

THE
HALLOWED LABYRINTH
And Other Stories

John Xavier

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

– Luo Zhicheng

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ALL THE HUMANS WILL BE TAKEN CARE OF

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

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

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

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

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

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

* * *

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

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

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

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

* * *

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

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

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

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

ARIA OF THE NIGHT

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

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

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

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

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

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

She could've been a model certainly but she was never the sort of girl who was interested in getting by in life just from her looks. Sure she still made use of

them. Like everywhere else – in litigation they offered her certain advantages. Disadvantages too but on the whole more useful than not. Besides, you had to use whatever you had – being dissatisfied with what you couldn't change would never benefit you in any way. That said she could have, hypothetically, disfigured herself but that certainly wasn't a desirable solution. She quite enjoyed being so good looking. And not just attractive in an essentially sexual manner but beautiful according to classical ideals.

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

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

inside. Then she poured it about two thirds full, placed the kettle back on a cold element, put the cap on, and waited. Her life, in this specific moment, was the definition of serenity.

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

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

When she finally saw it she didn't even notice as she dropped the tea cup. It was like there was suddenly nothing but an abyss under her skin. She'd have fainted if she wasn't so absolutely mesmerized. It was a humpback whale. Swimming. Through the air. It was as clear as one of those high definition nature programs filmed underwater and the motions of the whale in the air were exactly what they'd have been in the ocean. Its body undulated leisurely as it swam through the corridors of city towers and made smooth graceful turns. She even looked into its large soft eyes and she saw life there – at the same time the lights of the city were gleaming on its flesh. She couldn't believe it. Her mind, like her body, was just paralyzed; unable to situate itself within the event. She couldn't even question what she was seeing because she couldn't form a question. Then she heard the excruciating beauty of the whale's cry again and two lines of tears began to flow from the outer corners of her eyes. The open ring of her mouth testified to an

unspeakable why. There was no one watching from any of the other hundreds of brightly lit windows that she could see however. As far as she could tell, she was alone with the whale. When it passed behind another condo building it suddenly failed to reappear despite that it should've been immediately visible again. Although she waited and waited it never came back. It was irrevocably gone and now she was alone again and more so than ever.

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

GOLIATH'S ANDROID SHOP

In the heart of Alchemist City, among the cobblestone alleys patrolled by hobgoblin cutpurses and platoons of steam-powered machine men trying to preserve order, there lived a giant. He was unremarkable as far as giants go, plus he mostly kept to himself in a gargoyle covered building located beside one of the many mercury canals. Here he ran the business of an android shop called "Goliath's Android Shop" and his name was Goliath. He was a peaceful giant so the name didn't really suit him but he pretended he liked it just fine. Goliath preferred to tinker away in his shop, oblivious as possible to the outside world, than to live the life of eating peasants and battling knights which people tended to expect from his kind. So far he'd done a good job of avoiding adventures but that was about to change when one day something resembling a girl snuck into his garage through an open window and hid among the boxes of spare parts there.

No one inside noticed at first. "Cogwheel?" called the giant in a casual way as his attention remained fixed on the eyeball mechanism he was examining through small opaque-seeming goggles. When no answer was forthcoming he lifted up his head and called again. "Cogwheel? Did you find the torso I asked for?" inquired Goliath, his baritone voice still pleasant. The sounds of things being bumped into and knocked over resounded from a nearby doorway until a robot carrying a heap of precariously balanced android parts in its arms veered erratically into the room. Their upper body was obscured but their lower half consisted of an

articulated cone shaped system slightly tilted at a wide angle and ending in a large spinning sphere which could propel the robot in any direction. This it seemed to do in short frequent bursts and not entirely under the robot's own control. As such, Cogwheel's focus appeared to be more preoccupied with not dropping the load they carried than anything else. Goliath scratched the back of his head as he eyed his robot assistant with amusement. "Over on the table will do fine," he said. Obediently, Cogwheel swerved in the direction of said table and miraculously managed to deposit the heap of parts without any clanging to the floor. At first.

