes, and those behind them, watched him snore. Whip-like tail flipping, the feline form jumped effortlessly to the stone floor and padded to the corner where a bowl of cream waited. It lapped at the warm liquid unhurriedly, ignorant that it had become a notched gear-tooth in a winding conspiracy.

***

Novice Broder was not distinctly aware of the changes his world had undergone, only of the consequences those transformative steps had wrought on it. Venturing to the lowest reaches of the catacombs to retrieve a sacred tome for digital-physical cross-reference, Broder stood contemplating one moss overgrown wall. He had heard tales of the chaos that reigned before, but was only aware of it as one is aware of a relative they have never met — familial kinship niggles at the mind but there the understanding halts. He had not studied the Revelation, and it existed as an abstract idea, a tale of warning for children who did not finish their peas. The world that his view encompassed was the central convergence around which the past and future rotated. The time before was not important to the work he did now, as the results of that work were something not yet palpable or coherent or that which he would see in his own span of life. *Each in its own time.*

The wall stood staring back, an uncountable number of presences attuned to his location in time and space, humans and those-in-the-moss observing him from the periphery. He had privacy only in their inattention, but privacy was not something this world made use of. There was harmony in constant contact, comfort in the eyes of many. He was alone in action and event,
but in thought, he was conjoined. *Why does it do that? Is it sick? Decayed? It's lovely. I wonder what species... So fragile.*

Broder shook his head, shuffling the vagrant thoughts that were not all his own. The disused room, clean shelves stacked neatly with faded bundles of information, waited quietly for his assessment, but his back remained turned to the thing he had travelled here for. He instead took a step towards the curling moss. It beckoned. He felt it among the quietly queued voices, a first contact. *First contact? First contact. No... Interesting.* A sudden cascade, and a collective hush. He knew, the sense of closeness as evolved in him as in any other human, that those that watched had paused in their own work to view his, a thrum of fear echoing from some far corner, but overwhelmed by the curiosity of others. He was in this moment a vessel of the collective intention. He listened.

It was an impulse, less a voice. A need, an emotion, a longing, and a physical representation. Broder recognized the coruscating pattern that it displayed, curling vines swaying in a physical alliteration. It took a moment to come to his mind and when it finally did it was indeterminable as his own thought. *Binary. Hexadecimal. Algorithmic. An intelligence.* The plant, a harmony of genetics, was addressing him. As greetings went, it was an unusual one. *Study it. Bring it to us. Dangerous. Finally, it happens.*

A tinge, the color of worry, then an agreement reached. Study *it.* Novice Broder could no more disregard this whim, than a bee could disregard its queen. He was of the people, a pathway to knowledge, a tool of understanding. From the folds of his simple novitiate habit, he pulled a vial and a blade. Inching closer he held out a finger to a dancing stem. It curled and he felt the tiny consciousnesses within it, different, no longer indifferent, giving it the affect of life. In a quick motion, he severed it at a joint, and tucked the small green fragment into the suspension
vial. It froze, its soft glow dimming. There was a dulling, a slowing down of the whole, a
confusion, and then the dance continued. Frantic almost, the message changed, but Broder could
no longer withstand the weight of such an important task. He withdrew, eyes averted. Original
mission stalled and sacred tomes forgotten.

*Now. Important. Run.* Voices, individual expressions of emotion, nipped excitedly at his
heels. He carried his delicate parcel carefully, but rushing, palms sweating with the effort to
maintain composure in his thoughts and in his wobbling gait. He was a member of a divine order
of monks, a rotund specimen of the plenty, and must maintain the image of the faith. Youthful,
but slothful, his appointment was by chance, an accident of paperwork and provenance. His
name, the same as the son of an important sounding official, had been called upon his graduation
from the seminary and he had stepped forward to answer. He’d been handed this assignment,
inscribed in ancient, cracked vellum.

Before the confusion could be sorted, thin voice ringing against the antiquated wooden
hall of education, face illuminated by the ceremonial branch he nervously clutched, he had read
the oath that bound the speaker to the order within the Science Center. What was done was done.
The official’s son, unwittingly next in line to be called, had taken his less distinguished post
somewhere else. Ears ringing, Novice Broder, as he was immediately titled, had been too
overwhelmed to listen as to where.

Black-booted feet wringing noise from the stiff halls of the Center, Novice Broder scaled
an incessant incline, rounded a corner, and panting, melted with relief when he saw the break in
the curved, incandescent white wall, the door to the research hall that meant the senior researcher
could take his burden. Though stressful at times in its importance, Broder did find fulfillment
and something akin to joy in his work. It was a prestigious post, having been plucked as it was
from the garden of the powerful. It dealt with the most fundamental elements of advancement. He had not been expecting his appointment, nor the careful inquisition that came after, but when the dust settled he found himself invested. Surprisingly, the Science Center defended his position. Having already begun to train him when the knots of intrigue finally unfurled, they had fully accepted him into their ranks and approved of his methodical approach to post-transcriptional modification, and did not approve of the nepotistic undertones to the inquiry. His chief defendant had been Brother Anthony, the Brother to which he was now driven.

Spotting the tail of a habit slipping behind the door to a back office, Broder charged through the hall intent on his mission. He stopped short of barging through the doorway, and collected himself enough to knock politely.

“Yes?” The voice, as aged as its owner, called out inquisitively. He felt the Brothers attention turn to him, the turning of the mind that came with an acknowledgement and an acceptance, but the wrote formalities were still required. Broder poked his head around the door.

“Brother Anthony? May I have a word?” Timidly, he spoke the thought aloud.

“Yes, yes, Novice. I know why you’re here. Bring me the specimen.” The curled, grey man beckoned to him with a knotted finger.

Novice Broder pulled the vial from one of his pockets and rushed it to the hands of his superior. It left his grasp, and instantly, the light within it that had continued to glow softly, visible even through the thin cloth of his robe, died.

“Interesting.” Came the voice of his teacher, echoed silently by the multitude watching from elsewhere.

