

THE SHADOW OF
PUREXO

LASSE ÖÖRNI

NaNoWriMo 2011.

Dedicated to the grand master chefs who each day submerge themselves in the art and science of preparing the most challenging desserts for the rest of us to enjoy. Also dedicated to Carolyn Keene. It is recommended to eat bun pudding and orange rice while reading.

The character Okko created by Tomi Thurlin. Used with permission (as far as the author remembers.)

1.

"The composition's already close to optimal. Just have to keep the temperature firmly in check," Lothar Wagoner mused to himself as he eyed the yellow-brownish mass bubbling in a glass container, heated by a gas burner underneath.

His present location was ten metres below ground, at Purexo's secret research facility for especially challenging desserts (referred to ECD's in official memos.)

He was the scientist in charge of product development and analysis.

Purexo was the global leader of food, events and facilities management services. Its morals and ethics had been questioned in the media several times. There had been demonstrations against the company, sometimes bordering on riots. Even some famous people had been arrested during these demonstrations. As for some of the less famous persons arrested – they had never been heard from again.

Lothar had long ago learned not to care of his employer's public image, and did not feel any measure of guilt twisting his heart if he happened to ponder what fate had fallen upon those poor devils. And in any case that was a matter for the security division, not product

development. They both had their own work to be done – and in his case it was not unpleasant in the slightest.

Quite on the contrary!

Of course it demanded an especial strength of character to spend day after day in the laboratory optimizing the taste and composition of a pudding or a kissel, according to the strict but peculiar quality criterias set forth by the company guidelines –

But when the work was finally complete, when the instructions for a brand-new ECD, or an updated existing dessert, had been codified and put to distribution around the world for the chefs to follow to the letter, nothing could beat that grand feeling of success. It was exactly at moments like these when Lothar felt at the top of the world.

Even though physically he was pretty much at the bottom.

Before sanitating its business focus to slightly more acceptable forms, Purexo had invested heavily into private penitentiaries. This facility had been built into one of them, and subsequently expanded below it. The prison itself had been closed already three years ago because of violent outbreaks and unsanitary conditions, and on the whole it had been a failure on almost all levels. Nevertheless, before closing down the prisoners had been given the questionable honor to judge the taste of some very imaginative but often also forbidding desserts. Very few of them was ever brought to the public.

The prison was called Black Meadow Correctional Facility. Black was not far from the truth, but there certainly was no meadow to be seen, just miles of open, marshy terrain into every direction. Any escaping prisoners would have had it hard trying to make any kind

of headway, and they would certainly had been detected unless they dug themselves into the swamp.

Officially no-one had escaped during the five years the prison had been operational. Unofficially there were rumors of some convicts daring to enter the bowels of the earth, the caves below ground that the research laboratory had later been expanded into.

But where would they have gone from there? "Maybe straight to Hell," one of the security staff – a former prison guard – had said to Lothar somberly.

In a way it was amusing to think why security was needed at all at this in this God-forsaken place – but in fact it was. First of all to guard trade secrets – Purexo's security division was admirably well up to speed with the tricks of cyberwarfare, and no noteworthy breaches, leaks or malware epidemics had ever materialized during the company's colorful history. And second – to ensure the physical safety of employees, particularly those in a leadership position like Lothar.

Sometimes, the task of sorting fifty variations of chocolate kissel or cappuccino mousse according to whatever criteria was simply too much for an assistant lab worker, and test tubes, LCD displays or even chairs could go flying at that point.

But now security might actually be needed for even more critical reasons. For Lothar's exact line of work might actually be changing due to a very, very speculative expansion Purexo might be about to undertake.

This expansion might not be entirely voluntary and controlled, and if Lothar would have let any kind of weakness or doubt to take hold of his mind, he might have headed running to the nearest exit in the throes of insane, gut-wrenching, absolute terror.

But he was a scientist. He took to the matter – or to

the phenomenon – with an analytic, iron-willed calmness.

The possibilities were fascinating.

It appeared that a bun pudding (one of Purexo's oldest and most famous ECD's) with just the right kind of composition and appearance, one that had been prepared in just the right temperature, reacted to certain harmonic sound frequencies in an utterly perplexing manner.

It started to fracture, which was not surprising considering the porous structure of this particular variation of pudding.

But what was most surprising – the other side of the dessert bowl had not been visible through the cracks and holes. Rather, something completely else had been visible.

Lothar did remember that he had been awake forty-eight hours without a pause at the time of witnessing the phenomenon, so his senses might not have been at their sharpest.

But he could swear that through the pudding, he had seen into another dimension

And what kind of dimension!

In his youth Lothar had read H.P Lovecraft eagerly, and this author's visionary descriptions of dimensions most foreign and forbidding to man came to his mind, undeniably and unquestionably. Spirals – nebulas – eternal black towers of monstrous size. Though the holes between pieces of bun had been small, it had been peculiar to observe that peering through them nevertheless felt like observing the vastness of space in every direction. It was therefore possible that it was not only purely a visual perception, but some kind of thought transference.

The phenomenon had not yet repeated itself. But Lothar could sense that it was just a question of time. He would just need to prepare the exact same composition again.

It was very possible that Purexo was about to transition from an international company to an interdimensional one.

This thought brought goosebumps to Lothar's skin, and made him chuckle almost silently. He had not brought the matter yet to his immediate superior, the assistant regional director Klaus-Marius Goldigger. First the phenomenon should be made to repeat itself reliably.

Of course one terrible thought had occurred to Lothar. What if it would not repeat, ever? What would he do then?

But he shut the disturbing thought from his mind with Spartan deliberation. He had succeeded in everything in his life up to this moment, and he would succeed now as well.

The temperature of the pudding sample was slowly rising up to the saturation point. Lothar sighed with a measure of disappointment: at this point there was not much to do except to wait, and that meant he would have to return to his actual assignment.

There had been a study on the effect of ECD's on the performance and mental agility of "top specialists in their respective fields," and Lothar was to produce a summary of the results, along with recommendations for further actions and further testing, if any.

The guinea pigs – or test subjects – had been given the opportunity to rate the meals and desserts on a number of criterias, including taste and surprise factor. They would also rate their perceived work effective-

ness, and whether the food had affected it in some ways. The questionnaire contained both multiple choice and open questions. In addition the actual performance of the participants had been measured quantitatively, for example in the case of programmers by counting the lines of code produced, and the number of programming errors fixed, or caused.

One had to note that the concept of a dessert being “challenging” was absolutely classified, and kept hidden from the public. On Purexo's management level it was of course discussed each and every day.

The common people could well discuss the “kick” or “bite” of a dessert, but they could never be allowed to know that Purexo made the desserts challenging on purpose. If that information ever leaked, it would greatly reduce the subliminal shock effect, in addition to potentially stirring up another round of public fuss over the company ethics, or lack of thereof. It might affect the turnover as well.

Not that Lothar cared that much of the turnover. But his pride was dependent on knowing that each day as many as possible, from students to prisoners to doctors and lawyers were subjected to the meals, and especially the desserts, that he had helped to shape. That was something worth ensuring that it stayed that way.

Lothar scrolled through the Excel files with putrid reluctance. This kind of work was truly beneath him, and secretly he hoped that such research would never be conducted again. Time was better spent just producing the most challenging desserts imaginable, and letting others over-analyze and over-explain them to death.

He observed his thoughts wandering.

Although he had not played video games actively for

over a year (the wait for Half-Life 2: Episode Three had finally numbed his mind and made him too cynical), he caught himself musing over the concept of a real life resonance cascade. If the LHC accelerator at Cern could not produce one, then perhaps his specially prepared bun pudding could? But would that make him Gordon Freeman, and what would be his crowbar, then?

But no.

Even though Half-Life and its sequel were thoroughly well-designed games, their stories followed a tiresome, too ordinary restorative pattern. Something went wrong, and someone had to fight to right it. But Lothar felt that his role was rather to actively change the world – to shock it to the very core, instead of striving to restore anything.

He would be the trailblazer and explorer of the new dimension and the new reality.

Whatever nameless and formless beings awaited beyond the pudding gate, no doubt Purexo could manage to expand its operations to their doorstep as well. Who could resist a pannacott, kissel, or pudding, manufactured the way only Purexo could do it? Certainly not Cthulhu or Yog-Sothoth!

Though Lothar did not care for money, only for his ambition and passion for being the best of the best at his field, he could imagine Klaus-Marius seeing the dollar signs in his eyes.

Though, would the Great Old Ones or other comparable beings actually pay with dollars? Likely not. Perhaps they would use some odd pyramid-shaped currency, if at all. But it did not have to be that straightforward. Purexo could well sell tourist trips to the other side, or extract protection money –

No, that was not a nice term. Rather, he would prefer

to think of it as a consultation fee for DARPA, NSA, CIA, FEMA, JSOC, Secret Service or whatever agencies, if it occurred that the beings from beyond the gate would seek to expand their territory to Earth with hostile aggression.

Of course if it came to that, it would be possible that instead of any fruitful collaboration, the facility would be seized, and the staff, Lothar included, would be imprisoned and renditioned to God knows where, suspected of terrorism and gross endangerment of the general public. But then, it would be up to the agencies and the military to try in vain to stop those creatures from beyond stars, not to speak of the automated production lines –

And the nuclear reactor.

Of course every self-respecting secret dessert research facility had to be self-sufficient when it came to energy.

Even at this very moment the reactor purred happily at the lowest sub-basement level, and produced beautiful sine-wave alternating current, which Lothar had once measured himself on the oscilloscope, and plotted on his workstation's display. No doubt it was much purer than the fluctuating voltage most households had to endure.

When the optimal mixing ratio for a kissel or jelly was being investigated, particularly if all coarse measurements were already done and it was a matter of fine-tuning the parameters, it would be completely intolerable to have the mixer slow down for even one tenth of a second because of a voltage drop or fluctuation. In the best case that would produce extra variance in the results, making it necessary to perform further measurements or to even redo from scratch, and in the

worst case there could be treacherous systematic error, noticed only later when Purexo's reputation was already at the stake. That could never, ever be allowed to happen!

Of course the dessert chefs around the world naturally had no nuclear reactors of their own, but were at the mercy of commercial electricity. Due to this (and other reasons, such as possible onset of alcoholism due to work-related stress) the final dessert recipes had to include considerable tolerances. As a result, from a layman's limited perspective it might seem as if there were considerable differences even between samples of the same dessert, and considerable carelessness at play.

But everything was intentional – the variation increased the surprise factor and kept the customers on their toes – and in any case it was most important that here at the source of knowledge, at the heart of science, the results were a hundred percent exact.

Lothar cursed silently. His imagination had again taken hold of him, leading him to daydream. At this rate the report would never be completed, and Klaus-Marius would be very, very displeased with him. Lothar forced himself, grudgingly, back to the unpleasant reality of the spreadsheets.

2.

Viktor Stålvind knew the Left Hand Path like his own pockets.

He was an Anti-Cosmic Satanist. Or Chaos Satanist, or Chaos-Gnosticist, as he occasionally called himself. But it mattered little what he called himself. There were eleven paths, eleven black flames, and they all led to the black dragon Azerate in the swirling dark center of disorder.

For ten years already he had studied the most esoteric of all esoteric writings, including Setian-Gnostic texts and the Qliphotic Anti-Kabbalah, and had dedicated himself to strengthening his will and the black flame of Satan (Azerate's current 218) burning in his heart, and bringing forth chaos to this meaningless world. He chose rather not to remember who or what he had been before his transition and dedication to the Path.

In addition to fortifying his mind and performing rituals, invocations and evocations, he had molded his body into a sculptured temple for the glory of Chaos.

He had just taken a cold, invigorating shower, and observed his image in the mirror for a moment, before wrapping himself in a shining black bathrobe. His head

was shaven bare, to symbolize the constant pursuit of deeper wisdom, but he let his beard grow, as beard had been the symbol of godhood in the ancient Egypt.

He himself was of course the god!

He sat in front of his laptop computer, but did not immerse himself in the mystic writings this time – of which he had a considerable collection on his hard drive as pdf's – but rather chose to open a web browser and headed to the site liveleak.org, where he selected a suitably repulsive and violent video to strengthen his character.

On the video, an infidel's throat was cut, and Viktor again reminded himself of the stagnant and corrupt nature of Abrahamic religions. Nevertheless they brought more suffering and conflict to the world, and separated in their own primitive way the strong from the weak, so reluctantly he had to admit that they had their place in the world as well. At least until Chaos would finally be unleashed and the black wind of Azerate blew through everything that was!

A few years back, when Viktor had still lived in Sweden, he had applied by letter to a few Chaos-Satanic organizations, but had never heard from any of them. This he took to mean that his views were too well-developed, and therefore too frightening to most. He was meant to find his own way alone.

Even in the circles of Satanism there was surprising herd-mentality to be found, if one just knew to look beneath the surface. Exactly like among black metal fans. Viktor had not listened to black metal for years, as he had found for example dark ambient to fit his current soulscape better, and to produce a meditative state of mind, which especially when combined with psychoactive substances – though those had to be used sparingly

– was fruitful for the further development of Anti-Cosmic theories.

However, now Viktor felt as if he had reached some kind of a plateau in the quest for controlling and bringing forth the dark powers. Something new was required, for example a ritual in a place where he could truly feel the presence of Azerate. This would be a so-called node, or junction point of Chaos energy.

First he thought – obviously inspired by the video – that he should travel to the Middle East. But although there he could develop his courage and readiness to fight, it could well be that in the end the mindless religious fervor would just drain away his mental powers and imagination, and in the din of Kalashnikovs and the suicide bombers' improvised explosive devices he might find little true black inspiration, not to even speak of finding any Chaos junction.

Besides, if it was the followers of the Demiurge spreading anarchy and disorder, then it was not true Chaos, not like Satan / Azerate had meant it to be!

Therefore he might need to look for the answer a little closer to home.

His thoughts drifted to his lady friend Kim, whom he had met roughly five months ago. She was a misanthropic woman of a few words, not at all interested in anything esoteric or occult. Occasionally they did discuss philosophy though, particularly its nihilist varieties.

Kim was also of Scandinavian heritage: tall, blond-haired and physically strong – a classic valkyrie, had a few of Viktor's acquaintances from the NSBM scene remarked upon seeing her. She worked as a night guard at a facility she had not named and was reluctant to discuss further. This job suited her because it demanded

little contact to other humans.

Viktor had not yet fully mentally processed what the thing between them exactly was. There certainly was physical attraction, and if he did not totally deceive himself, he had sensed the flow of Satanic kundalini and the Black Flame burning stronger when they made love. Therefore, even if Kim could never be initiated into deeper knowledge of the arcane, their companionship was at least for now something worth keeping. Apparently Kim also found it worthwhile, because it was usually on her initiative that they spent time together.

Actually Kim had a habit of appearing without warning, in the process often disturbing Viktor's Anti-Cosmic rites. He was not however bothered to hold a lasting grudge over this, at least usually. This he on one hand interpreted as weakness in himself, something to be weeded away. On the other hand he understood to have a kind of magnetic power over this woman, and without even having to do especially much to maintain it, and this was perfectly in line with his Satanic principles.

But – would Kim's workplace possibly be a favorable location for the ritual? If it was quiet and deserted at night, it might be possible to sense Azerate's residual Chaos energy in there. This was something Viktor always chased after, though usually with not much success. By following the vortices of this energy to the direction where they became stronger, it might then be possible to find the Chaos junction itself.

Viktor had once come very close to finding such a junction point – at the site of one Swedish cathedral where, in the old times, there had been significant Pagan activity. But this had turned out to be a false lead – the vortex had grown stronger, but then just suddenly

vanished. But if he could find at least one such place in his lifetime, then he could speed up the coming of the Chaotic age, as well as gaining supreme dark knowledge.

The matter with Kim's workplace would just have to be handled with the utmost delicacy. For when it came to work, Kim possessed a strict code of honor, one that would certainly prevent her from any lapses or acts of stupidity just for Viktor's sake. Such things could naturally cost her the job, which – if Viktor understood right – had little intrinsic value to her. But it was the principle that mattered.

Viktor decided to put a few lower-grade demons at work to consider the matter and any possible solutions. The demons of course represented the hidden processes of his mind: he did not actually believe in them as autonomous lesser spirits subservient to Satan.

The eleven grand princes of Chaos, or the eleven heads of Azerate were a wholly different matter. They were very real to Viktor, just as real as general relativity was to a physicist. The names of the princes were usually written into the eleven-pointed star, or hendecagram: Moloch, Belzebub, Rofocale, Astaroth, Asmodeus, Baal, Belphegor, Abramelech, Lilith, Naamah, and finally Satan.

Viktor felt himself shivering as he imagined himself drawing a hendecagram on the floor, in the exact center of the hidden Chaos junction. It could have consequences even he was not prepared for.

But he was going ahead of things.

First such a place had to be found.

At least he could start by convincing Kim to reveal what the facility actually called, and where it was. That could not be too much to ask. It could well turn out that

the place had zero potential for Azerate, in which case it could be just be quickly forgotten, and Viktor would have to look elsewhere.

He decided to watch a couple more of liveleak.org videos, then prepare himself a primitive but nourishing meal. Then perhaps some red wine. If Viktor did not guess wrong, Kim would be visiting today was well, a couple of hours before the beginning of her shift.

3.

Jake, Lee and Randy were science students who also practiced urban exploration. During their raids they used the codenames Dave, Adrian and Janick to fool any eavesdropping authorities, as they kept contact with two-way radiotelephones.

However, recently exploration had taken a back seat, as more of their precious free time had been directed towards becoming combat ready. This meant strength exercises using only one's own body weight for resistance, according to the book *Convict Conditioning* written by the instructor Paul "Coach" Wade. Wade was an ex-con, who had, during his nineteen years of serving time, first trained himself to peak condition just to survive the harsh reality behind the bars, then proceeded to guide the other inmates. His method was based on the old school lost art of calisthenics.

The book was based on progressing toward the most advanced feat or "master step" in six different categories: the pushup, the squat, the pullup, the leg raise, the bridge and the handstand pushup, where the master step would be to perform five one-arm pushups while using the wall for support.

It was late already, and the mathematics club room

was already almost devoid of other students. Usually the three gathered there just before the workout, which they performed in an adjoining storage room.

They did not want to go to the gym, for the fear of having to explain their unorthodox practice methods. And because they did not feel quite combat ready yet. Naturally, when they could actually do one-armed pushups and handstands, then they would go and flaunt them to everyone!

They had eaten another meal after the day's classes (catering at the campus was provided by Purexo), and now after their stomachs had settled and the blood sugar was at a good level, but they did not feel tired yet, it was almost an optimal time for workout.

Today was Wednesday, and they would do pullups and squats. They practiced according to the "Good Behavior" -program, which consisted of training three days per week, two moves each. Their respective schedules allowed for this – barely.

"Wouldn't it be cool to train in a real prison?" Jake stated. "I bet we'd see results on a whole new level."

"Yeah, if you'd feel you actually had to be combat ready," Randy replied.

"I don't mean we go and get convicted. But if there was some decommissioned jail, like Alcatraz, then we could go exploring there. And combine it with training. Infiltration and exfiltration."

"If you had to do some hairy climbing, I bet you'd have no energy for a workout after that," Lee protested.

"But that's just the point, dear Nancy Drew, if you were combat ready, then you'd have energy to spare," Jake said.

Lee did not exactly like it when the boys called her Nancy Drew. She did not remember anymore from

where it had begun. Maybe because of her reddish hair, or because they were explorers, which roughly resembled being an amateur detective and having adventures.

“Yeah, you'd feel powerful enough to take on ninjas. Imagine, if the prison just appeared empty, but then out of nowhere space ninjas with jetpacks would descend. Man, that'd be fucking epic!”

“Let's train already and forget ninjas for a while,” Lee said. Sometimes Randy just went way overboard with “epic” things. Possibly it had something to do with listening to far too much DragonForce and spending an inordinate amount of time on the site tvtropes.org.

And so they went into the storage room and worked out.

Three work sets of each move, maximum reps. Perhaps after a week or two it was time to progress to the next harder variations, but there was still plenty of hard work left until they could even dream of the master step.

The sound of the digital alarm clock beeping woke up Lothar in his office. Finally he had managed to submerge himself in the spreadsheets far too well, and had almost forgotten his unofficial but far more valuable line of research.

The bun pudding! It had unquestionably reached the saturation point, and it was time to check if it would react to the audio signal favorably.

It had been pure coincidence that the significance of that particular series of harmonic overtones had been found. It had originated from a pan flute tune that Purexo restaurants often played as background music. When the melody had risen to its highest note, Lothar had observed the pudding fracturing and the visual

phenomenon when peering through the cracks. But as soon as the note faded away, also the phenomenon disappeared.

Fortunately he had been quick to figure out the connection to the sound, and had synthesized a matching signal using a tone generator program on his workstation. Because the generated sound was more pure and focused, the effect had also been observed as more pronounced. Lothar had played the sound several times, and it never failed, until the pudding finally cooled down and hardened so much, that even increasing the volume did not help.

The next days he had agitatedly tried to replicate the exact parameters of that particular bun pudding sample, but so far without result. But this time everything should be as similar as it could be. Color, structure, tensile strength, initial temperature – everything should match.

Lothar extinguished the gas burner, and placed the glass container on his work desk, near to the loudspeaker. It was almost a great travesty to be summoning such a phenomenon of cosmic importance using a pair of cheap Logitech multimedia speakers. Preferably he should have been equipped with a set of hifi speakers with as flat frequency response as possible, or alternatively, good quality studio near-field monitors – NO BEHRINGER – but if it had worked last time, then fine.