As the robot, whose turret-like head consisted of two small widely set apart glowing eyes and a curling rubber appendage like an upside-down butterfly's proboscis, swept clean its hands in a theatrical display of accomplishment, the items they'd just set on the table began to slide off one by one. Cogwheel froze in apparent embarrassment until half a dozen things had fallen to the ground and then they began to pick them up. Goliath smiled a gentle smile. He could adjust Cogwheel's brain servos if he wanted and improve the robot's competence but doing so would inevitably destroy their current personality and the jovial companionship they provided more than made up for the harmless accidents they had. When Cogwheel was done, the robot wiped away a non-existent forehead with the back of their hand and let out an imitative sigh. "Whew boss! We've sure got a lot of stuff in the back. Any chance we might have a sale or something soon? Heck, I bet you wouldn't have to repair me so often if I didn't have to dig through so much junk to find things. Think about it." The giant let out a single laugh despite himself before smirking. "I'm not seeing the torso I need." Cogwheel rotated a few times in place by way of apology. "Oops! Sorry boss! I'll go get it!"

Minutes passed before a waiting Goliath looked at the cuckoo clock in his garage. Then several more. Curious about what it was this time, the bald giant with perpetually goggled eyes decided to go look for himself and, setting aside his instruments, he trudged across the room and through the previously mentioned doorway – one that required him to stoop. Down a short hall he came to the storage area where his supplies were kept and, inside, racks overflowing with machine parts towered all the way to the ceiling. It was quiet within but as Goliath paused he heard something strange. "Don't worry," whispered Cogwheel. "We can fix that right up, trust me. My master is the good sort. Never one to turn away from those in need." Alarmed, Goliath shuffled over in the direction of the voice and, appearing from behind a shelf, he found his servant leaning over the cringing form of a young

woman in a colorful corseted dress. But despite her remarkably human features, it was clear that her ceramic skin was the kind that could only belong to an artificial being. She was exceptionally beautiful even in her notably disheveled state and this quality further added to the hurt in Goliath's heart as the fear she was radiating became evident. Alone and scared, she had snuck inside and was feebly trying to reattach a severed arm.

It took nearly an hour before Goliath and Cogwheel managed to coax her out of the storage area and into the main bay of the garage. There she arrived in soft timid steps, her good arm clutching the separated one as if afraid it might be stolen. Goliath took the lead in encouraging her to sit down and, after much gesturing and glances exchanged with his robot servant, he succeeded. The android girl was sitting on a stool, staring at Cogwheel as he amusingly discussed various aspects of the garage, when Goliath finally decided to broach more serious matters. "You're... very wonderfully crafted," he said hesitantly. "Do you know who created you?" She apologetically shook her head. "I don't." Goliath now puckered his lips in thought. "Do you have a name?" he asked after a moment. The android girl let slip a nervous smile before quickly concealing it. "Arte," she said with the quiet of a confession. Then, just as Goliath was about to venture another question, Cogwheel made an intruding effort at eloquence. "A splendid name. A sum of beauty! Worthy of such a fine young lady," asserted the robot grandiosely. Cogwheel was striving to charm Arte and put her at ease but Goliath became concerned the robot's energy was too much. "Rest assured the noble master here can put you right back together! He fixes all sorts of machines! Takes them apart too! Not that he'd take you apart! Oh no! But if you needed that he could do it blindfolded! Indubitably! I trust him with all my maintenance. Furthermore..." Here Goliath interrupted. "Cogwheel," he said firmly. "Why don't you see to arranging a room for Arte to stay in tonight? I'm sure we can do better than the junk pile she stumbled into." Oblivious to the nuance of what Goliath had said, Cogwheel was nevertheless happy to please. "Right away master," he said with a salute before turning to Arte. "This may not be a royal inn but we'll find you something cozy, don't worry."

"You needn't go to any trouble," pleaded Arte a moment later. "I'm sorry. I was just looking for somewhere to repair myself. I didn't take anything and I'll be on my way... if you let me." Goliath shook his head. "I won't hear it. You can stay as long as you like. Besides, Cogwheel rarely gets to do anything besides helping me with my work. The surprise of your appearance is honestly quite welcome. By both

of us.” Arte smiled, but then looked down, unsure of how to express her gratitude. Sensing this, Goliath continued. “Can I see your arm?” he asked gingerly. Arte made eye contact now, silently imploring the giant not to insist but then the signs of realization crossed her face and she slowly handed him her detached limb. “Amazing work,” he said sincerely as he inspected the arm lying in the palms of his cupped hands. “And it appears there’s no serious damage. Some splicing and light welding should do the trick. Here, let me see the socket.” Nervously, Arte shifted on the stool so Goliath could inspect the shoulder that was missing its appendage. After a few seconds of scrutiny, Goliath gave Arte a twinkling grin. “You’ll be perfect again in no time.” Arte didn’t try to disguise her relief.