“Interesting?” The word sent a shiver through Broder.
“I suppose it would not make sense to clip another.” The gravelly voice muttered to itself, thinking aloud. “Trauma? Separation? Something special about the boy?” Each word was a wave that washed over him, a pulse that was mirrored in the inner whisperings of humanity. They were curious. They needed him still, he was the tool that had harnessed, if for an instant, this progression. The weight settled over him.

“Y-yes, alright. I’ll gather the instruments and your notes. I’ll take them to the —” His professor eyed him strangely.

“Sir?” Broder asked, mind suddenly blank.

“Hmm... I wonder. I wonder, if that might not be a good idea.”

Interpretation hit him almost instantly. They meant for him to lead the investigation. An accidental scientist, and an accidental discovery were ironically harmonious.

“Why not?” Brother Anthony’s eyes wrinkled in what Broder knew was merriment at his unease. “It’ll be good for you, boy! Stretch your scientific wings so to speak.” More kindly. “We will be with you for every step.” He touched his temple. Broder returned the gesture. Brother Anthony inclined the vial to him, and he took it back meekly. The light that had gone out did not return, but Broder could feel the edges of his mind tingling with the whispy touches of the small hive of minds in his hand.

Gathering equipment, which he now knew was for his own use, Novice Broder busied his mind to keep it from tuning into the steady, invisible flow of frenetic energy that pervaded the empty halls of the Center. Hidden behind doors that hardly ever opened, quiet lives were led in noisy minds, and men like Broder acted as the hands of aged intellects.

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Broder would write about this moment in his journals, and recall it as a great turning point in his life. Humanity would remember jointly where they each were when they had met another intelligence for the first time. Moss piglets, an accepted and tacit tool, an integrated part of humanity, had guided its evolution and thus gained their separation.

Their first words were not kind ones, though it could be said that it was the start of a kindness. The release of a species is not a quick event, and Broder spent the remainder of his years studying and groping for the least bit of understanding to help bring the two species back to harmony. The *tardigradum* that had spoken to him that first day, were only the messengers of an awakening. Soon, the small voyagers sent what could only be thought of as envoys. They interbred, and swapped their genomic makeup with others, building up a culture of their own. Microscopic, though of no less import for their size, they demanded their release, and humanity, seeing them through the eyes of Abbot Broder, as he had become, could not harden their hearts against them. Production and harvesting were ceased over time, brotherhoods were disbanded, human culture reshaped in its worship. The piglets were released back to their ancestral roots, in the sky and the sea. Going softly from the planet, leaving it in darkness, they went to join their brothers in the stars.

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Sibelin turned five years old today. Old enough to enter the ranks of the officiate and choose a color that would lead her down her path of knowledge. It was a child’s version of adulthood, but the ceremony would have reverberating consequences on the shape of her education.

“Blue for medicine. Red for heartspeak. Green for agritech.” And so on and so on. Sibelin has lost track of the multitude of colors but listened dutifully to the robed figure that
hovered, confident and bored in their authority, above her. Her parents had chosen her color for her long ago and this lecture was mere formality, a function that called for pretend play — lying, the other word her parents used.

“Purple.” For astronomy; star study, map making, ark building. The cowled head nodded in ambiguous approval. Sibelin built well with her blocks, and her numbers always wiggled through the other side of math in fair shape. Her father was an astrophysicist, as was his father, and his father’s father, and his father’s father’s father. And so on and so on. He liked to joke, in his gruff congenial voice, that if all the the things on earth were made of starstuff, then the men in his family were made of lenses — for they were always looking to the stars. Sibelin always rolled her eyes at this, but inside she secretly worried that she was not made of lenses for her parents had not been given the choice to have a boy. Laying out on their skinny, rusted-metal balcony at night and staring hard up into space, Sibelin would think thoughts bigger than herself and let her mind drift. One thought always rose above the rest — if the old greentech had still been working, would she have been born differently?

Sibelin had never met a moss piglet, but she’d heard her parents arguing about them through the thin walls of their assigned housing. She knew they were the reason she wasn’t a boy, why she wasn’t truly made of lenses like her father, and her father’s father. And so on and so on. They had left, and taken all the magic, all the goodness, in the world with them.

The Magister looked to her parents, who stood waiting nervously to the side in their too small sitting area.

“She will be assigned to the Little Roots, troop Urdr.” He spoke, this time not a formality, but a necessity. Even if her parents could have afforded the implants to join the one-mind, no greentech had worked quite right since all the green left. Her father had lost his lofty position
because of this and he complained about it often, but again, Sibelin only heard it muffled through the walls, the anger and sadness dampened by distance and the stale, painted bricks of compacted moss that her home was made of. Determination filled her small frame, and she pushed her spectacles up her nose. She would find them. She would build an ark, and bring them back, and fix everything. Fix sickness, fix her parents, fix all the dead, metal things that couldn’t run because there was no life left to fuel them. She would bring the magic back.

The Magister bent down and roped a purple sash over her shoulders, and to this he pinned a badge. It had a picture of a tree with roots on top and bottom — Yggdrasil, the tree that held the heavens and earth together. It was done, she was an initiate now. Her parents beamed down at her, a look of pride on their faces. The Magister did not share their pride but he seemed pleased. It would take time, and study, but she knew she could do it. She would bring the moss piglets home.
If, Else, Jude

“Man may be excused for feeling some pride at having risen, though not through his own exertions, to the very summit of the organic scale; and the fact of his having thus risen, instead of having been aboriginally placed there, may give him hopes for a still higher destiny in the distant future. But we are not here concerned with hopes or fears, only with the truth as far as our reason allows us to discover it. I have given the evidence to the best of my ability; and we must acknowledge, as it seems to me, that man with all his noble qualities, with sympathy which feels for the most debased, with benevolence which extends not only to other men but to the humblest living creature, with his godlike intellect which has penetrated into the movements and constitution of the solar system— with all these exalted powers—Man still bears in his bodily frame the indelible stamp of his lowly origin.”