He dared to pre-loosen the pudding a little using a tea spoon, like last time, and then, hand visibly shaking, he guided the mouse cursor on the media player's "Play" button and left-clicked.

4.

Kim Thorsen was pissed off. In fact on this particular day this state of mind had taken an almost dangerous stranglehold on her. There were many reasons to be pissed off: for example having to go in again to the Purexo dessert research laboratory to guard it through the night. Nothing ever happened during her shift: no one had ever been stupid enough to try to break and enter.

A decommissioned prison in the middle of nothing, used now for the study of “challenging desserts” – truly insane! But because they paid Kim rather well, and she was usually not required to come into contact with anyone, she had kept the job. At least so far.

The contract required naturally full non-disclosure of anything that went on at the facility. It was standard for any company, of course, but still bullshit. Kim remembered being exposed to Purexo desserts at least a few times, and there was nothing revolutionary about them. They tasted dull (or even bad) and synthetic, but in a way it was fitting: they reminded her of the world and life in general.

Her company car was another reason for disgust. A Fiat Nuova 500, it resembled more a twisted cross-

breed of a beetle and a vacuum cleaner, than an actual automobile. The driver's seat had to be kept in the extreme rear position just that she could fit her feet inside. But doing that, the steering wheel was left disappointingly far. Luckily the car was black at least, so it supported the usual gloominess of Kim's mind.

Had it been red or pink – Satan forbid – it would have been completely intolerable.

A few days ago an unusual noise had manifested itself while driving, usually while either accelerating or braking. In the distant past Kim had done do-it-yourself repairs, but for a company car she did not bother, and it probably would not have been allowed by the corporate policy. According to Purexo standards it should be brought to the dealer's service, and in the meanwhile she suspected to get some utterly dismal replacement. In any case the noise disturbed her imagination, as the thought of being stranded alone with swamp all around, in the middle of the night, was not pleasing in the least.

Kim had planned to visit Viktor before the beginning of her shift, but now she was too pissed off to even consider that. For if the guy was performing some ritual again, or was getting all worked up about the eleven heads of the chaos dragon, Kim might not be responsible of her actions as rage boiled over. Therefore she had to think of something else to do in the meanwhile. Maybe she would just drive around aimlessly.

Now that Kim sunk deeper into her state of aggravation, she found herself pondering Viktor's music taste and how inordinately much it annoyed her. Or not the music itself, for Kim did not care what shit anyone and everyone listened to, but rather how by changing his taste Viktor sought to bring an air of superiority and

sophistication. He should just have listened to that damn black metal if that's what he felt most at home with!

Kim herself appreciated funeral doom metal, its oppressive feeling of not moving forward, and the sludgy soundscapes (especially if the recording was of bad quality to begin with or contained mp3 compression artifacts.) Thergothon was perhaps her favourite band.

Her secret fantasy was to start her own or join a doom band that played the heaviest and most misanthropic music imaginable. She could play either guitar or bass, or perhaps even do the grunting, if there was no other suitable vocalist. She had never practiced playing seriously beyond the most basic power chords, but because of the slow pace of the music dedication would in any case be more important than technical prowess.

On the other hand it would be weakness to practice anything with too much dedication, Kim pondered. If one lived as minimalistically, ascetically and misanthropically as possible, maybe then one could achieve some kind of an enlightenment.

However, enlightenment felt more like something Viktor would care about. Kim did not see herself as very much of a spiritual person. Rather she would not have seen herself as a person at all. In the end people were animals. Or machines.

At times she just wanted her head to be devoid of all thoughts. Furious sex helped somewhat – this was one reason to tolerate Viktor – but only for a moment. Kim pondered if by using for example electro-convulsive therapy it would be possible to purge her thoughts for good. But she did not want to lose her mental capacity, especially when it came to feeling hatred for human-

kind. The dilemma was difficult: she did not mostly want to think, but wanted to retain the sharpness of her mind and the hate smoldering within.

Lothar held his breath. The flute-like upper harmonics were pouring out of the speakers loud and keening; so loud that he could imagine the table (and the bun pudding) shaking. Luckily the floor should be devoid of others by now.

It was absurd to care what others thought, when in the process of opening a dimensional gate, he reminded himself. At this moment the only right way of thinking was along the lines of Pinhead from the movie Hell-raiser: "Do I look like someone who cares what God thinks?"

And just like the Lament Configuration cube rearranged itself and opened a pathway to Hell, the pudding also began to reshape.

This time the effect was much more pronounced.

It was much more than Lothar could ever have hoped for.

Not only did the pudding fracture and crack, but it practically rearranged itself to the edges of the container. And the empty space left in between certainly did not show the glass and the table, but –

It showed a brooding, oppressive gray mass, rotating slowly as if was being stirred.

Lothar had to see more. What was this all about? He had expected to see the vastness of space and some towers beyond the stars again.

Carefully he leaned closer.

Suddenly he felt like detaching from his body. The lurch was so fast that he felt almost nauseous, and was afraid he would lose his balance and knock the bun

pudding off the table. The eye of his mind – if such a thing even existed – kept turning and zooming in on that gray mass.

Then his field of view shifted and he saw the space.

The gray mass was being stirred in absolutely enormous vats, whose shape resembled the cooling towers of a nuclear power plant. The vats hung suspended above nothingness, in the middle of the great blackness of the universe. No machinery or beings could be seen; the mass appeared to be moving spontaneously.

Lothar did not know if it was thought transference or some other form of wordless communication, but suddenly he was certain of two things:

One: the gray mass was a form of dessert.

Two: it consisted of the soul essence of some life forms. Which life forms, he could not precisely know.

The gray soul jelly – that was the name he gave to it – filled all of his thoughts with an enormous feeling of hopelessness. It was as if he could have sensed the combined anguish of all the souls trapped in the gray mass, being slowly stirred and mixed.

This was almost too much for him.

Even though he was a scientist, who took an objective approach to everything. And had succeeded in everything in his life up to this point.

The shine of distant stars and nebulas lit up this odd dessert factory. Almost hypnotized, Lothar watched the slow rotational movement of the gray mass.

Then, gradually, he became aware of a change.

The light was dimming. A huge shadow was falling over the vats.

And this was certainly too much for him! Suddenly Lothar knew he was truly scared. He was certain that should that shadow catch him, his soul would be

forcibly separated from his body, and be trapped in that vat.

Now he would have to wake up from this disgusting hypnosis, and fast.

He focused all of his mental willpower and succeeded in detaching himself from the vision. The sound signal would have to be stopped without delay. Lothar clicked the "Stop" button on the media player.

Nothing happened. At this very moment Windows had decided that it did not have to react to user input.

Lothar was ready to scream in pure terror. He glanced quickly to the pudding container, and for sure the vat, the endless space, and the shadow closing in were still there.

But the solution was surprisingly easy.

He pushed the multimedia speaker's power button.

For one hundredth of a second he imagined that nothing still happened. That the malevolent shadow from beyond the pudding gate was somehow still feeding power to the speakers, so that they would remain on and Lothar could be sucked to the other side.

But finally the green power led of the speaker started to fade and the sound diminished to nothingness.

The bun pudding returned to its former shape.

The dimensional vision had disappeared.

Lothar realized his heart was doing at least one hundred and fifty beats per minute. He was drenched in sweat.

5.

For the first time after selling his soul to Purexo Lothar was uncertain of how to proceed. The voice of reason told him that the experiments with the bun pudding and the audio signal would absolutely have to cease, and that the twice opened gate was to be forgotten like a bad dream. Without doubt there would be more acceptable forms of career progress, and the optimization of desserts would provide new challenges, if not endlessly, then at least until he reached the age of pension.

But to reach this point Lothar had always pushed himself to the limit, with a passion bordering on obsession. If he would back off now, there would be no passion at all. He could go on and continue his existence like a living corpse.

It did not feel like a much better fate than slowly drifting along with the rest of the gray mass, in the large vat beyond the stars.

And it was then Lothar made his decision.

He would have to go on until the end, even if it would result in becoming a captive of the vat, or in the dimensions merging and transdimensional horrors invading.

He absolutely had to cross the dimensional border

himself. This decision made everything that was to come much easier. The fear gave way to almost a lunatic form of confidence.

Lothar remembered, when as a small boy he had been reluctant to mix chocolate sauce and fruit salad. He had thought that the taste of the fruits would be ruined by the chocolate. And it actually did, but already back then he understood that the challenge of desserts was an inevitability. There would always be a surprise that would completely shuffle the deck, and shock one's sense of taste – or smell. This was a surprisingly profound analogue that could be applied to almost any walk of life. And when he started out at Purexo, it was perplexing to find out that the company policy matched quite exactly with that sentiment.

But now Lothar did not necessarily imagine that Purexo would server earthly desserts to the non-earthly beings.

No, the whole setup would be turned upside down.

The gray jelly should become a part of Earth's menus.

Lothar felt almost amused at his quick change of heart. He remembered the feeling of hopelessness that gazing at the rotating mass had brought upon him. But that exactly was the precise point: this was the next evolutionary step in Purexo's history. If an average student or county, state or government official felt a slight unease after gulping down a portion of orange rice or bun pudding, the soul jelly would be the same experience raised to the fourth power. Or to the six hundred sixty sixth, actually.

But this demanded remarkable preparations. It was not at all certain, that a human being could actually survive on the other side of the gate. If there was no air at

all, a space suit would be needed. Moving around could pose a problem. And perhaps self-defense was necessary as well. Would the facility's security crew have it in them to be his commando unit?

God damn, Lothar thought. Gordon Freeman had an answer for all of this, as he traveled to the Xen border world during the final part of Half-Life. The HEV suit, the long jump module, the crowbar, and a selection of weapons from the MP5 machine gun to the tau cannon, using Uranium-235 as its fuel.

Such a shame that Gordon Freeman was a fictional character, and Xen was a fictional world.

But the realm beyond the pudding gate was absolutely real.

And that brought an entirely another matter to his mind: also the gate itself was a problem. If he was to bring a whole team with him, it would have to be expanded. An extremely large amount of bun pudding would have to be produced, and it would be most convenient to have the gate in an upright position.

There certainly were a lot of challenges, Lothar thought. But the pleasure of solving them would be directly proportional to the level of challenge. Just as wolfing down a dessert brought the greater level of enjoyment, the more challenging it had been. Or contrariwise: a DNF (did not finish) situation felt more bitter the closer to the end it happened.

Another challenge would be how Klaus-Marius would relate to all of this. Maybe not well at all. He might start complaining about missing or insufficient cost-benefit analysis, or the neglect of real work. Well, perhaps Lothar should just walk him through the gate first and ask any questions later.

Viktor had to admit that he was disappointed of Kim

not showing up tonight, but instead going straight to work. Well, he could get pissed all by himself just as well.

His demons had considered different approaches and had come to the conclusion, that rather than trying to sweet-talk and extract information, it would be much more straightforward to just follow Kim to her workplace. Technically it would be easy: Viktor possessed a Yamaha 600 cc motorcycle, which he had dubbed the Great Beast (To Mega Therion) and with it tailing Kim's little Fiat would not pose any difficulty. If necessary, the bike's head lights could be switched off, as Viktor had ordered night-vision goggles from an online shop one year back. They had a forehead strap which made them stay firmly in place.

In fact Viktor had a slightly childish fantasy, that when Azerate's day finally came, he would ride the Great Beast atop the crest of the black wind, all the way to the stars, where his soul would melt and become a part of the Chaos (he could imagine a Judas Priest song playing in the background, even if the band was far from Anti-Cosmicism, and Viktor's current preference for music.)

The plan carried the risk, that Kim would certainly be supremely indignant – or plain pissed off – should he find out that Viktor had followed him. Hundred percent stealth was therefore the order of the day, in addition to successfully performing the ritual. Viktor could not know how many additional guards would be at the site. Probably not much. He played with the thought of performing an Anti-Cosmic mind trick on an unsuspecting guard, making it appear as if he had never been there. But he knew he was necessarily not yet on that level of Black Arts.

To celebrate the plan Viktor poured himself another glass of wine, switched his laptop's psychedelic screen saver over to his 50-inch LCD television, and turned the music louder.

6.

At six AM, at the end of her shift, Kim walked through the parking lot toward her Fiat. Like countless nights before, it had been one of absolute dullness and inaction. Nothing happened there at nighttime.

Well, nothing except an odd, high pitched flute-like sound she had heard emanating from the second-lowest laboratory floor. It probably was that weirdo, Lothar, who she had met on some occasions. Some other places she had been in insisted that employees always leave before the alarms come on. But Purexo apparently did not. Or possibly that weirdo was so high-level that any rules did not apply to him.

But perhaps it was just the inaction that had actually managed to relax her: Kim had to admit she was not as pissed off as yesterday.

“Hey,” Kim heard a voice call just as she was about to enter the car.

She turned around, hand on the pepper spray gun. But she had already recognized the voice. Now all disgust and agitation came back with revenge.

Sure as hell it was Lothar, the weird scientist. He was tall and wiry, almost malnourished looking, and his continuously darting eyes resembled a madman on

speed.

“What?” Kim grunted roughly.

“Would you be interested in some extra pay? Subject to full and strict confidentiality, of course.”

“Is this some kind of a test? No, I’m not going to take money illegally.”

“You can be assured I’m fully authorized to renegotiate your contract, and to raise your salary for the duration of this extra project, and even after its termination, should you accept. It would technically be a hazard bonus.”

“Is that a threat? Are you also authorized to terminate it, should I refuse to accept?”

“Don’t be so cynical. I’m offering you a chance to do something for the benefit of all mankind. The research I – we – are doing – is very cutting edge, and requires some extra security.”

“No, I’m not interested.” Kim opened the driver’s door and sat inside. “I think I already work hard enough. Goodbye.”

“Think about it. If you are at all familiar with the video game Half-Life, you could, in regard to this special project, think of me as Gordon Freeman. You would then be ... Barney.”

Kim was in fact familiar with the game, or at least with the concept of whacking everything with a crowbar. Well, at least the scientist had not compared her to Alyx, Gordon’s (weak) female sidekick in the sequel, which would have been a severe insult.

But did this mean the scientist was about to unleash some kind of scientific destruction in the bowels of this facility? Well, even if so, Kim did not feel she had any extra obligation to the safety of him or any other staff member. Or even the safety of humankind in general.

Only just what the work contract stated, which was to guard the premises against any unlawful intrusion. If shit really hit the fan, she would only tend to her own survival.

Kim started the car and drove away, leaving the scientist standing in the middle of the parking lot, looking severely disappointed. As she proceeded down the dead-straight empty road leading away from the prison, marshland on both sides, she revved the engine heavily, venting her rage.

A lecture on advanced differential equations at eight o'clock Thursday morning was not an especially pleasing combination. In fact it was gruesomely tortuous. But in this period this course was the only that all of the three shared. Therefore it was the only reasonable possibility for the further development of war plans.

Lee majored in maths, so to her the material did not (at least not so far) present overwhelming problems. Jake's and Randy's major was physics, though, and at least Jake knew to be struggling at his very limit of understanding. Randy did not seem to fare any better. This course was however vital for preparing them for the brutal and feared boss fight coming up next period: quantum mechanics. Legend told that when you took that class, you had better know how to integrate and derive by heart, as those skills were assumed to be known. No mercy would be given.

Jake knew that if the distress level rose to the multi-maximum, they could ask Lee for remedial instruction, but that would no doubt come with a heavy price: the promise to not ever again call her by the name of Nancy Drew.

Randy lifted his eyes off the course notes, to which

he had been copying the solution to a devious partial differential equation, probably not understanding even half of it.

"I looked into things a bit," he said. "I might know a place where we could train with true HC attitude."

"So, what is it?" Jake asked.

"Black Meadow Correctional. It was closed three years ago. The place's not very far from here, in the middle of a swamp though. But we could borrow my big brother's pickup."

Jake thought for a bit. The idea had originally been his, but Randy had been even crazier and started to think how to make it reality. Now Jake was not sure any more, if infiltrating a decommissioned penitentiary and performing a Convict Conditioning workout there was actually as wise idea at all. An exploration, or even an adventure, it certainly would be.

"There's just the problem that we can't get the truck until Monday. If we go in early, we might get back while it's still light. And bro needs the truck again on Tuesday."

This would mean skipping classes, including the other differential equations lecture. But there was no compulsory attendance, so it would not be a big deal. They could catch up later.

However, an uneasy thought came to Jake: what if the prison would not be so deserted at all? There might be some unofficial, rather unsavory occupants. But it was kind of a no-win situation: they'd be entering an unfamiliar place miles from civilization, so either they would be going in at daylight when they would be easily spotted in advance, or if they waited until dark, moving around would just become slower and more dangerous, while they might still bump into anyone waiting

out there. But Jake did not want to voice these concerns. He did not want to sound like a chicken.

“Well, it's good to have time for research. I'll check the place on Google Maps,” Lee said.

Surprising, Jake thought. No hesitation or protest in her voice either. But maybe she was just being coldly analytical first, and then she might condemn the whole expedition when she had the hard facts.

“Remember, Google is Illuminati. You don't know what misinformation they feed you,” Randy laughed.

“Yeah, yeah. But Illuminati is everywhere. You can be sure 4chan and tvtropes.org are just as infiltrated,” Lee replied. “Not to even speak of wikipedia.”

“What, you mean they can train mind-controlled slaves not just as assassins and pop stars, but also as proper forum geeks – like us – who are so convincing that no-one finds out?” Randy asked in disbelief.

“Yeah, you better believe it. Any time there's a major new meme, you can be sure some dirty old men sitting in a secret mansion made it up, while petting their white cats and listening to Imperial March blaring from some big and expensive speakers.”

“Now you're fucking with me.”

It was not usual for Lothar to be pissed off, but now he was. And quite rightfully! It would be a great honor to guard the security and safety of the pudding gate / soul jelly expedition, and no-one should dare to reject it!

Fuck it, Lothar thought. He would do it all by himself if necessary.

He walked back inside the complex. He really needed some sleep, but right now he was so agitated that it was better to just start the second work day in a row early. Then he could also get home early, and perhaps then he

would sleep.

Or perhaps he would ponder the problem of the full-scale pudding gate for yet another night, then work yet another day. It could become a maddening circle with no escape.

Lothar went to the locker room to refresh himself with a warm shower. As he got out, his cellphone rang.

It was Klaus-Marius. Certainly he would be asking about the report. Fuck him as well.

“Hello, Lothar. Did I wake you up?”

“No, I'm already at the complex.”

“Everything OK? Your voice sounds a little tired. I just returned from the North Korea trip. The generals were quite receptive.”

Klaus-Marius had been in a string of meetings with the top brass of the North Korean army, to arrange for Purexo to provide food services in several of their bases. For a Western company, to win their trust was a hugely unusual achievement. Of course the workers would be locals, and likely they would be tremendously exploited and overworked. Purexo would just bring its famous scientific efficiency to the process, and that had allowed them to score so well in the bidding.

“Yeah, you should get the report today in email.”

“Excellent.”

Lothar was not sure if he had made a mistake by making such a promise. But it was a deliberate strategy to give himself extra motivation by the way of a self-imposed deadline, more strict than what Klaus-Marius originally expected. And after all, if and when the god-damned report would be finished, then Lothar could – unless something unexpected came up – transfer his attention fully to the pudding gate project. The earlier he started, the better.

“By the way, I’ll be visiting the lab on Monday. Nothing special, just want to personally check on how you all are doing,” Klaus-Marius said. “Be seeing you.”

Then he hung up.

Lothar now knew he had yet another deadline. The gate would have to be fully operational by Monday. Then he’d walk Klaus-Marius right through it, space suit or not!

The task would not be easy. The time limit was exceedingly strict. To produce a perfect, reactive sample of bun pudding in the quantity needed would test his skills to the maximum. And he was not sure if his co-workers were up to the task of helping him, or if they could be trusted well enough. He would have to fabricate a very inventive lie of why such a quantity was needed, unless he wanted to induct everyone of them to the secret of the pudding gate.

That would of course come later, but first everything had to work!

If worst came to worst, he would have to fire up the prison kitchen’s large capacity ovens all by himself. He cursed his lack of foresight, for they had been unused for three years, ever since the last convict had been moved elsewhere. The actual dessert research never needed large production capability.

The disused kitchen equipment could have started to rust, or otherwise malfunction in any manner imaginable. A full decontamination procedure would have to be performed in any case.

Lothar knew he just had to test everything well in advance. And even with perfectly functioning equipment, the process would be very delicate. Though he was not self-destructive usually, he could well imagine severely cutting himself upon finding to have produced

a ton of inert bun pudding, a sample that would not open any dimension gate ever.

To the matter of protection beyond the gate, he would procure some deep sea diving equipment, with pressurized and heated dry suits. In the best case they might even turn out unnecessary: he could try with something inanimate at first, like the robot the security division had for bomb defusing (never needed for an actual crisis so far) then perhaps something living, like the lab rats they used to test the most challenging dessert varieties before human consumption.

He walked the empty corridors to his office and began the final stretch of completing the report. His conclusion would state that the most challenging desserts would have to be served very randomly, to maximize the anxiety and expectation of the workers, and thusly to also maximize their work throughput, as a clear correlation between the two variables had manifested in the results.

(Purexo did not of course care of anyone's work performance except their own, but maintaining such illusion would be good for reputation.)