* * *

A week passed with the three inhabitants of the shop in fine spirits. After her initial caution faded, Arte proved herself a cheerful companion and the unusual trio soon found themselves in pleasant domestic harmony. While Goliath and Cogwheel ran the business as usual, Arte set herself to making little improvements in the interior décor. A table cloth here, a reorganized drawer there; pretty soon the dingy machinist feel that once pervaded things had all but disappeared. Customers who never went farther than the front shop room were complimenting Goliath on the changes but he couldn’t convince Arte to take any credit for things in person. In fact, she swore Goliath and Cogwheel both to secrecy about her presence there even though she’d yet to divulge anything significant about her background. Inferring that she’d escaped some kind of serious ordeal, neither of them pressed her but the mystery of it would fill the silences that occurred between them from time to time. No matter what though, both Goliath and Cogwheel were agreed that they wanted to do everything they could to help keep her safe. Unfortunately they had no idea how difficult this would prove to be.

One day a man entered the shop. Arte was out of sight as usual but Goliath’s heart instantly started racing. You see, the man in question wasn’t the sort to come into this kind of place at all. He was wearing a red leather suit hiding nothing about his gaunt but muscular body. An angular mass of sleek blonde hair jutted from his receding hairline a couple feet beyond the back of his skull in defiance to both natural and celestial law. His eyes meanwhile were milky blue and his lips, as pale as those of a corpse pulled from the thawing snows of spring, were a window to rows of sharp yellow teeth that had never shown anyone true kindness. The

electrical static that saturated his aura also confirmed that he was a sorcerer but whether he was more monster or magician, Goliath couldn't tell.

"Greetings shop keep," purred the man without a trace of warmth. "We, Revery Starlings, executor of the law, have inquiries for you to address." Goliath had to silently gulp before he could summon any reply to the man who was only half his height. "Truly my lord? I will do my best to honor your patronage. Any wares of mine of particular interest to you?" A hint of irritation flashed over the sorcerer. "None of that," he hissed. "I'm here in the service of Count Ptolemy. Even an oaf such as yourself must be familiar with His Eminence." Goliath nodded meekly. "I am my lord." The sorcerer didn't immediately follow up on this acknowledgement but instead gazed around the room until his curiosity was satisfied. "Well then, no doubt you are eager to assist His Eminence with recovering his property." Goliath tried not to sweat. "My lord? What kind of property?" Revery Starlings leaned over the counter and, setting his elbows to rest on this while he brought the fingers of his hands together, he furrowed his brow and stared up at the giant. "Escaped property." Trying to hide how nervous he was, Goliath abruptly turned around and rifled through a shelf before producing a large vellum bound book. "I can write a report my lord and ask around." The sorcerer's eyes narrowed as if they were about to cut diamonds. "Anyone who assists us in this will be rewarded. Likewise anyone who obstructs us will be repaid – but the other way." Goliath fumbled trying to open his book and barely refrained from dropping it. "Surely... surely everyone wishes for His Eminence's favor? I know I do. Will you... grace me with a description of the missing item my lord?" Revery Starlings leered menacingly before slowly standing up. "Enjoy the rest of your day giant," he said as he casually walked away, adding as he looked out the window at the evening sky on his way to the door, "Although it looks like you don't have much of that left."

When Goliath returned to the garage after a minute spent catching his breath, he found a terrified Arte slumped to the floor with Cogwheel hugging her. Evidently she'd eavesdropped on the entire exchange. "They found me," she moaned, ready to sob but unable to due to her construction. Goliath tried to console her. "He's gone Arte. He's gone. And I think I convinced him I knew nothing." A sharp laugh descended from the rafters. "You didn't," disclaimed a mysterious voice. For a second, Goliath thought it was the wizard himself but, when he found the hooded figure standing on one of the thin metal beams above, it clearly wasn't. "Who's there?" demanded the giant but before this could be

answered Arte let out an outraged scream and, throwing off Cogwheel, she ran over to one of the work benches. Snatching up a wrench lying there, she threw this spinning at the unknown man with deadly accuracy. Instead of killing him as it should have though, the man made a seemingly effortless leap and, in a kind of slow single cartwheel with his feet together, landed with flawless balance on the floor far below. He held his hands wide with an ironic look on his face as he replied to Goliath's question. "Not to brag but I'm Tom Stiletto." Cogwheel let out an appreciative whistle.