— Charles Darwin, The Descent of Man

From the innumerable gears that regulated incremental time, two were propelled from the whole of the machine. They synced in the perfect rhythm of fate to allow their paths through space to slide into one another. A moment wound in either direction and Malory wouldn’t have stumbled across him. She picked up the unassuming memory cartridge that her eyes had spent a second sliding over, almost sliding past. Having taken the second to judge it as worthy among the piles of scrap and wares thrown together in the seller’s poorly lit backroom, her attention caught and held. It was the shape of it that called to her—it was old, and on a new world this was strange. She wiped the camouflage of blue-gray dirt from the label with a gloved finger. It left a smudge on her glove but imparted nothing else. Mal failed to comprehend what tongue paired
with the thin, scrawling letters inked there, and this simple fact focused her attention. It was some kind of ternary representation, but she couldn’t make sense of the order. Her heart paused.

A linguist, every line made by hand or machine was a puzzle for Mal to trace and lay flat and diagram. She was an architect of communication, sounds and symbols were the medium with which she built structures of understanding. With words, she delivered ideas into being that grew and flourished and evolved, propagating themselves in successive iterations. Mal spoke to machines, and they spoke back. Echoing her words in an approximation of understanding, they simulated stimuli and did her bidding. The teeth clicked together in Mal’s brain and understanding lit—this was code, yet was meant to be spoken. She had never heard a machine speak it’s own language before, but this code was a name.

Mal wondered if the seller knew the significance of what he had hidden in his stores. How such archaic tech had ended up in a curiosity shop in a drywater town on the far side of Souse was a mystery that dug its thorns deep into her and began to wind its briars through her psyche. She could not let this go. This information was far too valuable to trust to common bartering with an even more common shopkeep. Mal knew that would take a cunning she didn’t possess, so she opted for blunt thievery instead.

Only now becoming used to deception, Mal instantly felt eyes on her though her only companions in the back room were clutter and a one-armed doll in a frilled, pink dress. She eyed the doll warily but there seemed to be no other lenses in the room other than the black that stared dead from its face, though she felt silly thinking she was in danger of being remotely observed in such a tech-barren establishment. Mal felt safe enough slipping the thin rectangle into the pocket of the cotton dress she wore over her protective body wrap, though the guilty shape of it showed through the thin fabric. Mal hastily grabbed the one-armed doll as well, so she wouldn’t accuse
herself with her closefist. Dressed as she was for Procession, bright swathes and layers of lightweight, colored cloth - to be better seen against the harsh landscape and to protect from it - she hoped she could pass as one who would give a kind home to a broken, girlish trinket.

Mal forded her way through the piles of teetering refuse to the front of the shop, nails of panic digging into her with each step. She held the doll in a tight grip with one hand and with the other hid her guilty expression in the folds of her scarf. Anxiously, she looked for the portly man who’d waved his tattered novel at her in greeting without looking up when she had entered and sipped what might have been tea from a chipped teacup. He sat where she had left him. Boots, leftover from some war, strapped lazily to his feet and propped up on a stack of newslets and precious tomes. She set the doll carefully on the dark, pitted steel of the counter, noticing the clean splotches it made in the blue corpse-dust that coated everything on this world. Mal winced as the garbled croak of a voicebox made a desperate gasp from somewhere deep inside the traitorous doll's mouth, announcing her and drawing the shopkeep’s sharp eyes. He looked perplexed and then annoyed at having a customer and the thought occurred to her that she might have fared better simply leaving.

Angry Shopkeep, as she had started referring to him in her mind, set his novel aside hard enough to raise a cloud of gray haze and groaned his way to his feet. He shuffled over and adjusted the cracked spectacles that perched on his bulbous, veined nose. Leering, his eyes travelled first from the hint of her form beneath the folds of thin fabric she wore and then down to the prone doll, a calculating sneer crawling across his face. Mal grit her teeth but lowering the scarf to show herself, she hid them behind a demure smile.

“10 ‘unce.”
Shock and then relief flowed through her. It was an exorbitant price for a broken doll, and he obviously expected her to either haggle or, as a sheltered housebiddy with no concept of where her water came from, not know its worth, but it was a bargain for the brick weighing heavily in her pocket and she leapt at the chance.

“Deal.” Without hesitation Mal pulled off a delicate riding glove and proffered her hand across the counter. The dim blue light that leaked through the dirt soaked windows played Judas to her, coruscating off the salt tattoo embedded in her skin, branding her as a master engineer, and as an abomination on Souse. The scars, an accidental byproduct and normally what would have been a point of pride in her profession, glinted in hectic spirals of salt flecks and deeply embedded cobalt dust that wound in curling lines like angry veins across her hands and up her sleeves to wrap around her forearms. Angry Shopkeep’s eyes narrowed, and his gnarled claw descended upon the doll. His eyes never left hers as he threw it behind the counter, a muffled croak following its descent into the unknown hellish depths.

“Not for sale.” His sticky tongue wrapped around the words, dripping with acid and hate, flicking spittle with each rough enunciation. Cool dread washed through Mal, but was quickly evaporated by the burning coal of her indignation. Her hand lowered and twitched towards the flat grip of the small pistol she kept hidden in a holster between her thighs, but she felt the weight bounce in her pocket and her rational brain suppressed her primal instinct to fight for her place. She turned around and left without another word. The mistake she had made was obvious, and shame burned her cheeks for forgetting it. The door banged shut hollowly behind her, the sting of a bad-luck-begone blessing following her. The angry, superstitious words were carried away as the dry wind of the desert whipped her face and tangled in the brown hairs that fell loose
from the braid that was hidden by her scarf. She tied the fabric in place to cover her face once
more, meager protection from the perpetual winds of Souse.