Previously, for example at one Finnish restaurant there had been a regular schedule of bun pudding once in a month, and orange rice every four months. But that had to change! The workers should be led to believe that each time could be the last, which worked both ways: both the fans and the haters of the desserts would be on their toes.

This time the report seemed to be proceeding exceedingly well. He estimated to be ready before noon. Then: prison kitchen inspection.

7.

Upon arriving at her small and primitive flat, Kim rolled the heavy black curtain down to keep the morning sun out, and went to sleep.

Sleep would not come immediately, but when it did, Kim found herself in the middle of a severely messed up dream. Though she also was intrigued by it and did not want to wake up.

In the dream, she had been experimented upon and had one of her legs and one of her arms replaced with metal prostheses. This was done against her will by a group of scientists who needed someone to stop their malevolent army of robots, which they had created to ensure mankind's continued survival. Or actually the survival of mankind's ideas – the robots had AI resembling human brain activity and would go on to colonize other planets long after Earth became un-sustainable for life.

Something had gone wrong with the robots, and they, with orders from the central intelligence, the so-called Construct, had started to build an underground tunnel network. At the very bottom, near the core of the Earth, they were building a huge black mechanical worm, Jörmungandr, which would rise, once completed,

and breath its poison to the air, killing all organic life.

The metal limbs were given to her in order to enhance her probability for survival. Later, before actually infiltrating the tunnel system, she would also be given mechanical lungs so that she could breath the hot and sulfuric air as she proceeded deeper below.

Along with her on the quest to reach and stop Jörmungandr she had a band of misfits, from a peculiar organization "Skeptics Apocalypse" which seeked to educate people on the possible forms the end of the world might take, and who were now trying to prevent it as well.

To make the dream more messed up, the final surviving rebel scientist, who also had operated on her, resembled Lothar a lot. And the head of the Skeptics was clearly Viktor, though this time he appeared to have no Anti-Cosmic beliefs.

The dream played out like a typical Bruckheimer / Bay production, of which Kim had seen ashamingly many, or alternatively like an action-adventure video game. She would get further upgrades along the way, while her allies kept dying one by one.

Damnably the dream was still unconcluded when she woke up. She never got to see Jörmungandr. The romantic side-plot with Viktor (thankfully it was nothing like that in real life) was unfinished as well. Kim did not feel at all rested; she had only slept five hours. But trying to get further rest would likely be futile, so she decided to just get up instead.

The damned report was finally done and dusted, and sent off to Klaus-Marius. It was not exactly a piece of high art, or even particularly solid and well-argued science, but it certainly should be convincing

enough for a bean-counter like him.

It was a while since Lothar had actually been in the prison proper (there was now an another entrance which he always used), and ascending the steel spiral staircase to the kitchen had raised some trepidation in him. But then, what was there to be anxious of?

The prison was as empty as it could be, and though there was an actual death row section and the execution chamber built, they had never been used, so even if he believed in the more conventional super-natural (he did not) there should not be any vengeful prisoner ghosts present.

Except perhaps those who had been lost in the caves. But those poor souls should have haunted the below-ground labs, and no poltergeist activity, or even unexpected changes of room temperature had ever been reported. Not even by the most mouse-like and superstitious assistants!

No, anything supernatural in this prison would come from beyond the gate. And the gate would be firmly commanded by Lothar's upper harmonic sound frequencies.

Lothar's fears had proven to be true, at least to some respect: the kitchen was not fully operable. One of the ovens was utterly dead: perhaps just a wire had broken or the thermostat was malfunctioning. But in any case investigations would be needed. Investigations which he did not have time for!

In the end he decided to enlist the lab assistants Laszlo and Karla to help getting the equipment operational. He told them a quick lie about needing to test the production of the latest desserts also in the most adverse conditions imaginable, starting from the re-

pairs. It seemed they bought it.

He could trust them with the work, after all a prison kitchen did not exactly compare to a nuclear reactor or even a full-blown chemistry lab in its level of sophistication. They would be able to do the de-contamination just fine as well.

Of course, in the end he would have to make several test runs to see how the equipment would behave, and how the parameters from small-scale production would have to be adjusted. He would need precise diagrams on how the big ovens' temperature varied with time, with various loads. Only then he could hope to prepare the pudding successfully for opening a large version of the gate.

But that was still in the future. In the meanwhile he would have to gather something very essential. Namely, the raw materials for the bun pudding. Buns, flour, butter, milk, sugar, yeast and eggs would be needed in exceedingly large quantities. Not just for the final production run, but also all the iteration and testing. He would need to take at least the company van to town. A medium-size truck, one that did not need an actual commercial driver's license would have been much preferable, but regrettably the lab did not have one. He put its acquisition on a mental checklist.

If time (and space) permitted, he would also acquire the diving gear on the same trip to town.

It was close to five PM when Lothar returned to the facility. The van was absolutely packed with pudding materials, and he did not dare to drive especially fast. There certainly had been no hope to fit any diving gear in the back. That would have to wait until tomorrow.

For now he left the raw materials inside the vehicle

and hurried instead directly to the kitchen.

"Seems you took your time as well. But it should be all ready now," Karla greeted him.

Lothar ignored the slight tone of insubordination and sarcasm. For now.

"Excellent. The decontamination?"

"That too."

"A circuit board had rusted," Laszlo explained. "I bypassed it. All ovens heat properly now."

A circuit board? Well, it made sense that modern prison kitchen equipment would be complex, and fragile. They would be made to last just beyond the warranty period, and then a heavy price for further service would be extracted. But what Laszlo had said...

"Bypassed? Can I trust it to operate properly?" Lothar demanded with sudden anger.

"Relax. There's still an old-school thermostat. The circuit was just for timed shutdown or such. But manually it works just fine."

Lothar nodded reluctantly, as it was likely a proper spare part could not be acquired in time. He would just double-check that particular oven with extra fascist precision. If it exhibited even the slightest fluctuation compared to the rest, he would make Laszlo produce its quota of the whole pudding volume during night, while he rested.

No.

Shit.

In this case there could be no such administrative punishment. This was all the way up to "God clearance" on the importance scale, and the actual production could never, ever, ever be left to the assistants.

Lothar felt deeply shamed for such mental error, though he had at least stopped before actually saying it

out loud. Karla and Laszlo had done their best, and the rest would be a hundred percent up to him. He dismissed them.

Then, he fetched his laptop – not as powerful as his main workstation, but it would do – to the kitchen and prepared for measuring the temperature curves. In theory he could still have used the assistants for that too, but it would no doubt have raised their deeper suspicions. After all no Purexo chef was ever required to actually measure or calibrate their own kitchen equipment, even though the recipes themselves were exact and grueling.

It was well after dark when the process had been repeated for all the ovens. Now Lothar had yet another difficult decision to make: whether to rest now, or to head directly into the first test run.

Both alternatives were bad.

Either he wasted valuable time, or possibly set himself up for bitter failure due to working while too exhausted and making some elementary, unforgivable error.

Of course most of his most brilliant work had been made on the edge between sleep and reality. And the first successful, accidental pudding gate test had transpired while he had been up for over two consecutive days and nights.

But still, the potential for error was too high.

Even gods needed to sleep.

He called it a day.

Just before he turned to leave, he remembered the ingredients that had been in the van all evening. The butter, milk and eggs would not be actually spoiled, but still outside the controlled parameter range for the de-

manding work that was to come. They could not be fully trusted anymore.

He filled his lungs with air, and then let out a mighty scream, which reverberated in the empty kitchen.

“FUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUU...”

8.

Friday morning. Lothar had been so pissed off and enraged by a simple rookie mistake that his sleep had been entirely unfruitful. By forcing himself to go home he only had pissed himself off more; that was a kind of a double punishment.

But now was the time to correct the mistake.

At seven thirty he was already driving to the city, ready to get yet another load of butter, milk and eggs. Against company regulations, he had taken the van home so that he could leave on his acquisition spree without taking a detour at the laboratory first. his But first, absolutely the diving gear first.

Jake, Lee and Randy met quickly before class.

"I think there's activity at the prison," Lee said. "The Google satellite image showed vehicles going in and out."

"Why? It makes no sense." Jake stated in response.

"I think I have a theory."

"The Illuminati?" Randy questioned.

"No. Something far more concrete, and sinister too, I'd say. Remember who provides the campus food? And who has also invested in private prison business?"

“Purexo?”

“You got it. I think they're still doing something there, though I didn't find anything official.”

“Fuck them. We should just have Longcat with us. She'd clear a path for us with her eye lasers,” Randy said.

“Isn't it a he?” Jake asked, though the accuracy of memes did not usually concern him particularly. “And that wouldn't exactly be urban exploration then. More like destruction.”

“Fuck exploration.”

Randy was clearly in his epic DragonForce destruction mode, and any further reasoning with him would be futile. But the interesting part would now be, would Lee suggest that they abort the expedition?

“So, what do you suggest?” Jake asked.

“Well, there might be some severe human rights violation going on in there. Perhaps experimentation with forgotten prisoners. Or maybe it's a secret rendition station for the military. Torture outside the limits of Geneva Convention. Guys, I think it may end up as something much more than exploration and Convict Conditioning.”

Ah, and there it was. Lee was already imagining they would actually make a difference. Change the world for the better. But if that belief allowed her to go on and not abort the mission, then fine!

Viktor was up unusually early. Immediately, he consulted the Black Flame, but it refused to give him a solid answer. His question: had he now irrevocably spoiled his chances for performing the ritual? He and Kim had actually met last night, but he had been drinking absinthe heavily both before and during, to such degree

that he had not felt like riding the Great Beast to tail Kim. And the Anti-Cosmic forces had not been aligned right in any case.

Well, at least the absinthe – of the Nemesinthe brand – had been excellent, and potent, at 60 percent alcohol per volume.

For a split-second he imagined himself as Nemesis, the Greek spirit of retribution. But then, the Greek had been quite extensively following the Demiurge's ordered path. Therefore, fuck them and their sheep-like mythology!

After a while his Anti-Cosmic optimism returned. Even if the Black Flame was silent, there would certainly be another chance. But next time he should abstain strictly from any alcohol, until his mission was completed and the location of Kim's workplace was known to him. After that, he would be able to return to it as many times as he wanted, until the anticocosmos was perfectly aligned and the ritual could not possibly fail.

Klaus-Marius felt a strong sense of something not being quite right. Lothar had sounded tired, yet he had produced the document rather quickly. The document had superficially been all right, yet contained several spelling mistakes and even lapses of logic, something completely out of the ordinary for Lothar. From all of this Klaus-Marius deduced that the head scientist was working on a second, personal project.

He just hoped it had nothing to do with –

No, it did not even bear thinking about. Klaus-Marius cursed the fact that he could not travel to the laboratory immediately and straighten Lothar out. But in the meanwhile he had a meeting with men who convened

once or twice each year in isolated mansions around the world – never the same place twice in a row – while stroking their white cats. In addition to mansions, some of the men actually owned their own castles complete with medieval torture chambers, which at times were augmented with more modern features, like a microwave transmitter that boiled you inside out. Obviously such a meeting could not be canceled on a moment's notice. That might even be the last mistake Klaus-Marius would ever do.

At last everything was fucking right!

The decontaminated high-volume ovens, their temperature plots, the fucking buns, wheat, butter, milk, yeast and even the fucking eggs. Not to speak of the god-damned pressurized dry suits, which had cost a fortune (and it even had been a damned good luck that they had been in stock, because ordering them could have taken weeks.)

Lothar knew he was boiling with hate. All the preparation, and the simple mistakes had already taken him to the limit, even though he had not even started the first high-volume test run. If even one more thing went wrong, he would be ready to scream bloody gore. To kill, kill, kill and kill without remorse. To paint the prison kitchen and the downstairs laboratory walls red with the assistants' blood and entrails. Even though they were (mostly) innocent.

He also knew he was not exactly himself. He should have taken a step back and let things cool off. But there was no time for that. Instead, now if ever was time to begin the first production run.

He confessed to feeling absolute trepidation. Producing reactive bun pudding even in a small scale had been difficult enough. To produce it in such large quantity,

with no tolerance for error, was a Herculean task. No, not just Herculean. Fucking godlike!

He had always succeeded in everything in his life so far. Living up to that was about to get very, very hard.

It usually took Jack Bauer 24 hours to save the world. In 24 hours Lothar had achieved nothing. Absolutely nothing! The only bright side was that now it was Saturday, and except for the guard manning the security center, he was alone in the facility. During the early hours the night guard Kim had happened to hear his scream and came to check it out, and Lothar had angrily dismissed her. If there was no working bun pudding, there would also be no need for a commando unit, and no need for her!

Meanwhile the hours had merged into one absolute, continuous nightmare, one where he always prepared the ingredients, fired up the oven, let the temperature saturate, then cool off, scooped up a sample, blasted away with the harmonic overtones at ear-bleeding volume –

And still nothing.

“FUUUUUUUUUUU!” he screamed. The sound echoed back at him for a long time from the large concrete-walled room.

“FUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUU!”

Well, there was still plenty of hours remaining until Monday and Klaus-Marius visiting.

Plenty of more times to fire the ovens up.

And certainly there was plenty of the raw materials remaining. Those were perhaps the only positive sides.

Lee had a strange dream. In it she indeed was Nancy Drew. But Nancy Drew's usual friends were nowhere to

be seen. She was alone, and examining the abandoned prison, which she absolutely knew to be infested with Purexo's evil minions (though the only wrong they had ever done to her had been to feed her some very questionable-quality campus food.)

She was armed with only the signature magnifying glass, and a flashlight.

Then a shadow appeared out of the corner of her view. It was somehow deeply wrong, deeply distorted, sucking out all the light around it. There was a quick-time event, press X then O, but she missed it. The shadow proceeded to strangle her to death.

She woke up with a scream. It probably had woken up the entire floor of the dorm. This also was wrong. She never screamed no matter how bad the nightmare was. She also strictly boycotted video games with quick-time events. Maybe that was why she had seen the nightmare, and screamed.

She also realized that she had overslept and missed the class. A few more seconds later she realized that it was Saturday and there were no classes.

It was unusual to know there were two full days ahead with nothing to do. Kim was uncomfortable with that. Maybe now was the time to buy a guitar, or a bass guitar, and start practicing and writing absolute, frighteningly intense doom metal. And looking for band members.

But no, to give in to that impulse was weak. Kim wanted to feel pure and spartan. She fired up her minimalistic netbook and went to watch disgusting live-leak.org videos. This was something she definitely had picked up from Viktor. But apparently to Viktor that was a way to strengthen the black spirit. To Kim it was

nothing but a way to pass time. And the videos did not even exactly disgust her. She was too numb for that.

Randy was getting mighty excited of Monday already. It was getting so intense he could hardly stay in place. He was shaking all over.

He confessed he did not give much credence to Lee's theories of a rendition station. She had been influenced too much by liberal brainwashing. Most probably the Google map images with vehicles were actually from years back, when the prison was still operational.

To try to contain his giddiness Randy thought that maybe he should again work with the unsuccessful open source game project he had occasionally participated in. The team was just some random people in cyberspace, not really knowing each other. It would be a kind of a punishment.

The game being written used an unknown – too unknown – game engine called Urho3D. Fuck it! They should have used Unity, CryEngine or UDK, or even fucking Ogre3D for God's sake. At least it had a proven history of several years! Urho3D had been written by one person, and seemed like he was abandoning it – the commits to the source repository were becoming more and more infrequent, and it still lacked major important features. Randy could never understand why the author had dropped deferred rendering, and went with primitive multi-pass forward rendering. All the best engines like Frostbite 2 used deferred rendering.

Then he thought, fuck it again! Instead of punishing himself, he decided to get as pumped up as possible instead. Though that carried the risk of getting over-pumped, and being too exhausted come Monday. But in that case he would be weak, not combat ready. And that

would be a contradiction in itself! Without fear he queued the following directories to his Winamp playlist:

DragonForce – Valley Of The Damned

DragonForce – Sonic Firestorm

DragonForce – Inhuman Rampage

DragonForce – Ultra Beatdown

Lady Gaga – Born This Way

in bun pudding.

At that point he noticed, again, two things:

One: the speakers were still on, transmitting the harmonic overtone signal.

Two: a gate began to form to the wall, showing him the vastness of black space beyond.

At that point he suddenly understood something: it had never been the structure and composition of the bun pudding that was important. It was the proximity of the prison's structures, such as walls.

Yes, suddenly he understood it precisely.

During the first successful experiment, the container had stood on the floor, therefore making a direct connection with only the thin glass surface in between.

During all failed attempts, the bun pudding had rested directly above the gas burner. The iron legs of the stand had been too thin to properly transmit the connection to the prison superstructure.

And then, during the second succeeded attempt, the bun pudding had rested on his desk. A solid connection again.

In retrospect, it was so simple that he cursed deeply. So much time wasted! But now he knew the secret, and therefore none of the wasted time mattered any more. He could summon the gate with any bun pudding sample, as long as it took contact with the prison walls or floors.

But did that mean the prison was cursed, or something?

At this point Lothar did not care. As long as the gate stayed open, it did not matter if there was a curse of an Indian burial ground below the prison, or whatever.

But was it now time to walk through the gate immediately? Lothar was suddenly very excited, but knew he

had to contain himself. He reminded himself of the procedure he had envisioned: first the bomb-defusing robot, then the lab rats.

But before Lothar could think further, he sensed the ambient light level in the whole prison kitchen was slowly diminishing.

The shadow from beyond the stars!

It was entering the kitchen.

Immediately Lothar reached for the speakers' power button, and the sound died out, the ambient light returned to normal, and the pudding gate closed.

Lothar reminded himself that every time the gate was open, no matter for how short time, he was taking his life in his own hands.

Failing to react in time would result in his soul being imprisoned in the gray jelly.

This presented Lothar with an altogether new dilemma: how to harvest the otherworldly dessert quickly enough without being trapped and consumed?

Could he devise a mathematic formula of how much he had time? Would he need to enlist the assistants again as guinea pigs? If their souls got consumed, he would not feel especial sorrow.

Viktor knew now the Anti-Cosmic signs were all aligned right. Azerate was smiling to him from the chaotic realms. Fuck, scratch that. Azerate never smiles. Nothing would fail now. For four hours, he had prepared with diligent and secret rites of the black arts, then Kim had showed up, and as usual they had went quite straight to the sex, and Viktor had certainly felt the Satanic Kundalini flowing. Stronger than ever!

And most important, Viktor had restricted himself. Only one half-glass of red wine. He was sober enough to

ride To Mega Therion.

Now Kim was leaving. Ready to begin her next week at the hidden facility. And this time Viktor would certainly follow. He had switched the batteries for the night vision goggles to fresh ones, just in case.

"See you," Kim said. That was unusually wordy for her. Often she just said nothing or grunted as she left. Viktor waved his hand silently in response.

Now there was just the question of waiting for just the right amount of time. Viktor knew exactly how Kim would accelerate the Fiat onto the street as she left, and he had left the Great Beast in an inconspicuous, but convenient shadowed corner.

He strapped the night vision goggles on. Now he looked like a satanic, Anti-Cosmic commando, though just without an actual weapon!

The nighttime road stretched to infinity, Viktor imagined. In the night side eclipse! The goggles were working as expected. The Great Beast growled in between his legs like an animal with its rage barely in control. Kim's company car stayed at the edge of his vision quite easily, and consistently. She could definitely suspect nothing.

At this moment Viktor imagined the Anti-Cosmic wind taking him all the way up to the realm of Azerate. And he even imagined the hellishly tight double bass drums of Scott Travis, the menacing guitars of Glenn Tipton and K. K. Downing, and the tortured scream of Rob Halford (and perhaps even the subdued and almost inaudible bass of Ian Hill.)

As Viktor found himself playing back Tipton's solo on the song Painkiller note-by-note in his mind, he knew he was going too far, and forced himself to con-

concentrate. A crossroads was coming up. Kim dutifully switched on the turn signal (a clear sign of being the Demiurge's follower) and turned left. Left Hand Path. That presented a perhaps unresolvable dilemma: how could one follow the Demiurge (Right Hand Path) and the Left Hand Path at the same time? Was a true Satanist never allowed to turn right? But now Viktor knew he was just being stupid. He should indeed focus, lest he lose his concentration at a critical moment.

Soon after the turn the forest gave way to some low hills on both sides. This was something new. The hills soon leveled out, and it looked like marshlands now. Kim's workplace was truly in the middle of nowhere.

Lothar did not quite know what to think of the results.

To start with, just getting hold of the bomb defusing robot had been a challenge. He could naturally not have revealed what he exactly needed it for, and Ed, the guard almost permanently manning the security station had not been exactly cooperative.

But Lothar had persevered, at last, by bribing him with some Russian Vodka kept in a locker room cabinet for extreme emergencies. Now they both were bound by a covenant of silence and transgression.

The positive news was, that he had indeed successfully manoeuvred the remote-controlled robot through the gate, then back. Though it looked as if there was nothing but black emptiness beyond, and it would fall through or drift to infinity, it had come back. Its tracks still worked perfectly when it returned onto the solid kitchen floor and Lothar hurriedly shut down the gate.

The negative news was, that he had not learned much by controlling the robot. When it came back, it had not been covered in any otherworldly substance.

There was a camera on the robot – but it was not any good for the light conditions beyond the gate: he had mostly seen noise in the small monitor embedded in the control unit.

And speaking of light – in the kitchen it had certainly started to dim again – the shadow from beyond had once more tried to enter. The robot had only been perhaps twenty seconds on the far side, and the gate itself had been open a little less than a full minute. Was that all the time he had? It was not much for any proper exploration.