"Not THE Tom Stiletto?" asked the robot with growing awe. "Oh yes, the very same," Tom replied. Goliath and Arte exchanged a dumbfounded look before the giant demanded an explanation. "Who's Tom Stiletto?" Cogwheel clasped their hands to their face and blinked their eyes in something that seemed disturbingly like adoration. "One of the greatest thieves in the known realms!" Tom coughed apologetically. "Please. No need to be so wordy. Greatest thief will do." It was too much for the other two and they stood in stunned silence until the groping mind of Arte managed to find something to ask. "How do you even know this Cogwheel?" Taking a moment to look rather pleased with themselves, the robot eventually got on to explaining. "When Master Goliath first activated me he wisely made me study up on everything related to the business – including of course security issues. Naturally then I familiarized myself with the lore pertaining to theft in the city and the main individuals responsible. You'd be surprised but the underworld economy is quite large – and that's not even including the gnomes and dwarves. Anyways, Mr. Stiletto is very famous. Or infamous I should say. He's had many interesting exploits. All quite adventurous." Tom Stiletto nodded approvingly.

It was at that moment that Cogwheel realized the presence of Tom might not be an entirely welcome thing. "Wait. You're not here to steal anything are you Mr. Stiletto?" they asked, a hint of what for a robot approximates sadness in their words. Tom shook his head. "No no. I'm not here on business, strictly speaking." Goliath now let out exasperated sigh. "Why ARE YOU here?" asked the giant. The superlative thief took a seat on a stool and stretched his legs. "To help of course," he replied before chuckling to himself. "In what way?" inquired the still suspicious Goliath. "First of all, to relieve you of the erroneous belief that you've fooled Revery Starlings. The old eel's coming back. If the obvious evidence of this android girl's handiwork around the shop wasn't enough, your terrible attempt at lying, giant, no doubt clinched it." Real fear returned to Goliath and Arte but Tom ignored this as

he went on. "Secondly, as someone with considerable experience in the business of running away from the consequences of my actions, I thought I might make some suggestions regarding your departure. Most importantly, that it be soon. By my guess, you have about half an hour before a squadron of Count Ptolemy's goons are kicking down your door."

That spurred Goliath to action. Muttering suddenly to himself, he began to search the cluttered shelves of his garage, ignoring the things falling to the floor as he swept undesired objects aside. "What is it boss?" asked Cogwheel while Arte looked on helplessly. "I know it's around here somewhere," the giant groaned as he concentrated on finding what he was after. Lifting up a metal rocket recently commissioned by a fat earl for delivering decadent foodstuffs to his long besieged castle, Goliath turned it upside-down and shook it hard. A number of gremlins fell out, swore at the giant, and then scuttled away, but he was disappointed to find this was all. Unsure of what to do, Arte turned to Tom Stiletto. "Are you just going to stand around?" The thief made an effort at smiling politely. "Again, I'm here to be of assistance, despite the young lady's preferred method of greeting guests, but I assist in my own way." Arte scowled. "I'd throw something else at you if I thought it'd do any good." Before a quarrel could get underway though, Goliath cried eureka. "It's here," he shouted as he held the small device aloft.

"What's that?" Tom asked Arte nonchalantly but, irritated by his tone, she pretended to ignore him. Cogwheel meanwhile had disappeared to the front of the shop to look out for trouble and now he came careening back. Seeing the remote Goliath had grabbed, he whirled his hands in full circles at the wrists approvingly. "Just in time. They're already gathering outside boss." Tom Stiletto was the least surprised of them all by this news but he perked up from the distraction of scrutinizing his fingernails when he heard it. "As I said. Now, you'll have to pardon me but I won't be fleeing with you this evening. Other business and what not." The rest of them absorbed this with varying amounts of distraction but they were all too busy gathering things to respond. In a couple minutes however the giant, the robot, and the android had all reconvened in the main bay of the garage with some hastily packed luggage. Outside they could hear the Count's soldiers forming up in preparation to breach the shop. Oddly enough Tom was still standing in the middle of the room, apparently waiting for something. "Why haven't you left yet?" asked Arte. A fist pounded on the front door and a menacing voice shouted for everyone inside to surrender while Goliath dragged a large panel away from a hidden exit on