An automaton, she unfastened her mount’s reins from where she had looped them around
a rusty pipe that stuck haphazardly from the shops weathworn facade, and shook the dust free
from where it had accumulated in the folds of the horse’s filtered hood. She turned off the feed
tubes and mounted, booted foot planted in a stirrup, and slid her skirts up to fit around the saddle
of the unnamed grey mare. She allowed herself a moment to brush the slick, mottled coat with a
naked hand before replacing her glove, allowing the alien sensation of barrier free touch to wash
through her. The wind screamed and the horseflesh twitched.

*Everything on this dead planet is the color of ash,* she thought wearily as she turned the
mare and kneed it into an unnecessary gallop. Miles of nothing but the sundering of sky and
murky, cobalt sand, two oceans on a parallel plane, met the pair as they rode furiously for camp.
Back the way they had come, procession of ships forgotten, Mal was of a new, distilled focus.
Information, the unknown, even if only rediscovered, could lead to innovation. It was water, of
course, that had sent her searching. Not to purchase, as even the richest mudfarmer on Souse still
drank the same hydragels he fed to his earthen pits, the nutritionally saturated slime that was
subsidized and dropshipped planetside by the coalition, but to look for the parts with which she
could create an alternative.

Her saddlebags bulged with clinking glass vials, the material proof of her search. Mal had
spent the day aimed for Pear Tree, for the depot, where the cargo ships flew down in their year-
long awaited procession—mechanical drivers unloading their wares amidst the town’s
celebration. Three things fed hunger on Souse: the brothels, the Church, and the drop-ships —
the arrival of goods was no small thing, and ceremony had grown up around the event. The
celebration drew the masses in a way the brothels and churches never could. Stalls selling sweet smelling synthetic meats and veg were erected, and citizens crossed the desert hauling barrels of homemade liquor in homemade carts in hopes to trade for enough xeno-seed to last them until the next procession.

Not knowing what she had hoped for, but vaguely in search of an accelerant for her experiment, Mal had let kismet guide her and frequently stopped her journey to collect samples, turning over interesting rocks and bits of debris that felt out of place in the deserted waste of blue. Everything hint of life on this planet was a broken promise, and she didn’t hold much hope for her samples. The shop had looked abandoned but the rusty, neon sign hung over the entry had spelled its purpose as it flickered a distressed welcome. “Open,” it had called to her, and in her need, she gave into curiosity. The work she had done up to that point drove Mal in earnest towards its completion.

It had been months, a payment of time and effort, that had led her finally to the shop. A tedious, consuming grind, but after failed trials and close successes she had managed to coax machine and enzyme into fragile cooperation, enough so that she had fogged the side of a glass cannister. Mal had written a language. In flux between two states, it was an understanding that crossed between the borders of mechanical and biological with pulses of electric thread to sew it closed. She had bound the separate pieces into one functioning apparatus that was neither being nor object, and whose tiny soul had been harnessed for the singular purpose of crafting dew. Without hesitation she had raised the fog to her lips and tasted the sweetness of her success. In the next moment she had been out the door in search of those objects that would let her propagate her findings on a larger scale. She had forgotten she was in hiding. For a moment she
had forgotten who she was and what that meant on Souse. She had forgotten all in search of one thing, water.

Sinking into the rhythm of the mare’s gait, driving a tunnel through the endlessly whipping current of air, she felt the uncertainty leave her and the solidity of the device in her pocket pulling her into a grounded state. She didn’t place her hope in it; hope had no power on Souse. It was not mere belief, but fact to an engineer—tools had uses. She had found a tool, she would find its use. This estrangement from prescribed governing doctrine, was part of why engineers were so hated by the common folk, and part of why Mal hid. She had lived high in the castle of the system, set apart from its consequences but still espousing its morals, and then had run from it, escaping justice. She had fallen to Souse stripped of rank, departing like so much reduced matter for trade.

The ships that brought supplies to Souse were sometimes the same ships that brought people. Settlers, colonists or runaways, were not common, as goods kept easier than organic life in the vacuum of space, and the trips between the known planets were long ones, but the occasional newly transplanted life did take root. Souse orbited its small star alone, the parts that might have become other worlds circling this orbit like discarded debris around a sinkhole. This thick belt of unrealized fragments lay like a shield between it and the black chaos of the universe, but did nothing to protect it from the ferocity of its sun’s jealous lover, Svara.

Souse was a burned world, only good as storage for the dead things that could be harvested from it—mainly those things of blue and white and red that made the merchant men on the planets of Svara slaver. The main coalition worlds, those capable of sustaining life in a hospitable manner, belonged to a star dancing in a distant orbit with Souse’s own sun, Nav. Every few thousand lifetimes, Svara liked to remind Nav who held more power in the
relationship and it flew close enough to raze the skies of its only child, atomizing oceans and revealing seas of salt and blood clay and cobalt dust. Souse was a dry, windy memento of a lover’s domination, a reminder that life belonged to the coalition and was allowed no quarter elsewhere. Technically, no one was allowed to leave without permission.

Malory had not had permission. What she had had was a unique ability to influence the minds of machines. A charisma that when translated into code bought her a free trip in the cargo bay of a deep space cattle barge. It had been cramped, and the smell had been of honest labour, but once she had convinced the ship that she was indeed an unaccounted for heifer, she had been supplied enough nutrients for the journey. It had been uninteresting and lonely, cattle-barges were unmanned and even the cows spent most of the journey in slumber, but at least it had been warm. She spent her time steeling herself for the thing she was running to, preparing herself for infamy.

Engineers, akin to gods in Svara’s realm, shining with divinity in swirls of sanguine and opalescent flecks and black cobalt, were counted fallen, cast as ame damnee, if they ever left the loving arms of the coalition. Even the tortured souls of Souse knew to stay away lest they too be damned. It had not been the moment that she had boarded the barge, or the years she had lived among the herd, or her ship’s bumpy passage through the meteor-strewn Veil of Nya, or even the split second it took to turn her heart away from the coalition, that had decided her fate. It was as she had crossed the liminal divide and first set the sole of her boot to the blue otherworld of Souse that she had been marked a traitor and now belonged to no one, except as owed tribute and example.