He had planned to use the lab rats next. But sending them through the gate would likely offer no additional insight. Instead, next he would have to enter the gate himself.

That could be a self-imposed death sentence.

The valid alternative, which was still available, was of course to wash away all the bun pudding from the kitchen walls with a high-pressure hose, to destroy all of the remaining batch, and to forget the whole experiment had ever transpired. But that at least was unthinkable.

That would be anti-scientific.

That would be admitting failure.

10.

The huge structure emerged from the middle of the green noise. A (funeral) fog had risen over the last ten minutes, and visibility was low. Viktor killed the engine as Kim started to slow down, and at that moment he realized what the structure was. A prison.

But all the lights were out, and it looked completely dead and abandoned. Why would Kim be guarding such a place?

Well, something dead and abandoned could be suitably Anti-Cosmic. Particularly if many convicts had died violently at the prison, then their Chaos energies could have remained there, strengthening the current of Az-erate.

But how to get inside? There was a solid brick wall with barbed wire on top. Kim no doubt had some kind of access card, or an access code, or a camera recognized her. But he would have no such luck.

The steel gate was opening now, and Kim's Fiat was about to enter the courtyard.

Viktor was of course in top, black-spirited condition, so maybe he could close the distance by running, and get inside while the gate was still open.

There was some two hundred metres to the gate. He

might just make it. But what if he would be seen by the gate camera?

Well, he would not care of such details. Getting in was the priority. He left the bike to the side of the road and started his mad dash.

One hundred and fifty...

Damn, the gate was closing now.

One hundred.

Fifty.

Ten metres remaining. The gate was almost shut now.

Almost losing his balance, he squeezed himself through the gap just before the gate closed for good. Anyone watching the camera feed certainly had seen him, but he had nevertheless claimed the first Anti-Cosmic victory: he had reached the courtyard, and there were many deep shadows to hide in.

At the huge concrete main building, Kim stopped her car and got out. At first Viktor was so excited that he did not realize he was completely exposed.

But Kim did not turn around. This probably was very boring routine to her, and so she was not exactly being alert. Viktor used this opportunity to slip into the shadows near the wall.

But how would he get inside? Of course he could search for Azerate's residual energy within the courtyard, but somehow he was certain that to reach fulfillment, he had to get in.

Now Lothar was as prepared as he was going to be. That was not saying much, for in fact he was very close to being scared shitless. His analytical calmness shielded him no more. But still, there was the explorer's curiosity, to reach beyond the pudding gate and experi-

ence what no mortal had ever experienced.

The potentially lethal risks were numerous.

The shadow, being caught or consumed by it.

Lack of oxygen or pressure on the other side.

The gate closing while he was out there, perhaps even due to a stupid reason such as electricity cutting out, or Windows crashing.

Severe time-space distortion when crossing sides, in most extreme form it might turn him inside out.

To ensure that even in panic he would be able to navigate back, he enlarged the gate by plastering almost the entire northern kitchen wall, floor to ceiling, with the pudding. There had never been a continuous, reactive sample that large, so he did not know if it would open up as one big gate, or as several smaller.

Though now there was another problem: while wearing the dry suit gloves it was not exactly easy to press the “play” button. Well, theoretically he could let the audio signal ring out, and the gate open, while he suited up.

But. The shadow.

He might not have time.

Though, when he crossed over, it was possible that the shadow was already waiting. Precisely at the spot where the gate opened and he showed up. It could also be frighteningly omniscient, finding out instantly where he was, even from across its realm. Or maybe the shadow and the realm beyond the gate were the one and the same. If that was the case, then he would not have much hope. There would not be any time limit, or a fair chase where he stood some degree of a chance.

He decided to gear up beforehand. At least the air hose could be connected first, and the compressor fired up.

That matter fixed – the compressor was now dutifully pumping air using three-phase current provided by the heavy socket on the kitchen wall – he practiced pressing the play button (with volume at zero) by gloved hands. Finally he thought he got the hang of it.

Therefore it was time to raise the volume, wear the diving suit helmet, and open the gate.

But suddenly he remembered something. Something that had nagged at the back of his mind. The very concept of time.

Did time pass at the same rate on both sides of the gate? He decided he would do a simple experiment. He would leave his wristwatch running in stopwatch mode, estimate how long he would be on the other side, and then compare the results.

Yes. Now he was ready.

Kim thought she heard noises from the prison kitchen again. It had to be Lothar. Last time he had been screaming aloud, but this was a mechanical noise instead.

Well, the night had been dead boring otherwise, so she decided to check it out, even at the risk of incurring the scientist's hate again. Just before she had visited the security station to find Ed, the resident guard, following the closed-circuit camera feeds with a dull, glazed look in his eyes. He stank of old booze.

Kim's code of honor included never reporting such cases, because she could all too well imagine herself in place. Or maybe she would kill herself before it came to that? She was not sure. A fully learned Nietzschean over-woman certainly would. But was she one? Suicide had advantages and disadvantages. The total cessation of thoughts was certainly one advantage. But then, she

would also cease to hate and despise and listen to funeral doom metal.

Cautiously, she opened the steel door leading to the kitchen.

“What the fuck?”, she gasped.

During her entire career as a night guard she had never seen anything so messed up. The wall was covered in an yellow-brown goo, and it was not just any goo, but dessert, she recognized.

Bun pudding. She knew that one.

And to complete the picture, there was a man – had to be Lothar – in a full pressurized diving suit, crouched in front of a laptop computer.

The sound was the air compressor running.

Suddenly it was overwhelmed by another, higher sound. Now Kim remembered she had also heard it before, when the scientist had been screaming.

This was some kind of a scientific experiment, but because the man was suited up, and not cursing, it had to be going according to his plans.

Next Kim could not believe her eyes.

As if reacting to the sound, the pudding wall began to move in a slithering manner. It was grotesque and reminded her of a horror movie. How could the pudding react to the flute-like noise? That made no sense.

What happened next was even more out of the ordinary. A large window of black appeared to the pudding wall. No, it was not even completely black, for though Kim was watching at an angle and could not see exactly clearly, there appeared to be the vastness of space, the glow stars and nebulas behind, and some unnameable vast structures.

And the man walked through that window into the black, with just his air hose trailing.

This was insane, Kim thought. But at the same moment she was also very excited. The times when she had been truly excited during her misanthropic life could be counted with one hand.

But this was something.

It was clearly a dimensional gate into some sort of a Lovecraftian realm. Not just that, but exactly the kind of realm Thergothon had written songs about.

Now Kim understood quite precisely what the man had been trying to tell her earlier. Cutting edge research indeed!

Most people could never say they had been in the middle of a forbidden experiment, of a dimensional gate opening. But now Kim could.

Of course she had no especial wish to share that information with anyone, because they would just think she was out of her mind. But having the knowledge was enough.

Lothar had now vanished completely to the blackness.

Then Kim became aware of a third quite unnatural phenomenon. Though the kitchen was rather brightly lit by several fluorescent tubes in the ceiling, it appeared to be darkening. It was as if the blackness was seeping into the room, sucking away the light.

In all her excitement Kim was still thinking rather clearly, and by following the logic of horror movies that was easy to understand as well. It had to be the other realm extending its influence to this one. That was potentially a not so good thing, something potentially fatal.

She remembered what she had thought when the scientist had attempted to recruit her. That she would care for her own survival only. Was now the time to

start caring for it? Apparently it was the laptop making the sound, so she could just shut it off. If the sound made the gate appear, its stopping would with high likelihood make it disappear.

By laws of logic Lothar would be trapped then, though. Did she give a shit? Not really. But she was not afraid either. The slowly invading blackness was not threatening enough, yet. She had to see how the situation would develop.

Lothar was taken completely by surprise by how much the blackness on the other side resisted his movement. It felt like wading in a black treacle, or being inside a pillow.

So far his insides had not experienced spontaneous mutilation, and the air hose spanned the dimensions flawlessly. He was certainly feeling calmer now than before entering. But he had no idea how, at this rate, he could ever get to the enormous gray vats he had once seen, to steal even some the soul jelly. There were some indescribable, spiral-like structures off in the distance, revealed by the starlight, but even reaching them would take perhaps a full hour.

So far he had not seen the light diminish – the shadow did not hunt him at least yet.

He struggled forward for what felt like another minute or two, but in truth it was hopeless going. He decided to turn back; as he glanced over his shoulder he saw the portal back to the kitchen some distance away. At least some logic existed between the dimensions; for all he knew the gate could, theoretically, have been one-directional. If the masters of this dimension had been truly cruel, they would just have misled him by letting the robot return, then trapped him inside for-

ever.

As minutes stretched on, at last he reached the gate, and with a last exertion he crossed over back to his own dimension.

Immediately, even before removing the helmet, he rushed to the computer to shut down the sound.

Then he checked the stopwatch display.

Kim was almost startled as the scientist returned. It had only been perhaps thirty seconds at maximum. So was that everything? Had Lothar already seen enough? Or had there actually been nothing to see?

In any case the sound was over now, bun pudding was now just its usual unpleasant self and not a gate to another reality, and as far as Kim could tell the room's lighting had returned to normal.

She backed off carefully and closed the door as silently as she could. Now that the show was over, she was not in the least interested to have the scientist notice she had been watching. She was quite certain that just more yelling would result.

As if nothing had happened, she went on to continue her rounds. Though it had been unconventionally exciting at first, in the end the whole thing had turned out to be an anti-climax. Now she had seen the opening of a pudding gate to another dimension, which surely had to be the ultimate mystery of life, and honestly she had been left disappointed. Well, that fit quite well with what else she had experienced in life so far, and what she would likely come to experience as long as she lived. Misanthropy and disappointment.

It could be though, that the true rush was to actually visit the other dimension yourself, but unfortunately her survival instinct was too well-primed to consider

that option. At least for now.

Finally Lothar took the helmet off. To breathe freely was a relief, no matter how well the compressor had worked. It had been hot and uncomfortable wearing the diving suit.

For a first run the excursion had been a success, though his eventual, final goal had been far out of reach. Movement beyond the gate had indeed posed a problem, but not in the way he had envisioned. No floating or falling off into the vast emptiness, but rather a truly odd resistance, almost like wading in pudding.

Maybe that was it? Maybe the gate did not actually lead to another dimension, it just revealed and expanded the true, blackened nature of bun pudding? To be honest, Lothar had always secretly loathed this dessert, though to say it aloud in front of Purexo executives would likely be grounds for immediate termination. And perhaps not just termination of career.

The time discrepancy had also been roughly measured. The stopwatch read forty-five seconds, but it had certainly felt like several minutes on the other side. It was perhaps a ratio of one to four, or even five. In a way it was a positive result. For if the shadow did not fully invade to this side in one Earth minute, he would have four or five on the other side.

After shutting down the compressor, Lothar surveyed the kitchen to see nothing was off. The door was still closed like how he had left it, the ovens were all switched off.

But –

Was it now permanently darker than before? Even though all the fluorescent lamps were on like before. Or was he imagining? He had been up for more hours than

he could remember, and his senses were probably not at their sharpest anymore. In fact he should go to sleep immediately, before even thinking what he would present to Klaus-Marius the following morning.

But if he was not imagining the change –

Then the shadow from the other side was roaming this prison right now.

It was a thoroughly unsettling thought. Then he, or anyone else, would not be safe anywhere in this complex. Perhaps, if his paranoia went to the extreme, not safe anywhere in the world?

He hoped that after some rest he could be sure that the luminous power was indeed same as usually, and that what he thought now was just a cruel hallucination.

“Stupid, stupid idiot,” he then called himself.

Of course he should have had a lux meter with him, for foolproof before and after -measurements. If the meter would show the same reading, then he could be absolutely sure that the shadow had not crossed the gate.

As he was driving home, Lothar thought of a crucial missing piece. To be able to choose the point of insertion exactly. If he could materialize right next to the soul jelly vat, there would be only a short distance to wade before he could reach it and scoop up a sample.

But how would that be achieved? Would the composition of the bun pudding matter after all? Or slight variations in the harmonic overtones?

Searching for the answer could take days, if not weeks of maddening work, and each time there would be a race against the clock to not let the shadow materialize fully. Plus, though the big sample of pudding had

been supremely active this day, tomorrow it could be inert already, and he would be required to manufacture more, which in itself would be time-consuming.

But then, should he keep quiet until he could navigate into the other dimension at will? Well, he was taking a tremendous risk even as of now. Tomorrow the laboratory would again be full of people, and it would not be unimaginable for some of them to wander into the prison kitchen. He had not specifically forbidden Karla and Laszlo of that, so they at least would likely check what he had been doing with the ovens. And then they would see the bun pudding stuck on the wall, and the diving gear.

In the worst case they might even turn on the sound signal – the laptop had been left there, and even powered up if he did not remember completely wrong.

Lothar cursed silently, as such carelessness was truly beneath him. But right now he was too tired to go back and clean up. Just staying awake enough to drive was enough of a challenge. Fortunately there was not long to go.

In this most tired state, he made the decision: there was already enough evidence to show to Klaus-Marius. He would just test-fire the gate quickly as the first thing in the morning, to ensure an epic fail would not result at the critical moment.

11.

Viktor was very pleased that his chapter number was eleven. Azerate! With this in mind, he was sure that eventually he would succeed, though he had been carefully moving in the fog, circling the prison main building for the better part of an hour, searching for any way in without success.

It occurred to him: if the building itself was impenetrable, maybe he should try farther away from the courtyard.

Indeed!

Azerate's black light was shining upon him on this very moment, for almost hidden in the grass that had grown through years of disuse, was a sewer grate that looked like it could be pried open.

He switched to the spare gray fabric workman's gloves, to protect his immaculate black leather ritual gloves. To soil or lacerate the ritual gloves would be a severe travesty! That might possibly disrupt his connection to the current 218 on this night, and could not be allowed to happen.

"Satanic death!" he cursed sharply as he irrevocably dirtied his clothes while trying to open the grate. It was true that dirtiness equaled entropy, and entropy

equaled chaos, but the more traditional Satanist in him still wanted to be clean and well-prepared for the ceremony that was come.

But finally the metal grate gave way, and Viktor crouched lower to take a look, using a small flashlight.

No doubt he would get even more unclean down there.

Down there! That was a Beherit song title. Though Viktor did not actively care for black metal any longer (he sometimes listened to Nuclear Holocausto's Suuri Shamaani ambient side project though), it felt pleasing to remember the name. Nuclear Holocausto was a true Satanist, of that there was no doubt.

The beam of the flashlight revealed the bottom to be about three metres below. There was a ladder, narrow, rusty steel rungs protruding from the concrete shaft. Well, at least he did not have to jump straight down.

He descended the ladder to the bottom. It reeked as if the prison was still in full use! But if he wanted to penetrate into the building, there was no alternative but to accept the smell and move on.

So far he had not sensed especially strong Chaos energy – often one could feel a small undercurrent of Az-erate almost everywhere, and its sameness could dull the senses.

But now he switched the flashlight off, closed his eyes, held his breath and just concentrated.

Yes, something was changing. Even through his closed eyelids, he could sense a deeper blackness emanating from the direction of the building itself. It could be the outer edge of a Satanic energy vortex. This lead was definitely worth following.

On the side of the tunnel there was a raised walkway, so he could make progress without actually having to

wade in the shitty water. That was much preferable.

He switched the flashlight on again and started his journey into the direction of growing Chaos. At this point a compass or a map would do him no good, all he needed to navigate was to follow Azerate's energy.

Randy was extremely pumped. Considering that tomorrow would be the big day, he should be already sleeping, but he was so pumped that he honestly could not sleep. This was not entirely because of the coming trip, but rather because of two entirely unrelated things.

First: promising research into the influence of Illuminati in the current pop culture, including Lady Gaga. It appeared that by using overtly blatant Illuminati symbolism, she (or her handlers) was giving the impression of being a B-film and counterculture aficionado, while masking and hiding the true layers of control behind. But Randy was not about to be fooled. Her music he actually liked – but that could not ever be overtly admitted, so he had erased the ID3v1 and ID3v2 tags from her mp3s to keep them from getting scrobbled from his playlist – even to such degree that he could not stop listening, and that was worrying, for it could be that Illuminati was luring him into a trap, slowly draining away his willpower.

The second thing was that he had decided to implement deferred rendering to the game project he was working with. This involved substantial amount of rework in the Urho3D renderer code, though there were remains of former, inbuilt deferred functionality left, such as the support for multiple render targets. Fuck the author! Why had he ever removed such a fundamental feature? Well, now it would come back with revenge.

Randy was thinking of the optimal G-buffer layout. He could not exactly decide, but the following seemed quite good for starters:

```
RT 0: Albedo R  Albedo G  Albedo B  Gloss factor
RT 1: Normal X  Normal Y   Normal Z  Spec power
RT 2: Linear depth (R32F)
```

On his machine, he had an AMD graphics card, so he would have to explicitly write linear depth to a render target, instead of sampling nonlinear hardware depth directly. Of course one could do that even on an AMD card, but it would induce disgusting slowdown (for anyone demanding further proof, he would kindly refer them to <http://aras-p.info/texts/D3D9GPUHacks.html> – and that was from an actual Unity developer!) And to tell the truth – linear depth was always superior to nonlinear, as nonlinear depth depended much on the camera parameters – the distance ratio of the near clip and far clip planes. In deferred rendering one had to reconstruct the world-space (or view-space) position of each screen pixel using the stored depth value and the pixel's XY screen coordinates. If nonlinear depth was used, even with 24 bits, it would bring definite inaccuracy, which could show up, if not elsewhere, then at least as shadow mapping artifacts.

However, using only 3 render targets was rather modest in this day and age, when anyone taking games seriously had a maximally pumped graphics card anyway. Therefore he could add at least one more, which could then look for example like this:

```
RT 0: Albedo R  Albedo G  Albedo B  Gloss factor
RT 1: Normal X  Normal Y   Normal Z  Mat. index
```

RT 2: Velocity X Velocity Y Object ID Unused
RT 3: Linear depth (R32F)

This would allow per-object motion blur in screen space, and a material index for accessing a lookup texture that could in addition to specular power, perhaps contain the full lookup tables for $N \cdot L$ (diffuse light) and $N \cdot H$ (specular light) calculations, allowing for example cool metal-like materials like the game S.T.A.L.K.E.R used. Additionally, the object ID could be used to do per-object light selection, or to alleviate self-shadowing artefacts. And he would still have one unused channel to fill with something in the future.

The normals were to be in world space, not in view space. Though that might complicate some calculations, it meant the normals stayed unchanged while rotating the camera view, and therefore he could get away with only 8 bits per channel. View-space normals would fluctuate slightly when rotated, creating noticeable artefacts with specular highlights.

Randy knew he had to get anti-pumped somehow, lest he be totally un-combat ready tomorrow due to lack of sleep. But that was easier said than done. He tried to imagine hellishly difficult quantum mechanics exercises, that he would fail if he did not go to sleep, but that was not exactly motivating. Furthermore, thinking about physics just deliriously circled back to game development: why any of his teachers had not told him that the lighting equations in vertex or pixel shaders needed vector and matrix algebra? That way he would have been much more eager to learn. Now he was filling the gaps afterward, and that was certainly challenging, although it would also get him super-pumped when he finally figured things out.

Viktor had come to a T-junction. And there he was presented with a dilemma: he was quite sure the building was to the left, but he felt a stronger Azerate current to the right instead. That was perplexing. But of course the forks of the Anti-Cosmic current could circle around, so that the center – and therefore the Chaos junction itself – might still be well inside the prison. And in any case, choosing left was usually correct answer, as doing that stayed away from the Right Hand Path, the Demiurge’s oppressive grasp.

Therefore, left it was.

A twenty metres from the junction Viktor saw stairs going up, and without much hesitation he headed for them. The stairs led to a heavy steel door, and momentarily Viktor’s black heart sank. If it was locked, he would likely have no way to breach it, and it would mean mission failure.

But then he noticed that Azerate was still bestowing him with luck: the door’s lock had been shot, probably with a close range handgun blast. Therefore the door opened easily – though noisily – as Viktor pushed.

He emerged into a dark maintenance closet. Now just to hope there were no more locked doors on the way before he reached the center of the Chaos vortex.

“Meh,” said Jake aloud as he was trying to fall asleep. His problem was not being too pumped, but rather the creeping lack of motivation toward the whole abandoned prison trip. Lee had her reasons – though she might be up for a major disappointment as there were probably were no secret human rights violations within the radius of a few hundred miles – and Randy would just get pumped by anything. The original idea had only

been a joke, and it had felt good at the time. But now – what was wrong with him? Did he not want to be combat ready? Did he not want to explore? It might be a lack of ownership: Lee and Randy had taken his idea, while he had been left aside.

He questioned his beliefs, his inner thoughts, his whole existence! That was an Iron Maiden lyric from their most depressive period, and it did not spell good.

He had to do something.

He got up from bed and forced himself to do a full Convict Conditioning routine, one set of all the moves at his current level: pushups, squats, pullups, leg raises, bridges and even one handstand against the wall (though only fifteen seconds.)

That was much better! He was back on the track of becoming combat ready. He just hoped to remember that the next time he was all out of motivation.

12.

Out of some unforeseen impulse Kim decided to return to the kitchen. It was a deviation from her normal rounds, but it could be tolerated. Nothing ever happened here anyway!

En route she thought she heard some very quiet footsteps off in the distance. Was that imagination? Normally she was fully certain of what was real and what was not, but obviously after seeing a pudding gate open to another dimension, one might be more susceptible to one's mind playing tricks.