the floor. Tom noted this development without expression. "I'm curious about the remote," he said. "I want to see what the giant has up his sleeve." Goliath nodded solemnly as he ushered first Arte and then Cogwheel down a slide-like shoot. "This place is lost," he said mournfully to the thief. The front door was already being battered down as he clicked the button on the remote and the stone gargoyle veneers burst apart, revealing the defensive robotic systems underneath. Chaos broke out as they swiftly engaged the soldiers and Tom Stiletto listened to it for a moment with a cocked ear, appreciatively, as if he were a musical connoisseur evaluating a fine symphony. "Well done," was all he said as he casually saluted the empty space where the giant had last been.

* * *

What followed next was many days of hectic uncertainty. The escape shoot the three fugitives had slid down led to a long tunnel which eventually seemed to stop at a dead end. Goliath then used the remote to activate a secret door that opened out to another hallway. When everyone was on the other side, the giant closed the hidden door and collapsed the tunnel behind them. As the group began to run once more, Arte started to wonder where exactly it was they'd ended up. Only a few seconds later though she was amazed when the rusty industrial corridor they were fleeing through turned into a crowded factory floor. There, at least a hundred wizard serfs were engaged in the rapid conjuration and enchanting of magical commodities along conveyer belt assembly lines. Few of these indentured mages even noticed them as the group plunged through the heart of their pandemonium but a tattoo-faced overseer did yell indignantly as they passed. Goliath meanwhile led them as if he'd made this route before and they soon hurried through another door which opened outside to a section of the city by the seashore. Here the sun was setting over the water and, in the distance, the black silhouette of one of the emperor's dragons was patrolling the blazing sky as the last of the daylight flowed out of it.

From there they managed to secure passage on a chattel barge headed up the Troubadour River. While the phantasmal smoke from the ship's coal engine wafted over the river's surface, Goliath divulged his plan to his two companions. The only way they could rid themselves of Count Ptolemy and his henchmen for good was to seek the aid of someone more powerful than him. This left them with one option – Goliath had once made an emergency call to the palace of a cousin to

the emperor, Ambassador Melancholia, when one of the automatons in His Excellency's garden malfunctioned prior to a state soirée. What Goliath concealed in his plan however was the fact that he'd never actually met the ambassador himself, only their manservant, but he knew his friends needed hope to keep going so this gave him enough sense of justification. As the group finished discussing things they decided to head to their quarters for the night; Goliath trailing behind slightly. Under the creaking floorboards of the barge's deck he could hear the chained up unicorns below and, like them, he too was trapped.

On the outskirts of the ambassador's vast estates, the thriving town of Caduceus Falls provided their natural disembarking point. Here the goods from the vineyards, orchards, and animals the ambassador owned were sold off and shipped out by caravans or transported down river. Being a busy hub of trade, artisans and craft guilds had naturally also set up shop; together creating a vital commercial center where merchants from all cross the province, and even other parts of the empire, would regularly come to purchase new inventory. As a result, the streets of the town were quite busy; humanoids of limitless variety and custom were to be found engaging in business and recreation on a regular basis. One could just as easily come across groups of skin dyed barbarian mercenaries congregating in vulgar banter as one could elven monks slipping past silently in downcast rows. There was also an energy pervading the place that held the promise of great fortune and this wasn't lost on Arte or Cogwheel as they waited for Goliath outside an enchanter's emporium.

"He'll be back soon Mistress Arte," assured Cogwheel. "I'm not worried," she replied while idly fidgeting with a knot she had been tying and untying all morning. "And you don't have to call me that. Arte will do just fine." Cogwheel had been acting agitated ever since their narrow escape however and a tendency towards formality was only one of the side effects. "I'll keep that in mind Mistress Arte," he replied as he suspiciously glanced around at the crowds of people going about with their day. Arte just shook her head in acquiescence but a moment later her attention lifted from the rope she was fiddling with as she eavesdropped on a pair of passing peasants. "A cowl's the thing," said the fatter of the two with his arm around his companion. "Can't be much of a thief without a cowl." The second peasant had his doubts though. "But ain't that con – con – con – spicuous?" His friend furrowed his eyebrows. "Course not! Never mind then. You'd best not tax that old pumpkin of yours." Here Goliath surprised his friends.