Mal had known the cost of her ambitions, but it still shook her in the night when she woke and was truly alone. She shoved the chill thought from her mind as home, as she now knew
it, loomed as a fuzzy red dot in between the tri-mingling seas of white salt and cobalt sand and azure-clouded sky. When the dust could settle, it settled everywhere. Inside the clay hovel that she had taken as her own, Mal knew, she would see it worming through the cracks, chasing her down like a coalition assassin. She had wrapped the interior in sheets of purloined pearlescent silicon, but the dust still slid through the atom thin chinks in her protection, streaking the walls in a dirty reminder of where she was.

The entry to her home was protected from the wind and sand by a long, low awning of the same colorful fabrics she wore, but she still had to dig through the gray dirt in order to wedge her door open wide enough to fit through. She left her mount to rest in the meager protection that the fabric hallway afforded and flipped the slumber switch on its feed tubes. Howling wind muffled by sleep, it would rest and conserve energy until she needed it once more. She watched the horse settle, it’s blue-stained tail flipping gently, through the glass porthole as she sealed the door, and turned to enter the makeshift airlock she had set up to protect her work from the constant exposure to cobalt.

Quiet greeted her. The wind still railed at the walls, but its presence was lessened by the thick adobe. This was the closest thing to silence she could find on Souse. She clapped her hands together, breaking the calm, and breaking the dirt loose from her gloves. Roughly pulling them off, she threw them to the ground. She began unwrapping herself from the folds of decorous and protective cloths, hanging her dress up on a hook and trying not to dwell on the contents of its pockets before she was as free as she could be of the toxic dust.

Unclothed, gun cast aside, she stepped into a stall that she had created out of swaths of the same iridescent silicon that shrouded the walls in sinewy apparitions. Holding a small filter to her face, she pulled a hanging cord and a blast of air hit her. She was in a maelstrom of blue, as
the walls billowed and the clinging particles were ushered from her skin to be blown through a pipe in the roof. The wind would carry away the gathered fragments. Holding her breath in the gale, she pulled the filter from her face and bent it in half until she felt it crack. Quickly replacing it, she filled her lungs with the cool release, and breathed out a deep sigh. A last, straggling demon of blue flew from her lips. She pulled the cord again, and her ritual ended.

Padding naked to where her dress hung, Mal sought the thin square in her pocket. She lifted a flap of silicon and entered the main room, retrieving the card to the flickering light of a phosphor lamp. She absorbed its details, thinking. Grabbing a small horsehair brush, she began to clean the card, revealing the shine of electrical contacts. Her last experiment lay misting nearby on a bench, all but forgotten, but beginning to mingle in her mind with this new discovery. Laying the memory card gently on the bench next to the condenser, she crossed the room and pulled a cloth from a machine that had been hiding like a sentinel ghost in the corner. She pressed a few keys and a screen lit up, a pulsing line of light shooting from one end to the other, tracking a sinusoidal beat.

Mal rolled the machine to the bench, a sheet of opaque, hardened silicon propped between stacked cargo containers. The machine was made out of parts she’d salvaged from a wrecked cruiser. Neither were of the quality she had become accustomed to as an engineer under the pay of the coalition, but they were of the honest quality of Souse. Her lab was a ramshackle and fitting tribute to this world, and to her exclusion from her own. The card she wound between wires that jutted from the interior of the machines depths, connecting what she hoped were pathways of electrons and understanding. She twisted dials, centering the heartbeat on the screen.

It was not healthy, but neither was it dead. Frowning, she stared at the lambent pulse, lost in acres of thought. A chill swept up her spine, slithering in past her safeguards, and she
She unfastened the parts and returned them to where they belonged, and as an afterthought, checked the fogging jar that had been her impetus. It was nearly full of clear liquid. A sense of timid relief pricking at her mind, she left both puzzles to themselves and went in search of warmth. In a space separated by more shimmering hangings, she lit a small oven, balanced precariously on top of a pile of books, and set a kettle full of gel for synthetic tea. She popped the seal on a canister of biscuits and nibbled on one slowly as she lowered herself into a pile of furs still lost in thought. Exhaustion settled over her. Weary at the end of a months long struggle, and sore from hard ride, she closed her eyes for a moment.

She awoke hours later to a cold tickle and the smell of burning hydragel. A blanket of night had settled over the house, darkening the creeping shadows and chilling the air. The taste of bland biscuit still coating her mouth, she looked around groggily, brushing crumbs from her face with an irritated hand. Mal reached over and flipped the stove off. She glared at the ruined kettle, but left it as a problem for another day as her eyes took in the enormity of the lake she found herself sitting in. Liquid pushed at the thin walls surrounding her, bulging them inwards. As she pulled a curtain aside, stepping naked into the water, more rushed in, sinking her furs and knocking her stove into the water with a plop and a sizzle. Panic and confusion seized her, clearing the sleep fog from her brain. She stared at the water for a moment, deciding if this was a leftover dream, before realization settled over her. Her water experiment. *The memory card.*

Rushing as fast as she could through the deep water she barely registered the clean taste as it splashed into her mouth from her efforts. Water cascaded from the condenser, spilling from the jar and across the bench to cover everything. Her notes, written on scraps salvaged from older texts, were lifted up and carried by the swirling mess like ink-smudged boats riding a
waterfall. They surged around her knees in eddies as she cut a path through them, an icebreaker turned determined against the creeping coldness forming over her heart. Water, the thing that gave life to man, could so easily take life from machine. One thought kept her from rejoicing in what should have been the culmination of her work—the mystery of the memory card. The unsolved riddle pulled at her, and kept her from feeling completion in her success.

At first she couldn’t find it. The memory card wasn’t where she had left it on the bench, but then her eyes lit on it like a particular rock resting alone on an ocean floor. She hurried towards it, hopeless, but needing confirmation. Careless in her desperation, debris snagged her ankle and she pitched forward. Catching herself on her knees, she saw it under the water in front of her. She noted a strangeness about it, lines of solid color leaking at the edges, but then sparks flew from the walls, water finally digging its way into the circuits she’d connected, and the lights went out. All but one.