She certainly was not going to fire up the audio signal herself – the scientist had left the computer up and running – but not out of fear, rather because of professionalism.

But what then had exactly made her return? She had already decided Lothar's experiment to have been an anti-climax, a disappointment. He went into the gate, then returned. So what was she exactly looking for?

Perhaps something the scientist had missed.

So, there was the man's diving gear, and a robot –

Kim recognized it to be a remote-controlled bomb defusing unit. She had not known the day guards had such sophisticated technology here. But then, maybe

Purexo was so paranoid and secretive that they would handle even bomb threats on their own.

Lothar had probably sent the robot through the gate before entering himself. So, the robot and the diving suit had both been on the other side.

Kim looked very closely at them.

At first she did not see anything out of the ordinary, but then she saw the markings.

Similar markings had been scratched to both the diving suit's rubber surface, and the robot's metal casing.

The scratches were certainly not random. They seemed like runes of some kind, a completely foreign language. Kim had to admit she was excited again. Though the scientist had likely missed it, the other realm (or the beings within) had actually communicated through these signs.

But what were they saying? Kim had no way to comprehend. Then -

Then she saw there were also images. They were more comprehensible. For a moment Kim felt her blood running a bit colder.

There was a stick-figure that could not be mistaken, it depicted a human being. It was part of a series, that started with just the human figure, and ended up with something being separated from it.

She could not be absolutely certain, but it could have been depicting the separation of soul from body, through the spine.

How was such a procedure possible? Well, to dimensional beings anything might be possible. But in any case it felt suitably disgusting. She decided to remember the idea should she ever need it, for example in a doom metal lyric. She also decided that from now on she would need to be a little more careful around

Lothar's experiments, because the intelligence – and malevolence – of something on the other side had certainly been confirmed.

In addition to the human figure, there was a long, towering shape which looked more animal-like. This was not nearly as sinister, just mysterious.

Kim thought she heard footsteps again, this time closer. Was the scientist still here, walking in circles and pondering his discoveries? Had he seen the markings? To tell the truth, Kim should not even care if he had, or had not.

But – was there an actual intruder? Someone that should not be here? Kim checked the taser and the pepper spray on her toolbelt. They were exactly where they were supposed to be, ready for action in less than a second should the situation demand so.

She would have liked to have an actual firearm as well, but unfortunately Purexo did not allow that. Fuck them! They wanted to be able to defuse bombs themselves, and experimented with dimensional gates (though it seemed like Lothar was operating somewhat off the records) yet did not allow her lethal force for dealing with threats decisively and aggressively in the first place!

Well, if the intruder was armed, Kim would first tase him (several times), then, if necessary, shoot him in the face with his own gun.

But enough of daydreaming, and back into action. Kim headed out of the kitchen once more and tried to pinpoint the direction of the footsteps.

Fuck! That was close. Viktor cursed almost audibly.

He had caught a glimpse of Kim at the far end of a corridor. It was a rather unpleasant game of hide and

seek. This was certainly not what he needed to disturb his search for Azerate's energy.

The ultimate Anti-Cosmic mind trick would of course be to convince Kim that she had seen nothing. But a) it might not work b) it would be very disrespectful.

Kim had once showed him her tools of the trade, and Viktor understood they would be rather painful. Somehow he was quite sure Kim would not hesitate in the slightest to use them on him, if she caught him in the act. Of course he would survive being tased or pepper-sprayed, but any quest for Anti-Cosmic discovery would be certainly over, as he would be jerked out of the current 218 for the time being even if he managed to escape.

Just barely consulting the blackened energies or trying to follow where they became stronger, but mostly just trying to evade Kim, Viktor set off on a course deeper into the prison. He took his boots off to be able to move more silently.

He definitely could not use his flashlight, for the risk of revealing his location. Some light (the foggy night was not completely black) filtered in from the high, barred windows above, so he was not completely stumbling in the dark.

He had not heard anything for a couple of minutes. Perhaps he had managed to shake Kim off for now.

So. It was time to concentrate. To get his Anti-Cosmic bearings again. He turned around in a circle, trying to sense where the force was strongest –

Yes. Straight ahead. Along the cell block corridor.

Azerate's current was rising.

Here, it also was darker. Almost completely black.

He was possibly very close to the junction now, for

he felt the energy as a steadily pulsing current, igniting the Black Flame in his heart.

Yes! At last. The chaotic energy had never been as strong as at this very location, at this very moment. Not even in the Swedish cathedral.

This would be a pivotal moment in his life, one where he would gain supreme knowledge –

He imagined being lifted from his feet, and unleashing a deep primal groan from the depths of his bowels, as a much deeper understanding of Azerate filled him. It would be similar to the Quickening experienced by the Highlanders. Though that was fiction, and Azerate was completely real.

Then he was deeply shocked.

He truly was lifted off his feet.

Directly ahead of him, while he hung suspended in midair, the blackness was actually swirling, like living fog.

Was this Azerate? Had it manifested to him right now?

To be honest, he was not sure. He also had to admit that he was afraid. Once or twice in his life he had performed a ritual that he had been unprepared for, and then he had been scared by its effects. But normally he never was. For fear was weakness, and a true Satanist needed to be strong.

He heard a deep, timeless voice.

“Mortal...”

The voice reverberated deeply from his head to toe and caused him to lose control of bodily functions. That was a burning shame, one that would certainly sever his connection to Azerate’s current for Satan knows how long. The true disciple would not wet his pants!

The shame was quickly replaced by even stronger

fear.

“...Prepare to be separated.”

Separated from what? This was not how it was supposed to go. Azerate and the Anti-Cosmos did not work like that. He would not be separated from anything, but would rather unite with the Chaos during the coming Day of Mourning. This had to be something else. Had he met the Demiurge? Was the creator deity so strong that he could make Viktor float helplessly in midair? And if so, why was Azerate’s power not helping him? Fuck, fuck, fuck!

The living blackness inched ever closer to him, forming sharp prongs of mist, and in his imagination, also a deformed, inhuman face. He could sense a foul stench, like rotting. That was not entirely unfamiliar to him from some rituals of invocation. Invoking the Angel of Disease, or especially Humwava, the Lord of Abominations, would certainly bring a foul odor. As would breaking into a morgue, which he had done once for necromantic divination.

“Gaaaaaahl!”

He screamed involuntarily the name of the former Gorgoroth vocalist as he felt the blasphemous pain of being stabbed in the back.

It felt like a sharp bone intruding him, though it most probably had to be the black prong of fog he had seen just before.

The foreign object inched deeper inside him, twisting and crawling. Though the pain burned constantly, growing with each further movement, Viktor also felt himself dissociating away from it, as if his spirit was already drifting away towards the Anti-Cosmos. That meant he probably was dying.

But he was not ready to die yet.

He had not yet amassed enough knowledge.

He had not fully cultivated his black heart.

He and Kim had not yet invoked Satanic kundalini to the maximum possible degree.

His quest would be incomplete.

Suddenly these thoughts were forgotten and replaced by much greater agony than Viktor would have imagined possible, as the sucking began.

He understood that his spinal fluid was being pumped away in a hideous, rhythmical motion. His body jerked in time with with the pumping, and he tried to scream, but his lungs were already empty, and he could not draw in more air no matter how he tried.

To drain him fully, the intruder pushed deeper, and Viktor felt it close to his neck (and brain) now. Gradually the throbbing pain started to fade into a dull nothingness, and he understood the end was within sight.

At last the foreign object reached the base of his brain, all the spinal fluid had been drained, and Viktor's consciousness was jerked away from his body. In a nauseous motion (though a spirit could not exactly vomit) he flew through the swirling fog, through the roof of the prison and out into the void of stars, until he saw a cosmically large vat of gray mass beneath him. He understood that the gray mass was coagulated souls, and he also had become a minuscule sample of that matter. In seconds he would merge, and lose his individuality. In those last seconds that he had available he cursed Azerate for betraying him, although for ten long years he had practiced the Path diligently.

He hit the surface with a dull splash. His soul shrieked without an audible voice, as it melted and became part of that slowly rotating gray jelly. At once the mindless, ululating cacophony of all the thought-energy

trapped in the vat started, and there was nowhere to escape any more. His final conscious thought was that some of these souls had been submerged here for thousands of years.

13.

Kim had kept looking, but for a good half hour she had not heard any more footsteps. At one of the cell blocks, near the end of the corridor, she arrived at an unusual sight: a large puddle of sticky but shining black substance.

Was it oil? And how had it ended up here? There were no pipes in the ceiling that could have leaked.

The substance could be harmful, so Kim did not actually touch it. But even from some distance away she could sense that the puddle was still warm. Was it somehow related to Lothar's experiments? Was it some black goo from the far side of the gate? But it was a long distance away from the prison kitchen.

Well, she could file it in her report. But what exactly to tell? "Witnessed opening of interdimensional gate in the prison kitchen. Later heard footsteps, found no sight of intruder, only a puddle of black substance in the cell block." At least the first sentence would definitely have to be left out.

Tough question. Well, at least this night had been less boring than any other night for months. She thought she should therefore enjoy each moment, for it might not repeat any time soon, perhaps not ever.

The rest of Kim's shift passed without anything unusual happening. And so, at last it was time to leave, to then repeat everything (except any excitement) on the next night.

Kim hopped in to her car and keyed the ignition, then drove to the gate. It opened like so many times before, disgustingly slowly, as soon as she had typed the eight-digit code into the keypad. The keypad was also disgustingly high, at least when trying to reach it from the driver seat of this small vacuum cleaner. Had she been driving a suburban assault vehicle (though she hated them just as well), where one sat much higher, it would have been more convenient.

There was no fog now. The morning was clear and sunny, though also cold. At about two hundred meters from the facility she saw the motorcycle left standing on the roadside.

“What the fuck?”

The recognition was instant. It could not be anything else than the “Great Beast” Viktor had proudly presented to her. She had also ridden it both as driver and passenger. But this could only mean that the son of a bitch had followed her here, without consent. Probably to perform one of his rituals.

But where was he now?

Kim brought the car to a sudden halt and thought hard.

Had he managed to get inside the gate? Not of course the budding gate, but inside the prison walls? Honestly that was the only option that made sense. Sometimes Viktor had told about majestic forests and how one could feel Chaotic energy in them, but here there was no forest, only swamp for miles. Surely swamp could not be majestic and ritualistic to any degree. And if Vik-

tor had not made it inside, surely he would not have stayed here all night.

The footsteps. Yes. Very likely that had been him. But then they had just stopped, and there had been no sighting either.

Did she have to go back to look? But it was possible Viktor was holed up in some maintenance closet or something. Kim did not even have keys for all of them. Fuck him! If he wanted to stay hidden while reciting some Satanic verses, she was not going to waste all her time scouring the prison over and over.

Of course if he would then be discovered later, and he had indeed managed to get inside during her shift, there could be punitive consequences.

Fuck him indeed!

But – Viktor was rather driven and goal-oriented. Why stay holed up in a disused prison? A ritual demanded concentration and energy – that much Kim knew – and if he was somehow performing a ritual that took this long, it would be an extreme feat of endurance.

Kim thought some more. What other clues did she have? After she had seen the pudding gate open and close, the only thing out of the ordinary had been the black puddle.

If it was unrelated to Lothar's experiment, was it then some ritualistic substance Viktor had used? But it seemed so alien and otherworldly, how could he have anything like that in his possession?

Then, there was another possibility, which made Kim feel a nauseous vertigo, even through her hardened misanthropy. The puddle had been warm, so it might have been –

It might theoretically have been Viktor's earthly re-

mains. In that case it would mean that he had in fact been tremendously successful in his ritual. That he had actually managed to merge with Azerate or the Anti-Cosmos or whatever he wanted. If Kim understood right that was Viktor's supreme goal, one worth dying for.

But still, it felt too unbelievable. Kim could accept the fact that there existed another dimensions, and that bun pudding could be brought to an excited state where it would act as a conduit to them, but it was much harder to stomach that Anti-Cosmic Satanism would have any basis in reality, and that by reciting the right incantations Viktor had actually managed to reduce himself to black goo. And even if that had been possible, there should have been something resembling human tissue, or bone, or anything.

Then, another, more sinister possibility occurred to Kim, and the nausea deepened.

What if it had not been an Anti-Cosmic ritual, but rather a result of the bun pudding experiment that had manifested itself that far away from the kitchen? She remembered the light dying away during the time the gate was open, and she also clearly remembered thinking that what if some malignant horror movie entity was coming through.

So ... had an entity from beyond the gate reduced Viktor to a black puddle? That was a disgusting idea. Kim spat.

But if it was indeed so –

Kim felt her misanthropy expand and change form. Now it was no longer just hate toward humankind, but also hate toward formless beings from another dimensions that could move at will through walls, and –

“Calm down,” she told herself. As of yet, there was no

proof of the existence of such things.

Well, except the ritualistic markings on the diving suit and the robot. And the puddle, perhaps.

In addition to the hatred, Kim felt an unusual emptiness at the thought of Viktor no longer walking this earth. Though that was not proven either. But even in that case she was not going to cry.

Rather, she made a promise to herself.

If that was the case, and it had not been Viktor voluntarily merging himself with Azerate, then the entity from beyond the gate should also die. And it should die in pain.

Lothar had set the alarm unusually early, and when he woke up he felt like needing at least two or three hours more sleep, but today was an important day.

Presenting his findings so far to Klaus-Marius.

He shaved, showered, and fixed a primitive breakfast, and then he was ready to go. He wished for a personal teleport to take him immediately to the facility – well, perhaps one day he would have one if they mastered the pudding gate technology.

He thought of Half-Life again, and the Combine alien race, the enemies. They could not teleport within the same world, but would always need to use another dimension as a “slingshot.” Would the pudding gate work similarly? Then, using it would always pose a rather large hazard.

He did not know the exact time when Klaus-Marius would visit. But he would have some mundane work to concentrate on until then, the early planning stages of an all-new ECD, the vanilla fudge pudding.

The morning was highly unusual. Not only were Jake,

Lee and Randy going to infiltrate the abandoned prison today, and going to train like convicts, but they were eating at the Purexo cafeteria in the university main building at 7 AM, before setting on the adventure. It was an unusual experiment on Purexo's part, to offer actual food (and dessert) that early. But there were several students present, so the experiment seemed to be working.

The three were at the dessert stage now. It was bun pudding, a rather cold and sticky variety.

"You're not going to do a DNF?" Jake asked Randy. Though Randy was usually very pumped, he was not apparently pumped enough to finish the pudding.

"Blech, this shit is terrible. It's not fit for human consumption."

"Come on, you're not combat ready if you don't finish."

"Screw you."

But so it happened that while Jake and Lee finished their bun puddings fully, Randy did not. He stood up defiantly, and the rest followed. It was time to head for the pickup truck and set their sights on the disused penitentiary.

Randy drove the GMC, as it was his brother's truck, and he honestly did not want Jake or Lee trashing it before they even reached the destination. It was slightly cramped in the cabin as all three of them sat side-by-side. But while he steered, and Lee provided the route instructions thanks to her cell phone's GPS function, he was actually thinking of something completely else.

To be honest, deferred rendering sucked.

All rendering (or lighting) methods sucked.

Because if their open-source game needed to cater

to the widest possible audience, it would have to support also entry-level GPU's, not just maximally pumped ones. And something like the Intel GMA honestly was not even an entry-level GPU, it was just an utter piece of shit. Therefore he might, instead of deferred rendering, have to implement bare-bones vertex lighting. Fuck the engine for not implementing that already, unlike Ogre3D did. By using Ogre (though Randy admitted he hated it too) they would have gained instantly much more open source credits.

But then, for what? Ogre3D's community was honestly a mystery to him. In his opinion they were a miserable bunch of groupthinkers. Though the engine was fairly capable now (by certain low standards), expectations of further progress were not high. Especially since the founder Sinbad had ceased active development.

Fuck, there were no good open source graphics engines! Horde3D was a piece of crap as well. Maybe the project should not have been the creation of a game, but the creation of a properly constructed graphics engine (and perhaps even a full game engine.) Though, forum evangelists at sites like gamedev.net were always telling "Write games, not engines." Fuck them too. Fuck all! But there was a truth to the evangelism, especially with this particular bunch of misfits that were taking part in this particular project: it would probably just end up as a monumental circle-jerk that would just design and design endlessly without writing a single line of code!

Randy noticed he was becoming uncharacteristically negative and aggressive. Being excited of a rendering technique had quickly turned into a destructive obsession. Or maybe it was just the truck. Perhaps it brought back some bad memories, from times he had not yet

understood how awesome DragonForce or jetpack ninjas or Tacgnol were.

He tried to focus his thoughts. Where was he? Ah yes, vertex lighting.

There would be directional, point and spot lights. In vertex lighting there was no need for specular calculations or normal mapping, so he'd just need light color, light position / direction and attenuation parameters.

If the vertex shader supported a maximum of 8 point lights, that would require 8 times 3 vector uniforms, 24 total. Combined with vertex skinning of maximum 64 bones, it would not yet exhaust the available constant registers in Direct3D9 Shader Model 2.0. What about OpenGL then? The count of available uniforms would vary from card to card, but in truth he did not care. In this he would follow the ideology of the engine's original author. The OpenGL support had clearly been put together as a loose afterthought. Because no-one used this engine anyway, the open source points awarded from theoretical multi-platform support were limited anyway.

Fuck!

He was getting too negative again.

Then he decided to just concentrate on the road and not care of rendering engine coding at all for now.

14.

Klaus-Marius was here!

Lothar felt his heart race into overdrive, as he caught a glimpse of him touring the corridors. But to tell the truth, there was nothing to be especially excited of. The research had unveiled some basic knowledge, but full insight was yet to be gained. But presenting it all to the assistant regional director now would definitely be fruitful. Yes, that much Lothar had already decided, and would not reverse it now.

But how would he start?

“Hey, I've opened a bun pudding gate to another dimension. You'll have to see it.”

Fuck. Klaus-Marius might think Lothar had gone insane. He should perhaps be gradually eased in on the truth.

And then he was in front of Lothar. Now the decision had to be made on the spot. No turning back. No rewind. No savegames.

“Hey, I've opened a bun pudding gate to another dimension. You'll have to see it.”

Go immediately for the throat. If he thought Lothar was raving mad, then so be it.

“Interesting. Tell me more.”

Lothar was honestly dumbfounded. How could Klaus-Marius react so calmly? Not at all any kind of disbelief.

“I noticed that bun pudding – when prepared in a certain temperature – or actually later it occurred that the temperature or composition probably does not matter – reacts to a certain upper harmonic series – I mean a sound signal – by opening a gate to another dimension. In this dimension I have seen massive vats of some gray jelly. I believe they are the merged souls of some formerly alive beings. Whether they are human I do not know. But I believe there would be a definite business opportunity for Purexo to harvest this soul jelly, and offer it as an especially, especially challenging dessert. EECED, that is. That would be like the challenge level of bun pudding and orange rice combined and raised to the n th degree. There are still some unsolved problems in traversing the other dimension, but I believe that in due time everything can be solved –“

Klaus-Marius nodded in a thoroughly unsettling manner. As if he understood. But no-one should understand this matter, for it was a brave new undiscovered scientific frontier. And Lothar was a trailblazer, an explorer. But under Klaus-Marius's odd stare, he did not know how to continue. His voice trailed off and he knew that if he tried to speak even one more word, it would just come out as an odd, inefficient raven croak.

“Lothar, dear Lothar. It seems you have clearly researched and discovered much. And yet – ah, yet it feels like time wasted.”

Suddenly Lothar was not just perplexed, but infuriated. What was this leading into? Right at this moment, it seemed that Klaus-Marius was speaking in the same unsettling, lisping manner as Half-Life's G-Man. Fuck,

how could it be wasted time? Unless –

It was not unfamiliar to Klaus-Marius at all?

“Ah, yes, for you see, we actually have been doing this procedure that you speak of, for quite some time now. It is unfortunate that word has never reached you, but I thought it would be for your protection. Though I knew you were much talented, I did not foresee that you would make the discovery independently. These are – grave matters, you understand. Actually it would be far too risky to offer this jelly dessert on its own, but you can take my word, it is already being mixed as an ingredient into several ECD's. To achieve a subtle effect of anxiety, that has been shown to lead into higher efficiency in both students and workers worldwide.”

Lothar felt his anger rising, and turning into full blown rage. What higher efficiency? So this soul jelly was already being fed to people? Now Lothar no longer cared if he was losing face in front of his boss. He just wanted to get at the bottom of this mystery – this treachery.

“What? What is this? I've been designing and finalizing the recipes for a large amount of desserts, and never, not once, have I seen this ingredient mentioned!”

“Ah, it is classified above your clearance level. Actually it is never put down in writing. Rather, the jelly – or very small portions thereof – is inserted at the raw materials production and processing stage.”

“Ok. So riddle me this. Let's suppose that I actually believe that. How have you solved the problem of movement on the other side? When I tried, I felt like being impeded by an immense mass of black goo.”

“Ah yes. It is rather intriguing, but in the end quite clear. The harvesting crew does not go through an actual, physical gate. Rather, they ingest a sufficiently

large portion of the bun pudding – one and half kilograms is usually enough, and then the audio signal is used for internal stimulation. After this, the crew member is, with training, free to project himself or herself within the dimension. Of course it is not entirely risk-free, for there is no way for practice runs in our dimension.”

And now almost everything made sense with a cold foreboding. Klaus-Marius had revealed secrets that were above Lothar's actual security clearance (actually he had not known that such clearance levels even existed), and this certainly did not spell good. Likely the security would show up at any moment, and he would be detained. Then, perhaps even terminated.