“I did it,” he said to Arte and Cogwheel as a few of the townspeople in the vicinity gawked at his height. “You spoke to the ambassador?” asked an incredulous Arte. The giant shook his head. “No, but I secured an audience through an intermediary. He’ll take us there today.” It was Arte’s turn to be apprehensive now. “You sure about this Goliath?” she whispered doubtfully. “Yes,” was the giant’s immediate reply before being followed by qualifications. “I mean, I’m sure it’s our best course of action... at this moment... given no other options. Listen, that wizard who came to the shop – he’s still looking for us. So we don’t have a lot of time. I’m sorry Arte, I wish there was something else I could do.” Goliath’s shoulders slumped slightly as he finished speaking and when the android noticed this she reached out and caressed his arm. “You’re doing a good job big guy. I’ll never be able to repay you for all that you’ve done for me and, if you say we should do this, I trust you.” His heart swelling with emotion, Goliath gently placed his hand over Arte’s. As he stuttered, trying to do justice to her kindness, Cogwheel intervened. “What you were saying master is time is scarce. Let’s go then before that diabolical sorcerer catches up to us. The thought of seeing him again makes my gears shiver.” Goliath promptly composed himself at the robot’s words and directed Arte and Cogwheel to follow him. A few minutes later they approached the tavern where the giant had arranged to meet the intermediary. Outside, a half-demon beggar sitting on the ground sang to them insanely while they went by. “Ifly ‘nd becausey, there’re t’was quite wasly.” They ignored him as, one by one, they entered the establishment. Inside it went about as bad as it could go.

The ogre Goliath had made his deal with was sitting at a table by the back wall but, as soon as they got near him, Ptolemy’s minions rushed in and surrounded them. This resulted in about two dozen huge soldiers in chainmail drawing their swords so the three fugitives immediately surrendered. For a short spell the entire tavern was reduced to a nervous hush but gradually the sinister humming of a man rose from the quiet. Or not a man exactly. “It was a nice little chase,” seethed a glaring Revery Starling. “To be honest though, I found it all dreadfully irritating. I guess I’ll have to punish you for that. With cruelty.” Arte, despite thinking she understood the danger of her predicament perfectly well, couldn’t refrain from a retort. “You’re the worst. More dead inside than any machine. If you’d been an android, you’d have been scrapped for being too un-lifelike.” The wizard laughed. “Oh, I’m sure my creator regrets me. Too bad for him. But worse for you. Of course I wouldn’t dare harm his Eminence’s special favorite. The object of all his... doting.

Your two friends however ARE MINE! How'd you like to see me take them apart? I'm not sure if robots can scream. I know giants can though." The wizard's ferocity overwhelmed Arte and her defiance evaporated. Revery Starling noted how his words had crushed her, something he had seen in countless other victims who'd dared to resist him, and he savored the wicked pleasure of it.

When all three of the fugitives were shackled, they were then led into the streets, but here another surprise was waiting. Knights in gleaming silver armor under a gold and ivory standard. Sixty or so. The ambassador's own. "What's this?" snarled Revery Starling as magical energy began to build up around his clawed fingers. "Let us pass!" But the knights didn't move to get out of his way. Instead, a heroic looking paladin stepped forward, his stern eyes boring into the wizard's own unafraid, and he issued an ultimatum. "On behalf of the lord of this land, Cyril Tyrus Adonai Melancholia, of the noble house Autarcho: I, Captain Hasson, declare you and your men under arrest in accordance with the Emperor's laws. Cast down your arms and submit or be killed!" Revery Starling looked around uncertainly. "On what grounds do you waylay us Captain?" spat the wizard. "By direct order," answered the leader of the knights, a gauntleted hand pulling his sword out an inch from its sheath. The magic Revery Starling had been channeling fizzled away. "Very well," the wizard conceded reluctantly. "Take us to the ambassador and we shall sort this insult out. Don't let those three escape though," he demanded, pointing to Goliath, Arte, and Cogwheel. "You can keep an eye on them yourself sorcerer," replied the captain. "They'll be coming too."

Everyone parted deferentially before the magnificent group of knights as they made their way through town and soon the company reached the gates of the Melancholia estate. There the diligent sentries on duty let them pass after a brief exchange with the captain and following this they continued on for several more minutes before the ambassador's palace emerged from a bucolic hillside. It was a place of supreme decadence and the idle courtiers and aristocrats loitering around the entrance gave them only cursory glances before returning to discussions involving peerage gossip and the array of other trivial topics they indulged in to soothe their smug boredom. Then, through echoing marble halls adorned with opulent statues and frescos, Revery Starling and the three fugitives were eventually led into a high-ceilinged room whose walls were painting blue and white with an assortment of astrological glyphs. On either side of a dais, a few courtiers stood, and between them sat the ambassador on his throne.