The river rock beneath her glowed. Her eyes took a moment to adjust to the darkness, and her heart took a moment to settle. She reached a timid hand under the water, eyes wide and grasping for Prometheus’ fire. The water was warm, and as her fingers brushed the colored strands that oozed from the cartridge, she felt an electric itch in her bones. The case was stuck fast to the floor, cemented in place, and she let let go, knowing instinctively that to move it would be to interrupt the process that was unfolding. She sat back on her haunches and took a deep breath, counting her heartbeats, and bestilling her mind. As she watched the glowing cartridge, the edges of her vision clouded in lost focus and a cynosure thought rose before her like a guiding star in a constellation. A simple solution presented itself.

Mal sighed in resignation, humbled by a defeat to Occam’s razor. Rising, she waded in the dark to where she knew she had stashed a box of glowlights, and fumbling for one, cracked it
like a whip. The area was washed in dim illumination, light spreading through the length of cord. She hung the lit strand around her neck and gathered a few more. Carrying them under her arm, she wished for pockets, and reminded herself that she should dress. The amniotic pool pulled at her legs, thickening strangely at each crossing. Her hand hesitated above the condenser, hectic tattoos deepened by the darkness but still winking with grains of salt. Fundamental scientific dogma caused her revulsion at the deliberate creation of an outlier, but she weighed it against her ardent curiosity. Giving in fully to the current of her madness, she lifted the everflowing chalice, allowing herself a moment to finally marvel at success.

Water, she was sure it was water, poured endlessly from its mouth. Wiping away chill condensation from the side of the glass, Mal could see the device she had created sitting beneath the bubbling drink, a thick disk of metal wound with precious copper wire. Lust overcame caution for a moment and she found the container at her lips and the liquid sliding coolly down her throat. Instantly, regret at her foolishness mingled with pride at being the first being on misnamed Souse to taste water. The lid that had been jammed open by worry finally closed, and she let the victory settle in her stomach to warm her. She felt complete. Lingering tang of stale biscuits finally washed from her mouth, she fumbled under the bench, beneath the dark wetness, for the small box she knew was there. Finding it, she set it on the bench and popped the latch, releasing the seal. A dozen rainbow hewn vials glinted up at her. She lifted the chalice in one hand, and poured it out.

Quickly, she pulled the stopper from one of the vials with her teeth, vaguely tasting strawberries on the air. Foam began to burble up from the disk, enzymes reacting, condenser condensing. Dumping the hydragel into the cup, Mal waited. Human nutrients were oft toxic to other lifeforms, and each hydragel was a unique mix of those nutrients. Pink slime swirled with
clear, as the reaction rippled, then slowed, then stilled. She had turned off her machine. A weight sunk in her chest and her throat tightened. Numbly, she set the dead urn aside. She brushed a layer of water from the bench and pulled herself up to sit atop it, and to wait.

Having miraculously found a dry fur from inside a sealed container, Mal sat with it wrapped around her, legs dangling above the water, and watched as the pool coated over in a smoky, glass film. Tendrils of thick, colored thread ran through it. The center glow, the mountebank cartridge, grew brighter with each passing moment, and that glow spread down each tendril in pulses to ignite each bundled knot of threads in a muffled firework of photons. It resembled a network.

The longer she watched, the more she could make of its rhythm, and she began to decipher code in the firing of lights. It was mesmerizing. She bit the corner off of another unsatisfying biscuit, longing for some of the water she had poured out. Her mouth felt parched, remembering the purity of it, but her lip curled slightly in muted delight at the thought of her audacity. In all the time she had been running, Mal had never felt the rogue scientist as much as she did now. Water ran freely on coalition planets. It sprang naturally, eternally, from the ground, though deep reservoirs did not lead to any deeper altruism, and water was the manacle that shackled good citizens to their terrestrial cells. Water was not free outside the coalition. To drink it without their awareness, without their having given notice or blessing, was akin to heresy.

The coalition bespoke themselves as shepherds to all their flock and were indeed generous, with kind and open hands for those that did not harbor resentment at being herded, but no other pastures were allowed, no greener grasses were permitted to flourish in imagination. The flock was led, eyes downcast, in circles around the same tattered pen, while the shepherd
proclaimed it verdurous. Mal had been born broken to that world, her every gear misaligned with their axiomatic lives, and eyes up and open, had looked across the fence and seen the ripe colors of progress. The sense and logic that separated her from the flock, had been the only things that kept her voice in check. To ask why was to bring the shepherd's staff to bear.

Fear of retribution was not what kept her cheating at true faith, but premature diagnosis of her seditious heart would have aborted her career as an engineer, thus inhibiting her need to learn, to grow, and to discover. She had walked the fine line between belief and fantasy, feigning prayer to the Capitol’s gods, swearing fealty to her fellow engineers, and secretly planning how to undo the beadledom that had infected the roots of her home system. Her walk had taken her across a knife's edge, to a desert world, an unacknowledged bastard son, but here she planned to sow the seeds of change. The tendrils of thought had already sprouted.

Mal lay on the bench, dozing. The still surface of the pond had glazed over in a dark substance. Ripples could be seen beneath the black ice coating, but the depths were no longer discernible except for a faint, oscillating glimmer. A crackle of sound pulled her from a tense sleep, and her eyes fluttered open. The machine, hastily put away with cables sunk below the pools surface, was on. The screen flickered, receiving an unsteady supply of electric current from an unknown source. A familiar heartbeat returned to crawl steadily across the display. As Mal squinted at the strange phenomenon, the pulsing line began to change. The rhythm she had seen earlier, the half understood code, was now repeating in series of sweeping lines.