But Lothar had to go on. To probe more. There were still unknowns.

“What about the shadow? Does it chase after the crew when they project?”

“Ah, you mean the One-Who-Shall-Not-Be-Named. Yes, it has to be taken into account. Each time. And that reminds me –“

Klaus-Marius produced an odd device from his suit pocket. It looked like an electronic multimeter, but with no leads attached.

“This device measures psychokinetic energy. And – it is showing highly irregular levels of activity. Tell me, Lothar, how long did you let the gate stay open?”

“Not even a full minute, I think –“

“Full minute? With an external gate? You stupid lab rat. Even fifteen seconds would have been pushing it.”

Suddenly it was Klaus-Marius that was enraged, or even scared. Lothar could not exactly tell which emotion was dominant.

Klaus-Marius performed some more measurements,

rotating a full circle. Then he began to speak more calmly.

“Yes. I believe – I thought there would have been time for thoroughly interrogating you, but now – who else did you talk to?”

The last words were heavily emphasized. The rage had returned without warning. Lothar found himself wondering if Klaus-Marius was capable of murder.

“I spoke to no-one.”

“Well, for now I just have to believe you. I have no other option. For I believe that you have released the – I’ll use your term – the shadow to this facility, and we might need to take some extreme measures to stop it. We will have a more intimate talk session later – with chemicals if necessary.”

As Klaus-Marius said this, there was no time for Lothar to ponder the threat of a possible interrogation with a truth serum, as a deep subsonic rumble reverberated through the office, and actually through the whole facility. The sound of twisting, fatigued metal joined the chorus.

“That is definitely it,” Klaus-Marius whispered. “It is moving to the lower levels. What do you have there nowadays?”

“The reactor...”

“No. I mean above that.”

“The fudge boilers.”

“What?”

“Better believe it. You commissioned the research yourself, even if in your slimy pompous executive mind you no longer remember it. To find out if vanilla fudge could be heated to boiling point with normal industrial-grade kitchen equipment, and if an ECD could be construed of it. Actually in quite early phase we found out

that it wouldn't work out, but by directing the coolant water from the reactor it is possible. And now we're trying to find out –”

“Enough. I get the picture.”

There came another rumble, deeper and longer this time.

Jake, Lee and Randy had been driving through the swamp for a good half hour now. The morning was turning into a bright, but chilling day.

At last something emerged off in the distance.

“That's it. The prison,” Lee whispered.

“Awesome,” Jake said.

Randy said nothing, as he gripped the steering wheel tightly, so tight that his knuckles were white. He could have imagined being supremely pumped up at this very moment. But he never could have imagined the exact method of how he would get so anti-pumped. Not by lack of sleep, not by listening to too much DragonForce or Lady Gaga, but by fucking thinking of deferred and vertex lit and multi-pass per pixel and single-pass per pixel light rendering techniques all the way here! And all those methods sucked! Thoroughly!

“Fuck,” Randy whispered wearily at last. Jake and Lee no doubt interpreted that as some kind of excitement. If they only had known! But of course he would never tell, for it was so ridiculous.

He had to get focused somehow.

They drove closer, and the prison could be seen more clearly now. The perimeter wall, and the large central building.

Then suddenly Randy got his answer.

His mouth hung open in bewilderment. He definitely did not think of rendering techniques any more.

For this was something way out of this world.

A spiral of pure blackness blasted up into the sky, originating from the central building. And he could clearly hear a deep rumbling sound even over this distance, over the engine noise. That had to be a definite sign of the end times. He had to think for a moment of all the implications, and then understanding filled him at once.

At this very location, the apocalypse would begin, and they would be there to witness it.

Or actually not just to witness.

Possibly, they would fight multiple ninjas and demons at the same time, and perhaps even Tacgnol, all the while doing one-armed pushups, and perhaps even handstands if they were combat ready enough. Then they would either manage to shut off the source of that Armageddon spiral, or die trying. But in any case, Randy felt full of awesome.

This was the beginning of everything supremely pumped up. This would be far beyond mere Convict Conditioning and urban exploration. This was like being in the middle of a DragonForce song.

Suddenly the pickup truck lurched nastily and lost speed. It seemed like they had driven into the swamp. But they had not. They were still in dead center of the road.

But in that case, the road was giving away, like it had suddenly become swamp itself. Yes, there definitely was no forward momentum any more, but instead they were sinking. That was possibly not that awesome.

“What the fuck?” Jake yelled.

“We’ll have to get out!” Randy yelled back, and reached for the door handle. In actuality he did not know if staying inside the truck was a better idea than

trying to get out. But it was better to be active than to wait for sinking passively.

But before any of them could get out, the sinking motion suddenly increased in intensity; it was as if the ground had become a large gaping maw, just as epic as the spiral in the sky, and it swallowed the pickup truck whole.

15.

Ending up with no fruitful conclusion about Viktor, Kim had decided that she should just head home. She had almost reached the highway when she felt the rumble coming from behind.

That was unusual. Was it some new kind of experiment at the facility? A gate with even greater scale? What was that Lothar guy exactly doing?

But she did not care. Nor did she care of the pickup truck she had seen going to the other direction. They three youngsters inside looked like they definitely did not belong anywhere in the vicinity, but her shift was over in any case.

The blackness was vast. And never-ending. It seemed like the sinking motion would never stop. Randy kept thinking, that this was unfair. This was decidedly un-epic. An adventure should not stop this way before it had even actually begun.

And to where exactly were they sinking?

Directly into the depths of Hell?

The positive thing was that they were still inside the pickup truck, so they would have air at least for the time being. In fact, had they got out according to his

suggestion, they could have fared a lot worse. Randy shuddered at the thought.

But if they got out right now, and could get the doors open, could they make it to the surface? If they were combat ready enough, it was within possible.

Randy became aware of a high-pitched noise and electric sensations all over his body. From reading some articles and forum posts (he had not tried it personally) he knew those were the signs of an out-of-the-body experience about to occur.

Then his whole world first tilted 90 degrees, then another. And he was jerked back to reality –

Where the pickup truck was still standing on the road. There was no gaping maw, and no apocalyptic spiral in the sky. The sun was just fast becoming obscured by heavy gray clouds that seemed to have appeared from nowhere. The truck's engine had stalled, because of Randy letting go of the accelerator. And he had an odd feeling in his stomach, like something was moving.

But had the others seen and felt the same?

“Guys –” Randy began with his voice shaking.

“Did you – like see a gigantic hell spiral in the sky? And feel the truck sink into the road?”

“Not exactly,” Lee replied. “But it was still horrible. Out of a sudden I was in the middle of space. There were some huge spiraling towers and like – nuclear reactor smoke-stacks. Absolutely vast. And the shadow from my nightmare was there. I didn't even have the Nancy Drew flashlight or magnifying glass for protection.”

Randy could have chuckled for Lee referring to Nancy Drew herself, but this was deathly serious.

“Yeah – at first I thought we were going to sink, but then I too was transported into the black. But it did not

feel actually like space, because I could breathe. But there definitely was stars and nebulas and stuff all around lighting it up," Jake explained.

"The shadow? Did you see it?" Lee asked, clearly still agitated.

"Don't think so. But the movement, it felt odd. Not exactly like swimming, but like wading in – pudding?"

This was confusing. It was like all three of them had been presented with a vastly different illusion. Then Randy latched on the final word Jake had said.

Pudding.

What they had had for dessert. Could it have achieved this effect? Randy still had the feeling of something moving in his belly, and then it intensified, as –

Another subsonic rumble came.

So those at least were real.

Immediately Randy felt himself being transported back to the illusion, where the road opened up and consumed them, but he kept fighting it with all his mental power.

"Quickly! We have to vomit it out! The bun pudding!"

He rushed out through the driver's door, or actually fell out, fingers in his throat. The dessert had to be expunged right now.

But was he already too late? He felt like succumbing to the illusion, to the blackness that was swallowing him whole. His willpower would not last forever.

Then with shocking suddenness, the wave of vomit came from the pit of his stomach with a fierce power, arcing through the air. The effect was immediate: the illusion was gone, and Randy could think clearly again. The convulsions lasted well after he was empty, and though they were painful, and he was drenched in cold sweat, right now he was very thankful for them.

Finally he turned around to see if Jake and Lee had managed to expunge the foul matter as well. His surprise was complete.

They were nowhere to be seen.

“You see,” Klaus-Marius said in a lecturing manner. “The subsonic rumble you are hearing is its own way to activate any matter that can act as a dimensional portal. It is like the low-frequency counterpart to the high overtones.”

To be honest, Lothar was surprised that the assistant regional director had any understanding of sound signals. But reluctantly he had to accept it. Of course the man could not possess actual love for the scienta maxima, the pursuit of ultimate knowledge.

Still, if his cronies had been venturing into the other realm longer than Lothar had, he might play a crucial part of getting things back in control.

Lothar was also surprised how calm he felt at this moment, when it appeared that the shadow was on the loose and things were spiraling out of control. Perhaps it was the perverse need to retain face in front of his superior.

“So do you believe fudge would also act as a gate?” Lothar asked.

Another giant rumble. This appeared to come from closer to their current location.

“I don't think it would be sending those soundwaves in vain.”

Then horror invaded Lothar's mind again, replacing the calmness. It appeared that the low sound became constant. The room started shaking.

“The bun pudding –” he hissed.

If the sound was constant, everything that could act

as a gate would stay permanently open. There was still a substantial amount of the pudding on the prison kitchen walls.

“Yes, truly a fine mess you have cooked up here. I don't think you will be of further use until this situation is properly resolved, which might mean calling in the disaster response team. And that means – you probably have doomed your staff to die.” Klaus-Marius stated matter-of-factly.

“What do you mean?”

“Well, you see, their methods will be extreme. An induced meltdown to contain the dimensional phenomenon might not be out of the question.”

Having said this, Klaus-Marius produced a small pistol-like weapon from another suit pocket.

What the fuck? Suddenly Lothar was angry instead of scared. Disaster response team? Induced meltdown? And what was that odd gun? He was angry at himself for severely underestimating Klaus-Marius, and leaving himself defenseless. Right at this moment he was standing too far so that he could just rush and disarm the director.

“Now, you must stay out of the way,” Klaus-Marius said and depressed the trigger.

Lothar felt the needle hit him square in the stomach, and at that moment he understood perfectly. A tranquilizer gun! Fuck! He probably wouldn't have much time. Still he had to do something.

In rage, he lashed against Klaus-Marius, and managed to make him lose balance. The gun clattered to the floor, but Lothar was not interested of it. Instead he broke into a run out to the corridor. Already he felt his vision dim. Indeed, he did not have much time.

Jake saw Lee float in the blackness some twenty or

thirty metres away. He too was floating. Somehow he knew this time it was not illusion, but their predicament was completely real instead. They had not managed to vomit all the bun pudding out, like Randy had, and had been forcibly transported to this foreign dimension.

It was unfair, Jake thought. As you floated it here it did not matter how combat ready you were. Here you had no control.

The positive news was that he at least thought he was breathing in the blackness. So this realm could not be actually space, because the lack of pressure alone would have killed him and Lee already.

He took this opportunity – as not much was happening – to actually study his surroundings.

Now he saw too the things which Lee had referred to as giant smokestacks. Viewed from above, he could see that they were humongous vats instead, in which some gray substance slowly swirled around. Somehow the motion felt deeply hopeless.

Kim heard her mobile phone beep. A text message had arrived. Fuck! She should have kept it on silent, or even turned it off completely. Being so misanthropic it was by now rare that anyone who knew her contacted her – but still she felt intrigued to fish it out of her pocket and look.

For all she knew, it could be Viktor.

Kim unlocked the keypad while steering with the other hand and opened the message. It read:

“Thmngs goinh to hell at uif prison you miht be onlx who can...”

The message was incomplete. And it was from Lothar. To be honest Kim did not even remember how

she had his number, and Lothar hers.

At first Kim dismissed it as a sick joke. But then, it did contain misspellings and trail off in a rather desperate way. And then she remembered the odd rumble. Could some odd shit be indeed going on at the facility?

But why should she care?

She thought for a few critical seconds, and almost drove off the road due to indecision. She cursed and righted the vehicle.

Lothar's talk of how he needed added security for scientific experiments.

The pudding gate, and the black puddle.

Viktor's apparent vanishing act.

The rumble.

And this message.

It would probably be wise to just push on the accelerator harder, and forget the prison at least right now, if not for ever. Her survival instinct told to do exactly that.

But then...

Kim remembered how unnaturally excited she had felt when first seeing the gate open. More weird things were probably going on there right now, so there were three options, basically:

One: go back there, investigate, manage to survive (if said things are lethal to some degree), experience things far beyond the usual misery.

Two: go back there, investigate, die in the process while experiencing things far beyond the usual crap that was her existence.

Three: do not return. Tomorrow, read of some odd shit having happened there from the internet. Continue as usual.

In the end, curiosity (or perhaps the fear of missing out) won. Kim made a three-point turn with burning

rubber and pressed the pedal to the metal to make it back to the prison before it was all over.

Lee saw the shadow emerge once more, towering over the vats and obscuring the starlight. Now when she could take a clear look, it was much more repulsive and amorphous than she remembered. She even flashed back to the nightmare, which had been at the prison instead (which she had not even seen for real yet), and remembered the failed quick-time event which had led to her dying.

She tried to shout to Jake to warn him, but no sound emerged from her throat. Then it occurred to her, was the “air” she breathing liquid instead, and therefore she could not make a sound properly?

The shadow was upon her now. There was no more time.

Out of some perverse reason she imagined the quick-time event again, though it had no basis in reality. But in any case, now she was prepared.

Cross.

Circle.

Square.

Cross again.

Triangle.

She nailed the sequence, and transported sideways to safety just as the shadow was about to lunge at her. Then she understood something: one could indeed be combat ready even in this strange dimension. But it would all happen through your mind.

Did Jake understand the same thing? How could she make him understand?

Then Lee saw it. Jake had looked into her direction as she had “warped” sideways, so he would understand.

He was smart enough for that. If only he gained control in time...

Lee evaded the shadow's tentacles again, this time without even imagining the quick-time event. She almost thought it was easy.

Of course she knew that even though she had mastered the art of movement, in time her concentration would slip. She could not keep avoiding forever. For long-term survival, they would need to learn how to return to their own dimension.

But now the shadow clearly switched tactics and started moving into Jake's direction instead.

Fuck! Would he be ready?

Randy tried to concentrate, but he could not make the vision of the black hell spiral return. So it had been the bun pudding which had made him see things. He waited for a while, but Jake and Lee did not materialize. But the rumbling went on, it had now become continuous.

Randy shook his head. This was definitely epic, but being left alone was not fun. That just meant he had to fight through hell to reunite with his friends, right? Or at least that was how the usual trope went.

Now that he thought of it, perhaps being in the middle of a DragonForce song, or in the middle of several tv tropes was not that fun at all.

But it allowed him to operate on a level of logic that would greatly simplify things. Likely, the answer to everything would be inside the prison. He just had to get there first. And that itself did not seem like much of a challenge yet, as the gaping maw had just been an illusion. The road stretched on toward the facility perfectly fine. He would just need to get back into the truck and

get going.

Suddenly he found that he perhaps should get going fast. The road was no longer fine. Cracks started appearing, and somehow he knew this time they were no illusion.

He climbed in and gunned the engine. Fortunately it started without protest.

The repressive ululation and moaning of the coagulated souls had continued for what already had appeared like an eternity. But now it had started to intensify. What for? Were they expecting another victim to join them?

Viktor's soul found it had in fact retained some shred of identity. It knew why it was so, and was secretly very pleased of that.

It was the Black Flame of Azerate, still refusing to die even in this accursed spiritual prison!

It imagined the eleven dragon heads, and gained some strength from that alone. It recited them constantly, imagining a low deathly and sinister voice though it had none: Moloch, Belzebub, Rofocale, As-taroth, Asmodeus, Baal, Belphegor, Abramelech, Lilith, Naamah, Satan...

It waited for the moment when it would have enough force to silence the ululation and make all other souls in the vat to feel true fear.

For they did not understand Chaos and the will to become one with it, but it did.

That was power!

Tremendous power!

16.

The adrenaline shot Lothar had snatched from an emergency medical cabinet and savagely injected into his chest had bought him some time, enough to send the text message to Kim. Whether that would do any good, he did not know. But now the adrenaline was wearing off and the blackness was invading again. Lothar felt himself slide along the wall to the floor, and he was too powerless to get back up. The situation would now play out without him, the fate of this facility, his coworkers, perhaps even of the whole Earth.

In a way it was simple and comforting: if the threats of Klaus-Marius would become reality in full, and the emergency strike team would actually induce the reactor to explode, he would not ever wake up, as he would be blown to pieces. That felt infinitely more relieving than the thought of being trapped in the soul vat.

With that final thought in mind he lost consciousness.

Jake thought he got it. Lee had suddenly moved sideways, and it could not be anything else than telekinesis. If you thought you'd move, then you did. That was the only workable way to travel in this foreign dimension.

But he also got that the huge shadow was definitely headed his way. He had to move now.

Yes –

He was moving!

Suddenly he felt excruciating pain starting from his groin, and rising upward.

He looked down, and realized he had warped directly into one of the shadow's tentacles, impaling himself. But how could such amorphous blob also be so sharp and damaging? It made no sense.

But what he had just done was a stupid, stupid mistake.

He looked to the side, and by the look of horror on Lee's face it was clear she had seen the impalement.

He had to free himself. So he thought of movement again, and thought transformed into action –

And this time the pain was even worse!

He indeed had freed himself, but in doing so the tentacle had completely ruptured his lower torso. He could see his blood and intestines trailing behind, floating like in vacuum. Freedom had come at a terrible price.

This was an even worse mistake. Now he certainly would not survive.

And to make matters worse, now the shadow was upon him again. The tentacle dug itself in from the same hole it had made, slithering and twisting inside him. He screamed, but managed only to make a strained sound the blackness all around him muffled. He was not even sure Lee heard it, and to tell the truth he did not even want her to hear. In the next instant he sensed a terrible heat and understood he was being melted from inside. At the same time it felt like his soul was already separating from the body, becoming the same matter that was slowly drifting in the vat below.

Lee was transfixed into place as she saw how the shadow was mauling Jake. The only comfort to her was the fact that by now he should be dead and feel nothing at all. His body was fast becoming just a mass of black goo, apparently because of being heated to a stupefyingly high temperature.

Or what if he was still alive, in searing agony?

It was too horrible to think about. Suddenly Lee felt nauseous to the core, and the bun pudding started to make its way out. It ejected with force, floating in front of her just like Jake's blood and entrails.

And as soon as everything was out, Lee felt herself leaving this hostile black dimension with a sudden lurch. So that was the answer to how you got out. But the horror of Jake's death was still so vividly in her mind that Lee felt no relief whatsoever.

Randy gunned the engine like a madman. Hairline cracks kept appearing in the road, and he twisted the wheel back and forth to avoid them. Because he had seen some of them growing into bigger holes. They might even lead, for real, to the illusory realm he had imagined the truck sinking into.

The steel gate was now only a fifty meters away, and he kept increasing the speed, as much as the old engine could give. It was already straining near the redline, but Randy would not switch to higher gear to keep the acceleration. Soon the truck would smash into the gate, acting as a battering ram.

Suddenly Randy had a vision, a premonition. But it was not the black realm he had seen before, rather something completely different. Grayish-white and eternal, a neverending maze of rooms, expanding to every direction as far as one's mind could imagine.

In this realm a lone, aged man clutched an electric guitar in his calloused hands. He was obviously a rock star, a guitar legend. But now he had been trapped in this realm for who knows how long.

Somehow Randy knew this man could write songs just as epic and memorable as DragonForce could, but without needing as much raw speed and technique.

But to see this realm was a warning.

It was clearly an afterlife of some kind.

And then Randy understood what would happen: the front of the truck would crush from the impact with the gate, the engine and the steering wheel would move into his lap and in turn crush him against the seat, and then he would inhabit this realm as well.

He could discuss epic songwriting for eternity with the aged man, but he would never return. He would not see Jake and Lee again. He would not witness the coming apocalypse today, at this very location.

Randy snapped back to reality.

The gate was too close to brake to a halt in time.

The speed was substantial, and ejecting himself would likely result in some harm as well, but in his premonition he had not died because of that.

Again, he yanked the driver's door open and ejected himself. Seconds after the truck impacted with the gate, having not lost much speed in the meanwhile.

The pain was tremendous.

The noise of the collision was even more tremendous.

But as the dust settled, he was still alive.

His jeans had torn from the knees, exposing the skin which had been severely and bloodily scratched. But that would not be a life-threatening injury. Nothing had broken or dislocated either; he could walk, though not

very fast, and every step did hurt.

Perhaps most importantly, the truck had managed to dislodge the gate. Not much, but enough so that he could squeeze himself from the opening into the prison courtyard.

Viktor's soul detected the splashing of yet another personality into the vat. It was quickly devoured by the collective consciousness of the liquid, and joined the chorus of the sickening wail, which still grew in intensity.

So, they had indeed been waiting for the next victim.

Now there appeared to be a pattern to the ululation. The pitch started changing in quick succession, alternating between a low and a high frequency, forming a kind of twisted message. Its speed picked up, starting from what could be fast, skillful singing of a two-note melody, and ending up with something definitely inhuman, where the frequencies blurred and distorted into each other.