It was not the ambassador who spoke first however. Standing to his right, a short plump man in a cerulean frock addressed the four new arrivals. "The visitors will show their deference to His Excellency," and they all bowed or curtsied as best they could. Revery Starling, it must be said, did not look pleased. "I hear you were conducting some kind of operation in my town Starling," drawled the ambassador. He was wearing a white embroidered doublet and a white wig of curls; in fact, his shoes and breeches were also white and his face was caked in white powder. His eyes however were discernably yellow and betrayed a lifestyle of excess that few in the room could even imagine. "I was retrieving the property of my master Your Excellency. It had all been taken care of before your knights interrupted." This reply irritated the ambassador and he got to his feet. "Is the Dear Count sovereign here? In my lands!" Revery Starling bowed again, sincerely humbled this time. "Forgive me Your Excellency." The ambassador scrutinized the wizard for any sign of insolence but found none. "That I may or may not do," he said at last.

Turning to his servant in the cerulean frock, one Secretary Umskull, the ambassador launched into a brief dramatic utterance. "Here I stand, in futile resistance, to the all-consuming tides of entropy." Secretary Umskull seemed unfazed by this declaration. "Yes my lord," was all he said. The ambassador then turned to his guests. "For those of you who lack a gift for appreciating poetry, this means I am the law. The law wizard! And here my will shall be done!" Revery Starling acknowledged the truth of this with another bow but his cunning was also at work. "And what of my master's right to his property Your Excellency? What shall I tell him of your law?" The ambassador's eyes narrowed as he parried; "You're forgetting something wizard," to which Revery Starlings replied, "I am Your Excellency?" The ambassador casually sat back on his throne. "Your master's debts," he stated with a certain vicious enjoyment. "But..." the wizard sputtered before being interrupted. "I understand your confusion. Poor Ptolemy has so many debts. Umskull though can clear things up for us. Umskull! How much does the count owe me?" Umskull too was taking satisfaction in the situation. "Eight hundred thousand ducats my lord. Roughly."

The ambassador's taste for the theatrical gained full expression now as he waved his hand in the air and spoke as if to the heavens themselves. "Eight hundred thousand ducats. Eight. Hundred. Thousand! So let us deduct a generous amount for the girl. We'll say, twice her worth. That's six thousand. Now she is mine and to

the giant I give her, because I am generous. As for you wizard, you will take your retinue back to your lord and remind him that he owes me seven hundred and ninety four thousand ducats! Or thereabouts! And tell him I'm tired of sending out agents to remind him. Soon I will stop sending men with parchment to do this and start sending men with daggers."

The courtiers in the room were tittering as Revery Starling hung his head in defeat. The wizard tried to mentally come to grips with what had just happened but the persisting sound of the spectators enjoying his humiliation began to ignite a rage inside him. He who was a master of the unnatural arts! Who commanded primordial powers! That he should be subjected to this! It was unacceptable to give these vermin victory. Somehow, through sheer instinct, they conspired together to undo their betters. But he would not have it! No! They would regret what they'd done to him. They would taste tragedy. With cold fury, the idea began to form in his mind how he would make this happen. It was the girl! The girl if you could call her that. He'd always disapproved of his master's obsession with her and so his anger converged without hesitation. With her destroyed the rest would all be deprived as well. He knew he had only one chance though. Concealing his left hand behind his back, he conjured a ball of lightning in it. Then with serpentine speed, he flung it at Arte. She was standing farthest away from him though and before the wizard's missile reached her, Cogwheel threw themselves in its path. When it struck the robot, the flash blinded the entire room.