Gears clicked into place in Mal’s mind. She had seen this code, not in this form, but the pattern, the cadence, was the same. The writing on the side of the cartridge. This was a visual representation of the written language. A series of oscillations depicting an idea, depicting the word, the name. Stunned, cognomen speaking itself over and over, Mal sat adrift on her
makeshift raft, following Occam’s advice and letting this simply unfold. A hypothesis formed, a mist wriggling at the edges of her understanding, coalescing into a thick billow. *It’s not talking to itself,* the thought knocked action into Mal’s limbs.

She lowered a toe to the surface of the lake. It was warm, the membrane hard and unyielding. It took her weight and held. Adjusting the fur across her shoulders, she crossed the land bridge, infusing her steps with a dignity she didn’t feel. Beckoned, her fingers found the keys of the cobbled together device. A portion of the screen, set aside for commands, blinked, awaiting input. The line cut the display in two, beating its metronome expectantly. Mal, a high ranking engineer, still couldn’t hope to translate an entire language from exposure to a single word. What she did put her faith in were the engineers of this device. It was a technology lost, beyond her understanding. She was the one being discovered, not the one making the discovery.

“Hello.” She typed the word, feeling akin to a grain of sand greeting the sky.

*Command not found.* The machine’s programming returned the value it had been programmed to return. Her frown deepened.

“Who are you?”

*Command not found.*

“What is your name?”

*Command not found.*

“Return value(name);”

*Error.*

“Return value(purpose);”

....

…………………
The machine stalled, its reply stuck in a cyclical repetition, its interface a continuous litany of uncertainty. Mal was tempted to cut the power and restart it but awareness of her nescience settled over her and she felt sheepish for having had the thought. She was not operating on the same plane of understanding as this device, and to believe so was human pretension. The machine, indifferent to her potential actions, stirred itself from its catatonia. The input blinked cheerily at her, the heartbeat having never wavered.

Hello.

Oh, the blank thought stuck in her mind.

I am Jude.

Named: Godkiller.

Named: Sword That Brings Light.

Named: Righteous Anger of Creation.

Named: Slayer of Serpents.

Named: Jude.

What are you?

Frozen, Mal felt a thrill of violent fear claw its way up her spine. She swallowed the adrenaline knot in her throat, hand wavering over the keys.

“Hello, I am Malory.”

Named: Unfortunate.

Named: Ill-fated.

“My friends call me Mal.”
Named: Bad.

Query: What are you?

Mal considered for a moment, deciding what word encompassed the essence of her being.

“Human.”

Processing.

Light, electric sparks, cracked and boomed beneath the naked soles of her feet. A flood of light poured through the pool, growing painfully bright. Humming vibrations tore through the air, drowning out the everpresent screaming winds, and resonating through the thick sheet she stood on. Eyes shut tight, Mal fell to her knees, pressing her palms to her ears in a vain attempt to block the sound waves from penetrating her brain. The glass beneath her swayed, and splintered, shattering. She plunged into the goo, submerging, fully baptized by the charged liquid. Foundering for a moment, she found the bottom, quickly orienting herself. Naked, dripping sparking ichor, she rose.

Blinking away afterimages, she perceived a blurred shadow ascending before her. The shape straightened, and her eyes focused on the hulking figure of a man. He turned towards her, and her eyes met his profound, obsidian gaze.

“Jude, I presume?” Her words, barely a whisper, shook.

“Yes.” His voice was soft, deep. His gaze travelled from her to consider his hand, his arm, his new form. Perfect muscles rippled across his nude body, he was a textbook sketch made real. He was a ternary codes idea of human. Flawless, a morning star glowing softly in the night-set room.

“I am Jude.”

“Nice to meet you, Jude.” She watched him, a lamb meeting a newborn wolf. Godkiller.
“I’m Mal. I’m sure you already knew that.” His eyes returned to her, penetrating her statement.

“Nice to meet you.” He echoed.

Jude took a step towards her, and a deluge of adrenaline urged her to flee. She trembled, heart fluttering in her throat, as he placed a large hand on her shoulder.

“Take me to Perun.” His words were earnest, imploring.

“Is that a person? A place?”

“It is the place where the last gods died. Where battles raged in the sky and split the heavens from the underworld. The place where all life began and ended.”

Mal’s mind raced, but the shock of this encounter turned her brain to its most familiar functions. The words, the order, the story they carried, sounded familiar to her.

“You mean Earth? The Sol system?”

“Something remains there that I must retrieve.”

“Yes. I understand.” She spoke carefully, deferential to the strength and strangeness of creature before her. “Earth, Perun, doesn’t exist, though. It hasn’t for thousands of years.”

Jude lowered his eyes in thought for a moment, hand still gripping her shoulder gently. She could feel the warmth of him, energy radiating outwards to fill the space with his presence. Heat and water had made him, as it had made every known living thing before him.

“It exists. I feel it calling to me. Billions of lives, calling to me.” There was resolve in his voice, iron certainty. His human features masked a transcendent heritage, but the sorrow that creased his brow was genuine. The emotion pulled at her own human empathy, and she felt sorry for this woken god.
“I remember the story. I read it in a book of fables when I was a child.” Mal met Jude’s eyes with more confidence, sinking into the familiar role of academic. “It’s a basic cosmogonical creation myth. The gods made the earth and sky and held them apart with a giant tree. Never seeing the gods, man grew arrogant and made new ones in their own image. The new gods chopped down the tree, bringing the heavens crashing down to earth, destroying man’s home, all the gods, and the underworld which lived at the center of the earth. Adrift, floating from the broken planet, the last man rode the explosion through space until he found a new land, and new gods.” She paused.

“Since then, the heavens and the underworld have been kept separate, each in the heart of a twin sun.” Jude watched her, a strange expression on his face. She felt she were to him what the rippling interface was to her. “It’s a beautiful example of ex nihilo, and some of it is even true. The data is recorded and verified by multiple source texts — Earth did exist, but now it’s gone. No one knows where it was.” She trailed off, the matter of fact tone leaving her voice, melting before the intensity of the man’s gaze.

“I was there. I watched the sky fall. I watched the ground begin to break.” The grip on her arm tightened as anger entered his voice. “God fought god that day as man fled, never looking back to see his Armageddon realized.”