The message tried to invade Viktor's soul as well, making it take part, but for now it resisted. Damn the weak herd mentality! But it had to confess that it felt uncomfortable – if not actually scared – by this development.

For it understood now what the two frequencies had to stand for. One and zero. Binary communication. The souls in the vat had merged to become a kind of a computer. But what were they calculating? Somehow it seemed as if the latest soul that had merged into the vat had been the critical, missing link, so that the calculations could begin. It considered giving in – at least momentarily – and taking part in the computation, so that it could understand what it was all about. Of course that could be risky, for it might be that there was no re-

turn once you gave in. The little shred of individuality it had remaining might be irrevocably lost. Would the understanding be worth it? That too, was a binary decision. One or zero.

Zero to reject their reality and substitute its own. Like it had done up to now.

One to join the computation and gain understanding.

Understanding was what Viktor had sought in life, and it would be possible – though only remotely – that this understanding would be crucial to further Anti-Cosmic development. Maybe it would even be a way out of this vat, a step towards merging with Azerate.

So, one it would be.

Viktor's soul allowed the herd-consciousness to invade. It was quickly picked up by the blindingly fast stream of binary communication, assigned at first a mundane, meaningless subroutine. Take the input bit, transform it to the opposite (one to zero and zero to one), then output it.

But while taking part in that subroutine, it sought to understand the greater meaning behind this all.

Not before long that understanding came, in a flash like lightning. So vast and terrible was this understanding that Viktor's soul could do nothing but to lose all resistance and merge completely. Its last conscious thought – or actually it was rather an image – was the full knowledge of what this herd-consciousness was calculating. It was the next evolutionary form of the shadow (or shadows) that had killed Viktor. It was an endlessly tall black cat, towering over the known ten dimensions of the cosmos, and even the eleventh, the anti-dimension. It would tower even over Azerate and eventually swallow the chaos dragon whole! And that was infinitely terrible, for if Azerate would be swal-

lowed and exist no more, then there would be no Anti-Cosmic goal to reach for. No merging with Chaos would be possible any more. For this cat stood for something even more terrible than Chaos: it represented pure nothingness, the complete lack of all existence.

When the calculations would be fully complete, then the shadow could transform into the cat, and it would be free to invade all dimensions and start destroying them.

The cat had also a name, which was also terrifying in its own right.

Tacgnol.

As Kim neared the prison, driving near top speed for the visibility was clear and there was no traffic at all (as usual) she suddenly had an odd sensation.

Somehow she knew that Viktor had ceased to exist both in this world, and the next, whatever it was. She did not believe in life after death, or the supernatural – the bun pudding gate on the other hand was not supernatural, it was clearly a scientific phenomenon – but perhaps this was a scientific phenomenon as well. A transmission of electromagnetic energy or something.

This sensation had come with the momentary vision of a towering black feline, which Kim recognized as an internet meme.

But transmitted this way, it felt more real, and more oppressing than just a meme.

Kim shook her head and forced herself to focus back on the present. The rumbling had not ceased, instead it was certainly turning louder the more closer she got. Now she could actually feel the road underneath shaking.

“Fuck,” Kim breathed, as she saw the cracks in the

road ahead. Something unusual was most definitely going on at the facility. She slowed down to be sure she would be able to navigate the cracks.

Lee fell roughly on a riveted steel walkway. It certainly hurt, but was much preferable to being consumed by the shadow.

She was still confused, still in shock by Jake's violent death, but as far as she could tell she was back on Earth, back in the physical dimension.

But where was she exactly? It was a dimly lit, high-ceilinged room, uncomfortably hot. She could hear the hissing of steam. There was a sickly sweet odor in the air. The network of walkways was circling what looked like large boilers.

She shuddered, as she thought of the vats in the other dimension. Though it was unlikely there would be the same gray jelly inside these containers, somehow this location had to be connected to it. Over the hissing, she heard and felt the same rumbling she had first heard in the pickup truck, before she had been transported.

So was this room somewhere in the bowels of the prison? It was possible. Somehow she would have wanted a magnifying glass and a flashlight with her, as if they would have helped her to unveil the mysteries better.

Suddenly she heard a loud gurgling noise, which was coming from the boiler at the back of the room. The roof of the steel container burst open, spraying steam and some brown substance in semi-liquid form all over the walls.

In this very instant she abandoned any Nancy Drew fantasies. Thinking more practically, she was very glad

to be far away from the explosion. She did not want to imagine what the hot brown sludge would do on contact with her skin.

In any case, she would have to vacate this room. It certainly was not safe. There was too much pressure in these boilers.

But in the next instant her shock grew much worse. In fact it went beyond all imagination. For from the middle of the burst container, the black tentacles of the shadow from the other dimension started reaching out.

Reaching out for her, clearly.

Somehow this brown matter could also act as a portal between dimensions. And that meant this room was doubly as dangerous as she had initially thought.

Lee started running for her life. Just after a few steps she stumbled and fell, as she was still shaky from all the teleportations, and what had happened in the other realm.

Quickly, she got back up.

In the physical realm, she certainly would not be able to “warp” to avoid the shadow. She just had to hope her legs would be fast enough. To be honest, she did not know where the exit was, or if it would be locked. But any direction away from the shadow was good.

17.

Randy surveyed the courtyard. There was a parking lot with several cars; apparently they were the employees' vehicles. But what kind of work was being done here? Summoning the apocalypse? Well, he hoped they were happy now, because now it seemed like they were succeeding.

He had to get inside to see what kind of people they were. It would be unfair, though, if they had firearms. If there were actual black ops soldiers and tier one operators guarding this site. To tell the truth, Convict Conditioning kind of combat ready would be useless against guns. In that case he would have to get armed as soon as possible. Though he had never fired an actual firearm. But he had watched enough reloading animations in FPS games to know how guns worked, right?

Somehow he would have felt more comfortable with the thought of battling jetpack ninjas, or demons. Or at least it would be more epic to die by ninja weapons, than be cut down by automatic gunfire.

He noted the barred windows of the large central building. But there were no windows on the first floor, so he would have to climb along the brick wall first, then try to see if any of the bars would be loose. That

would certainly require being combat ready, especially in his current not-so-top notch condition. And even then it felt like a desperate, improbable option.

However, if Jake and Lee had vanished into another dimension, it felt logical that by infiltrating the prison – where the end of the world was apparently being summoned – he would find the dimensional gate that could take him to them. Therefore he should try his utmost to get inside.

He also remembered the vision he had seen of that third dimension, the one with the trapped guitar legend. And he had a crazy thought. Maybe there had been a reason for that vision, other than just a warning. Maybe that man would be so combat ready that he could stop this shit. Maybe Randy alone – or even with Jake and Lee – could not.

But how could Randy reach him? If it actually was a form of afterlife, did it mean he had to die first? Or if there was a gate inside the prison, maybe he could reprogram it. That felt like a more comfortable alternative. But –

Reprogramming a dimensional gate did also possess a considerable risk. If he got the destination wrong, his guts could be splattered over a random location. Or he might even get stuck inside solid matter. Yes, the science of teleportation was certainly epic, and scary.

Randy considered whether Sam Totman and Herman Li would be ready to step into a teleporter gate if the situation demanded so. They could write supremely epic (and fast) music, but were they actually combat ready? If Randy remembered right, they could not actually beat their own song in Guitar Hero 3. That was certainly a fail.

Then he understood that was a fairly irrelevant and

unfair line of thinking. Sam and Herman had already proven themselves supremely, they had achieved what most would never achieve, they certainly were combat ready in music. They did not need to be combat ready in dimensional travel, or programming rendering engines, or –

But, what if Randy could be combat ready in all of those? That would be roughly the same as being both a brain surgeon, and a rock star or a Formula One driver, or something. Though Randy did not want to cut open skulls.

Fuck. He should not be thinking stupid shit like that, he should be getting inside that damn main building!

He shifted his gaze to the ground level, trying to see if there would be more accessible entry possibilities. But there seemed to be no convenient cellar entrance, or something similar. And even if there had been, it would have been locked with very high likelihood. And he did not have any tools with him and had not practiced lockpicking (or lockbreaking) either. Damn!

Then his eyes drifted to the courtyard itself, and its grassy surface. While he walked around, he noticed the open sewer entrance.

Maybe that could grant him entry.

But before he could consider that possibility further, or put any plan into action, he heard the sound of an approaching car engine.

Fuck! Someone was coming. Maybe an employee that was late. He would need to hide.

But where to?

Kim cursed. She had almost driven into a deepening crack in the road, but corrected the course in the last second. It almost appeared like the road had a malevo-

lent sentence. Was that possible? Kim was beginning to accept, especially after receiving the possibly telepathic image of the black cat Tacgnol, that perhaps anything was possible when it came to this facility, and the bun pudding gate.

Then she cursed again, as she lifted her gaze and realized that there was a pickup truck blocking the entrance. It most definitely was the same truck she had seen earlier. Damned hooligans! She would tase and pepper spray them (though officially she was not on duty) if she just got the chance.

She braked to a halt just before the gate, guiding the Fiat to the right side of the road. The GMC truck was badly smashed, it indeed seemed like the youth had tried to use it as a battering ram.

Fucking hell! They had even succeeded, because the gate had dislodged sufficiently so that there was an opening. But they must have not been inside while the vehicle impacted with the gate, because the cabin was now a twisted mess of metal – and empty. Indeed, they would have been severely wounded – possibly killed by the collision, requiring a rescue team with welding equipment to get them out.

So, that at least told that the hooligans were not abysmally stupid. But what were they doing here, this day? Had they too heard the rumble and decided they needed to see what was going on? No, Kim had first seen the pickup earlier, when she was leaving work. The subsonic noise had not yet started then.

Well, to tell the truth it did not matter. Explorers or vandals, the best Kim would hope for that they did not interfere. And if they did, she would show them some very harsh discipline.

Kim walked round to the front of the truck and navi-

gated the opening to the courtyard. Then she scanned a hundred and eighty degrees arc from the right to the left.

Immediately she noticed the guy, a pimply-faced youth with unkept brown hair, trying to hide – without much success – behind some low bushes near the wall. She took the taser gun and aimed it with both hands.

“Intruder! You have been spotted! Come out with your hands up, but slowly. No sudden movements!” Kim shouted with a rough, gravelly voice.

For a moment she considered the possibility of a grave underestimation. What if the intruder had a firearm, perhaps even an automatic one? And if he was high on some substance, the taser might not have much of an immediate effect, so he might well have time to shoot her dead.

The others could also be lying in ambush, while presenting one of them as an obvious bait. But somehow it seemed improbable. Kim scanned the courtyard again, but could not see anyone else.

Slowly, the guy stood up, hands held dutifully high.”

“Are you security?” he asked with a trembling voice.

Kim nodded, and that was perhaps a mistake, for then the guy started talking in a rapid-fire tempo, fast and incoherent. Kim could have ordered him to silence, but could not honestly be arsed to do that. So she just decided to listen to the inane rambling for now.

“Listen, we came – I, Jake and Lee – I’m Randy – we came here to do some combined exploring and Combat Ready bodyweight training. Yeah I know it was a stupid idea. And illegal. But I – I have a good reason to believe that the end of the world is about to start here, and my friends – they had eaten bun pudding this morning, and when the low rumble started, they couldn’t vomit it out

fast enough. And they just vanished in thin air. It was like the pudding teleported them away! I then rammed the gate and yeah, I know that's illegal too, but I needed to get inside to find out if I could get to them. And to stop the apocalypse, possibly. 'Cos I think this place is somehow connected to it. By the way, what is this place being used for exactly?"

Kim was silent for a moment, trying to process the information. "It's classified. You are trespassing, you have no need to know," she grunted then.

"Come on. My friends might be in danger."

Kim considered for a while. It was clear that, though incoherent, this kid was telling things that were much in line with what she had witnessed herself. The bun pudding again. Perhaps it was the key to everything. However, revealing the identity of this facility might get her fired. But that was probably the least of her worries now.

"It's now a Purexo research facility."

"Damn! I knew! Purexo provides the campus food. We ate your bun pudding this morning!"

Strictly speaking "your bun pudding" was a severe insult, as Kim was just a night guard, with nothing to do with the actual services Purexo provided. But she decided to ignore it for now, as it would be better to give an impression of being in the know. It would also be wise to hide the fact that she was not even on duty right now.

"So, what do we do now?" Randy demanded, with mixed despair and agitation.

"Officially, you are detained for trespassing and destruction of Purexo's property. I'm authorized to lock you up while waiting for the cops to arrive. And believe me, I will do exactly that - plus tase and pepper spray

you – if you give me the slightest reason. However, the situation is not exactly normal.”

“Yeah, I agree a hundred percent. So?”

Kim had already talked too much considering how curt she usually was. It was certainly unpleasant. She was supposed to be more misanthropic, instead of feeling any kind of sympathy for this intruder –

Well, she certainly was not feeling sympathy. But it appeared they shared an interest to what was happening at this facility. So –

“If you shut the fuck up and don’t give me any trouble, I’ll let you tag along.”

“Will you try to stop the apocalypse as well?”

“I said, shut the fuck up. I’m just curious of what the hell is going on here. If that doesn’t satisfy, I suggest you get out through the gate before I decide to detain your ass, like I should.”

“I’ll rather tag along,” Randy said.

Kim holstered the taser gun. “We’ll check the security center first. Or I’ll check. You stay outside it.”

Randy nodded, and Kim started a swift walk toward the main entrance door. She noticed Randy had some trouble keeping the pace, but she would not give mercy. It was not as if she forced the kid wanted to tag along. No, she had definitely given him an option to back out. Doing this, she would also not be responsible of him in any way, if there was indeed something dangerous going on at this place.

Lee made it out of the boiler room – barely – slamming the door shut behind her. She was now in a maze of corridors, just as dimly lit as the room she had escaped. The good news was that for now the shadow had not followed her, but the bad news was that she had no idea

where to go to.

She arrived at a staircase, and studied the plaque on the wall for a moment.

SUBLEVEL 1 – MAIN LABORATORIES

SUBLEVEL 2 – HIGH PRESSURE RESEARCH (*)

SUBLEVEL 3 – REACTOR CORE

(*) YOU ARE HERE

What the hell? Not just laboratories, but a reactor? Did that mean an actual nuclear power plant? She definitely did not want to head that way. So the choice was quite easy, she would go up instead. It appeared that there was also more light coming from the topside. For now, light equaled safety. The low rumbling also appeared to originate from here or the floor below. Was it the shadow causing it? In that case she certainly wanted to head away from it.

Cautiously, she started climbing up the stairs.

Soon enough, she arrived at the sublevel 1. It was another maze of corridors. Here, she would not have any better idea where to go, but if the shadow had remained below, she rather was lost than at its mercy. While climbing, she had been listening to the horrible rumbling, that still went on. Was it the sound that the shadow made? She could not be sure.

But she was quite certain of one thing: the low noise kept switching its direction, perhaps even swirling around her, as if mocking her. And that was alarming. Could the shadow be above her now?

Or was there several of them?

Lee decided to climb one more floor upstairs. Here, the walls changed to a more weathered, lighter-colored

concrete. The small windows near the ceiling were all barred.

So she was inside the prison now?

And the laboratories were beneath it?

But what the hell were they researching? Was it torture on unauthorized, forgotten prisoners? Were they being fed the brown sludge –

No. Not sludge.

Fudge.

Now Lee understood clearly what the odor in the boiler room had been. Vanilla fudge. But why would anyone want to boil it? That must surely require an extreme temperature.

And suddenly she understood that this could not be any government-sponsored rendition station. They might be draconian, or even evil, but this bordered on the ridiculous. The government would not waste time on something like this. It had to be private instead –

Yet another wave of understanding hit her hard. She almost felt like Nancy Drew again, unveiling riddles and clues to solving them. And she had already considered the possibility before, even told of it to Jake and Randy, but now the clues were absolutely plain to follow.

Bun pudding.

Fudge.

Desserts, or sweets.

Six letters filled her mind with a foreboding certainty.

Purexo.

It could be none other than their doing. They were a huge, unethical, devil-may-care company, whose only concern was the optimization of profit. But this was still something beyond extraordinary. They actually had underground research labs, where they apparently

studied transportation into other dimensions, and unleashed horrors from beyond to the physical world.

Lee felt sick to her stomach. The smell of the fudge returned to her consciousness, and she wanted to vomit though she was already empty. She felt desperate before the evil that she now thought she fully understood: Purexo were everywhere, they operated internationally, winning contracts by always bidding the lowest, always cutting costs, always exploiting –

And now, they had expanded to opening portals to horrible other realms! Lee flashed back to Jake's cruel death at the hands (or tentacles) of the shadow; it was something that should never have happened, yet it had, and there was no way to turn back time. Flying around the world like Superman to reverse the planet's rotation would not actually work, even if Lee could fly at such supernatural speed.

Nancy Drew had never been in such a terrible case.

Yet Lee knew now was not the moment to give up. She had to be stronger now than ever. All the wrongs of Purexo would have to be exposed. Surely opening dimensional gates had to be against some laws. Like grave endangerment of the public, or something.

But where she should go?

Down one floor, she decided. The laboratories. Gather evidence.

Or actually the choice was made for her, as the rumbling suddenly doubled in intensity, and the corridor wall some thirty metres ahead of her just exploded with a shower of flying masonry, and masses of semi-liquefied bun pudding came gushing through right after!

But it was not only bun pudding.

It was bun pudding with active dimensional gates

opening and closing in rapid succession, like black, disgusting blisters. And from those gates emerged the shadow tentacles, hunting for Lee mercilessly.

She felt like her heart was about to stop from horror.

It did not matter if there was one or more shadows. Now she understood one more thing – wherever there was some Purexo dessert or other food ingredient, it could turn into a gate from which the cursed shadow could reach for her.

Then it got even worse.

For the light in the other end of the corridor started to dim, and a fog-like entity materialized, sprouting similar tentacles as the other shadow. So: there was another entity at large in the prison corridors, and it did not even need a gate.

This was beyond horror.

She was being hunted from both sides.

For a moment Lee thought of rushing to the fog, trying to kill it with her bare hands – or more likely, surrendering to it, hoping for a quick death.

But there was no telling if the death would be quick, or if she even would die at all. Or if her soul would be left alive in any case, left to suffer at the hands of these entities. Therefore: reason won and she rushed down the stairwell, taking two steps at a time and trying her utmost not to trip over.

18.

The black Bell 205 transport helicopter was en route to the mission zone. The plan was for the disaster response team to land if possible, but if a significant dimensional occurrence was already underway, endangering a direct insertion, they would parachute from further away instead.

The team was led by Major Rutger Jäger, an expert marksman and seasoned veteran of special operations, ex-Delta Force, and several years in service of various private military contractors, until he had recently been snatched by Purexo to provide security and disaster response for their most critical scientific experiments.

He spoke only when needed, but whenever he did, his authority was unquestionable. He had a wide jaw and short-cropped hair that was already turning gray.

The rest of the team consisted of Matthew, the demolitions expert, Eric, the martial arts specialist, Andy, the support gunner (who loathed the M-249 light machine gun, and always preferred carrying a heavier weapon such as the older M-60), and last but not perhaps most fearsome Carolyn, the sniper. Like Rutger, Carolyn was also a veteran in the truest sense of the word, and her hair had begun to whiten as well, but her sensory

acuteness and stability of aim were still absolutely frightening. She had been known to stay in the sniping hideout for days, with not much movement at all, and then slay her target with one well-placed shot. Though she was rather short and slim, almost fragile looking, looks could be deceiving as she was still surprisingly strong and preferred the large Barrett .50 caliber sniper rifle even for human targets, though it was most often reserved as an anti-material rifle.

In line with the delicate nature of their mission today, they were equipped with unusual ammunition: PK (psycho-kinetic) rounds, which were to rip open and disable, at least momentarily, any dimensional entities. The problem with these rounds was that an actual dimensional phenomenon was hard to come by, so the bullets had so far been tested and measured by their ability to disrupt electronic devices, which was indeed comparable to a small EMP burst. The theory was that paranormal and dimensional beings would also obey the laws of electromagnetism.

Their mission was simple, but potentially deadly: contain the dimensional phenomena at the desert research facility by any means necessary. They had been given the control codes for the reactor, and a meltdown would be initiated if necessary. Whether this did or did not leave enough time for the team to extract, was of no concern. In case they perished, Purexo would provide for their families generously. And furthermore, they all had signed on for this to experience things no other man or woman had experienced, even if it meant dying in the process. In fact, though there had been minor disturbances and security incidents related to Purexo's dimension gate research in the past, this was the first outright emergency, to which they were going in with

the full authorization of extreme measures.

And as such, they were excited.

As much as the professional shell of a special ops soldier allowed. It was not every day that you got to nuke a facility with an out-of-control dimensional gate, and the experience had to be savored fully.

Like an especially challenging Purexo dessert.

“FUUUUUU!” Kim growled as she increased speed while running down the corridor that led to the security center, Randy trailing close behind. This time he would just have to keep the pace, or he would die.

(The writer would also just have to keep writing, else he would die as well.)

One minute earlier, things had appeared fairly normal as they had entered the facility. But then, bun pudding had started flowing through the corridors, and the fog-or-shadow entity had appeared. Right now both of them were mercilessly close on their tail. Flowing bun pudding itself would not have been that horrible, but combined with black shadow tentacles slithering in and out of the continuously shifting, myriad dimensional gates on its surface, it was much worse.

“I thought I heard footsteps,” Randy breathed. “Going down that stairwell.”

“We can’t stop. The security center’s on this floor, this way” Kim grunted, trying to calm down, but it was not exactly working well. The situation had indeed changed fast, too fast for comfort.