* * *

A few days after the events at the palace, Goliath opened his new shop in the affluent section of Caduceus Falls. The jeopardy was over. Revery Starling had been locked up in the ambassador's dungeon and Arte was safe. "I guess everything worked out for you didn't it giant?" chimed a familiar voice to him one evening as he was alone, or so he thought, in the garage. "I wouldn't say that Tom," said Goliath softly. Tom Stiletto appeared from the shadows. "It went better than you had any right to hope," the thief insisted. Goliath's eyes remained focused on what was in front of him as he answered, "You're probably right. Did you have something to do with that?" The thief sighed. "Well, I can't take all the credit. Most of it, but not all. I mean, I did send word to His Excellency that Ptolemy's agents had set up an ambush at a local tavern. Yet I imagine it was Umskull's recounting of your previous assistance that resulted in Arte being given to you." Goliath squirmed

uncomfortably when Tom said this. "I set her free," divulged the giant. The thief shook his head. "Why am I not surprised? And yet she's still with you." Goliath couldn't hide his gentle smile in confirming this. "She is," he said with a happiness nearing awe. Even the thief, his feelings fortified in walls of irony, wasn't able to protect himself from the sudden pang of warmth that stabbed him.

"Is she in the other room? Getting you tea?" Tom asked facetiously. Goliath turned with a quizzical look on his face. "Yes," he answered sincerely, pausing partly from confusion. Tom Stiletto shook his head. "I think that's my cue to leave. I got some petty revenge against a nobleman who killed one of my partners and I inadvertently assisted in your happy happy ending. So much the better. Don't expect we'll run into each other any time soon. Goodbye giant." As the thief turned to leave however, Goliath called out to him. "Wait. How'd you find us? Here in Caduceus Falls." The thief stopped and smirked. "The same way I stumbled across you before. Following the wizard." Goliath wasn't satisfied with this though. "And how did he..." the giant asked before trailing off. The thief's shrug silenced him. Then Tom Stiletto was gone, taken completely by the darkness. It would have to be enough, Goliath supposed. It almost was. Taking up his welding gun, he got back to work. Around him the broken pieces of his best friend waited; ready to be brought back together, ready to live again once the bright arc had finished.

IMMORTELLE

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

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

The foyer inside was immense and solemn. A lacquered wood the color of sable prevailed and this was garnished by towering magenta curtains that draped thin Tudor-style windows. In addition, various ornaments of highly polished silver gleamed in an uncanny way with the light from a host of sulfurous looking lanterns hanging on the walls. Marvelling at the decor, Andrew nearly bumped into a suit of conquistador's armor that was erected by the main stairs leading up to an interior balcony with six visible doorways. Before he could ask any questions though, the butler, an elderly man with a face like a melted candle, ushered him into a hallway that led on elsewhere. The hallway was full of large oil paintings on either side and Andrew couldn't help inquiring now, "Are these family portraits?" To this the butler replied, "Indeed they are sir," without altering his gait. In fact, Andrew noted how

crisply the man made his every move – a sign surely that this was a house of constant scrutiny. As a result, Andrew began to measure his own pace and worry about the movement of his arms. He wanted to appear humble but not weak. He expected an imperial audience and he was preparing himself for this. The portraits in the hall also served to assure him of the kind of man he was about to meet – all of them, men and women from across the chasms of history, painted with proud commanding looks. Some of the portraits though seemed remarkably old, even for a family with seventeenth century roots.

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

They walked together through the large quiet house as Mr. Beaumont narrated various matters of family and personal history. Realizing belatedly that the interview had already begun, Andrew Randall tried to steer the conversation with various professional questions. He was perhaps overly delicate in doing so. "You mention your father's political career and those of your son's in finance and the law. Yet you chose to pursue a life that's allowed you to stay relatively isolated. Why?" Charles Beaumont idly examined the man who was prying into his affairs.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

the costumes filled with dead flowers that were all dried out and dyed in various colors. He wasn't sure what to make of them.

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

INCIDENT AT MEGIDDO

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

KENSEI OF WRATH

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

eventually but they were all far too late to do anything and so, like him, they did nothing but watch.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

QUAESAR'S ARRIVAL

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

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

late – the gnomes would hunt you down and kill you without pondering you a lick. To be fair though, the gnomes weren't naturally savage, only made so by necessity, and they had their fair share of acquaintances and allies with whom they parlayed on occasion.

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

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

bounced and rolled off a ways, vanishing into a small thicket of arrow-headed mushrooms the color of stained teeth.

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

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

was a practical gnome. On top of that, it was good to just keep Nonny's constant complaining in line.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

None of them ever saw Quaesar again.

SENTINEL AT KINGDOM'S END

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

TERMINUS STATION

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

THE HALLOWED LABYRINTH

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

WARHEAD SAUL'S LAST LEG

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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