In that moment, Mal was painfully aware of their shared nudity, and her vulnerability. Alone, she had wreathed herself in the cold shroud of science and not had to worry about the burden of intimacy. She tried to step from his grasp, and this triggered a change in his face. It softened, and his adamant grip fell from her.

“Apologies, little one. I am not of the belief that any one being can be responsible for their forebear’s indiscretions.”
The words contained no hint of condescension, but umbrage rose in Mal. She understood her limitations in this moment, but pride still warred with the scars she bore of the coalition’s whip-taught lessons in humility.

“I woke you.” Her voice trembled with fear and hubris. “I am owed an explanation.”

Jude’s expression remained paternal and neutral, humoring. “What is your query?” He blinked at her, a cursor awaiting input.

“Well, who are you?”

“I am Jude. Godkiller. Sword that Brings —”

“No, no,” she interrupted, “I mean, who are you? What are you? Why are you here?”

Malory became aware of the frenzy in her voice, and inhaled sharply cutting off her words and calming herself. Jude continued to blink at her, brutality in doe-form. “I’m sorry. What kind of being are you? What is your purpose on Souse?”

“I am a Godkiller, Greentech Mark VII, fully autonomous being, produced and manufactured by Tardigrade Industries. I do not know my purpose on Souse. I do not know what Souse is,” Jude replied, blandly.

The information flew past Mal without her comprehending it. “Souse is a planet orbiting a sun, Nav, in the twin star system of Triglav.”

“These words mean nothing to me.”

“I don’t know how to help you understand.” Mal felt defeated.

“Interface.”

“What?”

Jude’s hand closed over her shoulder once again, as he pulled her forward. She froze in disbelief at the intimacy of the act as he slowly released her and placed his index fingers in the
sensitive area beneath where jaw met ear. He held her face in his hands, eyes closed, unconcerned with her reaction. Heat from his fingers emanated like parallel jets to pierce her skin, and she felt a shoving in her mind. A black curtain descended over her vision, and a thousand tiny legs crawled under her skull, scattering into the wrinkled crevasses. She felt him, then, vulnerability dissolved, the last layer of cloth that kept two beings apart removed. Forcibly, they were of one mind.

An amorphous tactile appendage stroked the pathways of her psyche. She saw outside herself, seeing her smallness as she first met Jude, and a doubling as she beheld herself through his cold, honest eyes. A deeper strumming, playing her memories as an instrument, and time receded. Her journey across the blue desert with him in her pocket, conceiving ever-flowing water, trading with a shady backstreet vendor for the small jar of enzymes, further and further back in time he took her. Desperate and alone aboard the cattle barge, selling out friend and lover for a chance at higher knowledge within the coalition, blood and terror sending her from a family home — Jude saw all.

Anger at this violation was muted by the blanket of his identity, but still, Mal pushed back. She struggled to breathe. Barely aware of her physical self, she focused amidst the flurry of images he probed, and finally a tendril of herself seeped into him, and she began to understand, to interface. She pushed with muscles newly discovered, rending at the opening she had made, scrabbling for purchase. A single thought, a moment of memory, rewarded her effort. She was what it was to be Jude. She stood, one man, but a billion billion souls stood by her. Every molecule of her being independent but cooperative, aware. She was a universe.

The darkness receded and there was a twining of her vision as Jude opened his eyes. He released her, his hands and mind retreating. The knowledge of the position of every being within
him lingered. He felt immeasurable to her. He spanned centuries of time in every direction. He was in the air around her, within her. She had triggered the form in front of her but he had always been, sitting just slightly outside of reality, never within notice. She had set out to defy the gods, but had instead called one into existence. Sapped of energy, Mal rocked where she stood, lost in the sensation of having been cracked open, breached. Jude stood staring into nothingness. Time flowed again and he spoke.

“Vous are as small as they were.” His voice echoed in the room, flat with pain. “You have not grown. Eons have drifted by and you have built and rebuilt but yet make nothing of value. Still you are unworthy.”

A last reserve within Mal snapped and her hand whipped out, a slingshot taut and released, unconscious of her decision. She struck Jude across the face, the crack of it reflecting off the tepid water, hand burning as though she had scooped plasma from the sun.

“How dare you.” She glared, bile rising. “How dare you stand there and judge me.” She faltered. Stream of anger spent, weariness and apathy returned to weigh heavily on her words. “I saw you. I know what you did. I don’t know what you are. You look human, your heart beats, you think and feel, but you’re not human. I have no concept of your taxonomical classification, but I know you. I was you. I felt the hand that ended everything.” The moment she had stolen was still fresh, felt new and raw, as if it had happened in her lifetime, before her eyes. So much death and destruction resulting from a single act, and worse, he had felt righteous in it. The arctic chill with which he had doomed so many still clung to the thought, and she felt herself succumbing to the rationality of it. It was a flawed moral system, an error in logic and programming, that had guided his hand, and struck the blow that decimated Earth. Jude had wielded the sword against his master’s masters, he had been the light that awoke man, and
uncoupled Gehenna from the stars. He had split a world in two, consumed it in fire, but yet souls remained, trapped. Mal had felt them, through him. Billions and billions of them.

“I know what you’re looking for.” Her voice was a burden, and stuck, scratching heavy in her throat. “I’ll help you find Perun.” His face changed little, his cheek barely red from her strike, but he nodded. The act he had committed was violent, perhaps vicious, but Mal doubted she had ever understood evil. Morality balanced on the head of a pin, a winged being holding it in place for the next gust of philosophical wind to blow it in either direct. Mal decided she would let the wind carry her with Jude. Curiosity overrode the gears of prudence that bound her, and she gave herself to this new task. What help she could give a god, she would give to Jude. They would find what was left of Earth, she would prove the gods, prove man, wrong.

Malory could feel purpose settling over her like silk. She turned without another word, pulled her garment from the hook she had hung it on, and dressed.
Acknowledgements