Kim tried to think rationally. She had seen the high-capacity ovens in the prison kitchen; could they even hold that much bun pudding? Or had it started to multiply on its own, perhaps due to the dimensional gates’ influence?

But at least so far the bun pudding was still flowing from the direction of the kitchen, it was not coming from the corridor up ahead.

She very much hoped that the security center would have weapons. She had not been allowed to use one during her rounds, but surely they had to have something for more severe emergencies.

Though there was no telling if any earthly firearms would have any effect on the shadow-entities. But in any case, it would be more comforting to die while clutching the cold steel (or plastic) of a firearm in both hands, pumping the otherworldly entity full of lead, even if ineffectually.

"We'll turn left here. It's not far from here," Kim hissed.

She was secretly pleased, as she had glanced behind and noticed they were gaining on both of the dimensional aggressors, who were falling further behind. Randy too seemed to be coping rather well, at least for now.

She turned left –

And suddenly there came a huge rumbling boom.

The ceiling of the left corridor junction just caved in, and among the plaster and concrete and tiles, also bun pudding came flowing down.

And not just any pudding. Dimensional gates would certainly open soon from the pores, giving an unfair advantage for the black tentacles to resume the chase.

They were blocked from the security center now.

How was this possible? Kim cursed in her mind. The kitchen was on this same level, so somehow the pudding had propelled itself up above, perhaps into the ventilation ducts, and was now descending on them. Hunting them.

Another deafening explosion rocked the facility, and next the floor in front of them opened, and a brown substance started flowing through. Kim sensed a disgustingly sweet odor.

But what was that substance? Obviously some food as well. Kim still could not exactly place it –

“Fudge! Vanilla fudge!” Randy shouted.

The wave of heat came next. The brown sludge was steamingly hot. For a double reason now, they had no way of entering the security center.

But what other route was there?

Kim tried to remember, but suddenly even her nightly patrol route seemed lost to her. Things were happening too fast, and she needed to get everything back in control.

The ventilation ducts? Could they work?

In the gray-white realm, Okko thought hard. Though his fingers were calloused and cold, and would no longer move with youthful ease, his mind was as alive as ever.

He thought that he would form a new band, Psychoplasm, that would rule the world like nothing before. To do that, he would have to fire all his old band members and gather a completely new lineup, youthful and hungry.

But to get at that point, he would first have to get out, back to the realm of living.

Klaus-Marius was starting to doubt if being holed up in the security center was a viable tactic after all. They were all there, the employees, and the day guard, who had dragged the unconscious Lothar to the holding cell.

He had listened to the rumbling noises from outside, and their intensity had amplified in a frightening way.

And it seemed to just go on and on, with no respite.

He was not sure if they would be alive when the strike team arrived. The guard kept a 12-gauge shotgun close to him – there was one more, and then some semiautomatic pistols in the weapons cabinet – but probably none of the weaponry would do no good against the shadows. The psycho-kinetic rounds carried by the team would hopefully pack more of a punch.

Klaus-Marius thought, perhaps he just had to think more positively.

Positive thinking had enabled his rise to this position in the Purexo hierarchy so far. It demanded a skillful art of faking results, keeping all the people close to him in sufficient lack of information, or even filled with actual disinformation. But the same strategies might not simply work against the dimensional entities.

But positive thinking in itself would! It was just so hard to uphold it at this exact moment.

For of course, the arrival of the emergency team would not represent an absolute certainty of salvation either. Because their goal was to contain the phenomena at any cost, not the extraction of high-value individuals. If he happened to be trapped here when the meltdown reached a critical point, the hardened commandos would not shed a tear for him, like they would not shed a tear for any of the other employees either.

All this because of Lothar! Klaus-Marius cursed the scientist's objective curiosity. Damn him, again and again. He should have just followed orders, do exactly what he was told and nothing more. Was not the research for new ECD's sufficient? The concept of next level EECD's, like the soul jelly, was reserved only for a very exclusive elite cabal of researchers. And Lothar certainly did not belong. Fuck! Fuck! Fuck.

Klaus-Marius made a solemn vow that if he made it past this day alive, the company policies for selecting supervising researchers would have to be tightened significantly. No individual thinking could be tolerated, except at the very top level! Fuck.

For a moment Kim thought, to hell with the security center. They would need to improvise, think on their feet and stay alive –

Or perhaps they should just leave, when there still was the chance? Indeed, it might be a wise choice. Kim thought she had seen enough of odd things. The rest of it she could well read from a newspaper or from a website.

But then –

Somehow it still felt incomplete. She was in the center of the action, and to leave now would be a defeat and a disappointment. Even if that was the only way to live, and choosing to stay was choosing certain demise.

Though she was no hero either. When she thought of improvising, she thought more of Jack Bauer kind of improvisation. Improvisation in torture and pain. Not disgustingly goody-good improvisation like MacGyver. Though... Wasn't Jack Bauer was the MacGyver of torture!

Fuck!

Fuck them all!

They were both fictional characters.

While Kim was real.

Or was she? Perhaps she started to question her own existence. Perhaps the shadows and bun pudding and fudge chasing them were not real either. She remembered an Impaled Nazarene song, "When All Golden Turned To Shit," that was about questioning existence.

Though Impaled Nazarene was not doom metal, which she preferred, it was cyberpunk sado metal, or nuclear metal. Bah! Those both were euphemisms for black metal. Why the band made such an effort to conceal that fact, she could not understand.

But...

Back to reality.

If not the security center, if not trying to find a roundabout way to reach it, if not crawling through ventilation ducts up, down and sideways, what then?

There was another staircase leading down at the end of the corridor. At least for now, it appeared to be clear of pudding and fudge, or any other foreign substances. Therefore, it was as good choice as any.

Kim glanced behind: Randy was still following, without question. Good. She did not want to raise her voice to explain where they were going. Perhaps most because she did not know exactly either.

19.

Lothar felt consciousness returning. He felt nauseous, but struggled, successfully, against the immediate need to vomit. He also felt cold, which was explained as he saw the cold concrete floor of the holding cell in front of his eyes.

Immediately (it was the same thought he had had when passing out) he remembered Klaus-Marius threatening with annihilation of the facility. Specifically, the meltdown of the reactor induced by the emergency strike team.

He would have to stop it!

But ... why?

Why he would have to stop anything?

The gates had been opened, and soon the world would know. Even if this facility was bombed, and they all buried alive underneath the radioactive rubble, soon someone else would make the discovery independently. Purexo high command could not hide it forever.

They should not have a monopoly on the soul jelly!

Lothar knew he was not thinking exactly coherently. Perhaps he should wait a bit to wake up fully, before making too important decisions. Though he was locked up in a cell, so the most important decision to make

right now would likely be how to get out of here.

How would Gordon Freeman escape?

Without weapons, and without the Zero-G manipulator, he could move forward, backward, strafe sideways, jump and crouch.

That was not exactly helpful. It appeared that by attempting each of those actions, Lothar would just induce hurt to himself, while not doing much to actually help his escape.

How would Solid Snake escape?

He would play dead, perhaps using some ketchup to fake blood.

Lothar did not have ketchup in here. Fuck.

But perhaps he could still fake some kind of a seizure, get the guard's attention (especially if it was Ed on duty again, the one he had bribed with vodka) and then pounce him.

Yes. It might just work. But first he had to gather strength and wait until the tranquilizer drug's effect had mostly dissolved.

The helicopter hovered now exactly above the facility courtyard. Visibility was good; they could see that the road leading to the prison appeared cracked and fractured, but the actual courtyard was in good enough condition for landing. And most importantly, there was no interdimensional entity of large proportions in sight.

The pilot Manfred – his codename was Satanel – started a slow controlled landing. Rutger was pleased to be working with a solid professional like him. The mission could go to hell in any surprising ways, but to have it go smoothly as long as possible would be a good omen.

Suddenly an impossibly loud roar invaded Rutger's

consciousness. It was distorted by the radio system; Rutger took his headphones off and heard its full-spectrum assault on his senses: it was tremendously low yet also shrill with upper mid frequencies at the same time.

Rutger looked down from the cargo / passenger compartment side window.

And he saw it.

It was something his mind was almost unwilling to comprehend. Like thinking it was impossible would make it go away.

But it would not go away.

From the exact center of the prison's central building, a humongously large black feline burst into the open, and soared into the sky. Its body appeared to be never-ending, as the cat's head and front legs already towered high above the chopper, yet its tail end was still nowhere to be seen.

All the while raising to the sky, it roared and screamed terribly. The continuing aural assault quickly dulled Rutger's senses – it was not loud enough to cause actual rupture of the eardrums – and in the end he put the headphones back on to make the sound more tinny and insignificant.

As if the danger would be lessened that way!

This, certainly, was a dimensional phenomenon.

“Tacgnol,” shouted Andy roughly. “The fucking end-of-the-world cat! I never thought I’d see a fucking internet meme for real!”

Andy actually knew it? What the hell? He obviously had spent too much time in cyberspace, too much compared to what was fitting for a specialist in this team.

But maybe he could then know its weaknesses? That could be turned into an advantage.

But at least now one thing was clear.

They could not land the chopper on the parking lot.

They had not seen the black cat attack yet, but there was no telling what supernatural assaults it would have at its disposal.

Suddenly there was a flash of pure white light, and the helicopter rocked.

"It's shooting fucking eye lasers!" Andy went on.

Well, now at least one of its attacks was known, Rutger thought bitterly.

"We're hit!" came the desperate shout of Manfred. "We're going down!"

It appeared as if Manfred had rehearsed his words, predicting the effect before the chopper actually changed its flight path, but then the craft indeed started to rotate uncontrollably. It appeared that the attack had destroyed the tail rotor at least partially.

Was it still safe to parachute out? Rutger tried to estimate the altitude they were at, but the world outside the windows was spinning so wildly, he found out all his special ops experience was failing him right now.

Was Manfred – Satanel – capable of a controlled descent in this exact situation? Or if they bailed out, could they rely on not being crushed by the falling, rotating piece of metal and steel?

Rutger thought he should be in control. Indecision could prove fatal. But if they all died, there would be no-one to tell how he had failed while being in charge; perhaps their GPS locators would tell the cruel facts afterward, but would that matter much then?

Fuck.

They still had a facility to nuke.

And a large black cat to annihilate.

They could not give up now.

Rutger had to be in charge.

“Everyone out now,” he barked. “Go go go!”

Manfred did not have a parachute on him. If he did not manage to land the helicopter safely – too bad for him. But at least the rest of the team still had a theoretical chance.

Rutger, Matthew, Andy, Eric and Carolyn all jumped. Rutger estimated now – as he now had the ground as a stable point of reference – that they had a theoretical chance of surviving the jump. They just had to wait for a few critical seconds to get clear of the rotor blades.

The acceleration due to gravity was always sickening. Even years of special ops missions could not make it go away.

Rutger waited, disappearing to a meditative state where he in fact was in perfect charge –

One.

Two.

Three.

He gave a hand sign for opening the chutes, then right after pulled the ripcord himself.

Instantly afterward, he felt the air around him electrify, and another blinding flash came.

Rutger looked above, and found the helicopter was no more. It was engulfed by a giant fireball. The black cat had fired its eye lasers again. The attack was indeed fearsome. There was no telling if the psycho-kinetic rounds would do any damage on the feline's humongous body, which was still growing in length, as the head was towering even higher above now. It had actually shot the chopper down at a downward angle.

Now they would just have to dodge the falling heap of lethal scrap metal.

Rutger cursed.

They should have waited a couple of seconds more.

But because they had parafoils, they could steer to some degree. Steer away from their falling transport.

“Look out! Above you! Avoid the helicopter if you can!” Rutger shouted to his radio microphone, unsure if any of them would hear.

A few seconds passed, then the flaming husk of the helicopter impacted with Eric's body with tremendous force. He never stood a chance; his parafoil had not even opened fully. He simply became one with the flames and was not seen again.

Though the loss was regrettable, Rutger accepted it without much protest, for it also revealed that in the end it did not matter much whether he would have ordered them to open their chutes now, or later. But the good news was that he, Andy, Matthew and Carolyn were all floating safely toward the ground.

“Heads up! Make sure you land inside the courtyard!” Rutger barked to the radio. He could see the pickup truck that had apparently rammed the entrance gate, and the gate might even be open, but in any case it would be more expedient to land directly inside the walls.

They had no time to waste. The dimensional phenomenon had grown to a degree no-one in Purexo high command (or even Delta Force or Xe Services high command) could have anticipated.

It was perhaps even possible that were they to fail now, the entire Earth could be at risk.

Perhaps the black cat had not noticed them yet. Or maybe it considered such small targets too insignificant to attack. In any case they had luck on their side, but it would not last forever. The advantage had to be utilized while they still had it.

Rutger considered the grim facts. They had lost their

martial arts expert. However, martial arts could not have played a significant role against the towering monstrosity anyway, so the loss was not that great. He also had never liked Eric much.

20.

Down at the laboratory level, Randy saw something that looked undeniably like another human being, vanishing behind a corner.

He picked up the pace, though it still hurt, trying to reach that same corner. He saw the disapproving gaze of Kim, who clearly was going to head another way, but he did not care.

So far, this floor had been spared of the bun pudding, boiling fudge and invading shadows. Randy rounded the corner –

And there could be no doubt.

It was Lee.

But Jake was nowhere to be seen. They both had vanished from the truck mysteriously, so the logical line of thinking was that they both had ended up in the same place, yet only Lee had returned.

Was that bad news?

Randy closed the distance. It was then Lee noticed.

“Randy!” she shouted.

“Lee!” Randy replied. “Where’s Jake?”

His voice trailed off uncomfortably. From the immediate transition on Lee's face that clearly was not a good question. Lee stopped in her tracks and gazed at

the floor, looking defeated.

“He was – eviscerated – by that thing –“ she finally said with a slow trembling voice.

Randy felt like falling through the floor. He knew that life would never be the same. This adventure was indeed lethal, and unpredictable. Yet he was alive. And Lee was alive. But what could he do or say now to lessen the sorrow to any degree?

“I’m so sorry,” Randy finally decided to say, as he enclosed Lee in a hug.

“Purexo must pay,” Lee replied.

“Yes. They must pay. We must kill –“

Randy was not quite sure of what he was saying. It seemed as if his thoughts and words were out of control. But to some degree it felt logical.

“Kill what?” Lee asked.

“Like, everyone. They are all guilty –“

Randy’s voice trailed off again, and he released Lee. To be honest, he was not sure if they indeed would need to kill everyone, but at least that would be epic.

Then, he started thinking more seriously.

In a way, meeting Lee did complicate things. For she was alive, and Jake was dead, and now she would have to be protected to the utmost. Now it was no longer just the matter of experiencing the most awesome and epic end-of-the-world battle possible. Randy had not even begun to process Jake’s death, but in the depths of his mind he knew that if their impenetrable Combat Ready training squad had already been reduced to two, it was already almost beyond horrible, but to lose Lee as well would be simply intolerable, simply unthinkable. Randy hoped that in that case he would see a great, black “Mission Failed” screen, but he knew that instead his cruel existence would continue, until he either perished

as well, or managed to escape this nightmare.

“Well, at least we have to get out of here. Tell everyone what Purexo is doing,” Lee stammered. She did not seem exactly coherent either.

Randy felt a deep conflict in his soul. To get out, or to battle the hordes of the apocalypse. So far he had only seen malicious shadows, not jetpack ninjas or demons, and therefore the experience did feel incomplete.

Damn!

But perhaps...

Perhaps they should indeed get out.

“Yes. We'll do that. Or at least try,” Randy heard himself saying, though he felt himself dissociating. Now he remembered that he did in fact feel like leaving his physical body sometimes.

Or perhaps it was reuniting with Lee that got him feeling confused and out of the body? If it was that indeed, should he kiss her or something, before they got themselves killed, or got transported beyond a pudding gate again? Would that clear his head?

But no. If this was a story, then stories were to have a structure. Now it was not yet the time, while the true epic battle was still ahead.

Though the epic battle had been terribly one-sided so far. Just running away from the shadows.

So yes. Getting out of the facility would prove some kind of initiative, instead of just running down corridors and trying to stay alive. But – what then? How could they actually get back to civilization? Randy was quite sure that the pickup was totaled. Indeed, his big brother would certainly kill him if the beings from other dimensions did not do that first.

What about Kim then? She had arrived in a vehicle of her own. Randy looked around, but Kim was nowhere

to be seen.

They might just have to find their own way out. Well, that was hopefully not too complicated. Up one floor, then out of the main entrance – if it was not yet smeared in bun pudding or steaming hot fudge – and through the courtyard.

Somehow Randy felt afraid of escaping too, because that would possibly be against the rules of the story too. Fate could lash back at him, with potentially deadly results. But if he was afraid of everything, wouldn't he then be just a slobbering emo? Fuck! That was to be avoided, even more than death!

“Fuck him,” Kim hissed under her breath, as she understood that Randy had irrevocably deviated from the path she was on. Though, she did not exactly know where she was heading either.

To find a ventilation duct that would lead upward to the security center? Did she still harbor that hope? It could be an exercise in futility in many ways. Either she would not find a route at all, or then the weapons held there were ineffective, or nonexistent.

But then, invading and investigating a ventilation duct would be an experience in itself. And it would possibly provide better safety against the shadows than just the corridors.

Unfortunately the entrance grates to the ducts were not as readily placed as in video games. Damn. Sometimes Kim indeed hoped for reality to be more like a video game, where, if the game was properly designed, all significant objects to be interacted with would be clearly marked. And that somehow tied in with her desire for a complete lack of thoughts. Just heading for the next quest marker.

Fuck! Kim cursed herself for knowing what a quest marker was. She reminded herself that considering her whole existence, she had played video games quite little, and by no means was she a nerd. Instead she was a hard, uncompromising, misanthropic individual!

But now Kim was sure that there, near a T-junction, hidden behind a tray of measuring equipment, was indeed a grate that could be pried open and entered. It was near the floor, very conveniently, so even climbing was not required.

Navigation would, of course, prove a challenge. Kim had no idea how the ventilation ducts crisscrossed in between the laboratory rooms, and especially between the floors. But the principle was still simple, she would have to find an upward leading junction first. Peering down to the rooms from above, she might regain her bearings more easily.

The team, minus the unfortunate Eric, landed on the courtyard without injury, and packed their parachutes expediently.

“Move! Up to the wall!” Rutger barked as soon as his chute was packed. This was to shield themselves from the cat's eyes as soon as possible. Though it was possible it had X-ray or thermal vision, in which case that would do no good.

He felt himself shaking involuntarily as the cat roared again just as they reached the wall. It was a huge, cavernous blast of sound, like thunder but ten times louder.

Perhaps it was roaring in disappointment?

In that case, up yours!

But now it was no time to stop, or to celebrate early. Instead, Rutger gave a hand signal for advancing to the

entrance doors.

He had been briefed on the layout of the facility, and knew the most optimal – though not necessarily safe – route to the security center would be indeed through the front.

There, they were to meet the assistant regional director Klaus-Marius, to obtain a quick situation update. However, should the route be blocked or the director dead or incapacitated, they would have to assume the worst and proceed directly to the reactor.

To tell the truth, assuming the worst did not demand especial imagination any more. The huge feline creature was towering and roaring above them, and their transport had been blown from the sky. In case they had to blow up the reactor (because it could very well be that the PK rounds would do not much more than to tickle the cat) then there would be no escaping. They would perish in the explosion, or even if they managed to get some distance away, would sustain an immediately or almost immediately fatal dose of radiation.

Then, there was also the possibility, which Rutger almost did not want to consider, that they would induce the meltdown, but the cat would survive it unscathed. In that case they would have failed, and someone else would have to come up with a backup plan, including even greater use of violence and force. It would be a mission failure of epic proportions, but dead special ops soldiers would worry no more.

The ground floor was in chaotic condition. The good news was the complete lack of shadow entities (at least so far) but there was now hot fudge everywhere, trickling down the walls and along the floors. At places it was just a narrow stream which could be easily dodged,

but at other places it had formed huge mountains in semi-liquid state, slowly cooling down, but still supremely harmful to touch, at least through the minimally protecting sneakers both Randy and Lee wore.

They ran down the corridor that would take them to the main entrance, and fresh air. Once or twice they had had to take a detour due to large concentrations of fudge; fortunately there had been no locked gates in their path.

The constant low rumbling and shaking had ceased, and despite the mess, it seemed as if things were calming down. It felt relieving to not be chased by anything.

ROAAAAAAAAAAAAARR!

Suddenly the floor shook once more, with at least twice the intensity than before. And what was that terrible noise? It was not just the ground shaking – it sounded like something alive.

Lee stopped in her tracks. “What on earth was that?”

“Good question,” Randy mused, shaking his head to clear the shock of the ferocious aural blast.

And then something hit him.

Things were not calming down.

They had just changed. The game had changed. It could be that the shadows were not chasing them any more, because they had –

Transformed?

Was that the sound of the transformed form? It had to be something huge, and wicked. And where did it come from? Not below, from the laboratories, but rather –

From above?

From outside?

If there was something outside that could make such terrible noise, then perhaps going out would be risking

their lives much worse. But then ... the alternative would be to just hole up here. What good would that achieve?

"Well, at least I'm glad it's not coming from the direction of the reactor," Lee said.

"Reactor? What?"

Randy could not believe what he had heard. So not only were there dimensional transitions, and evil shadows, living bun pudding and fudge, and then something yet unknown outside...

But a nuclear reactor? In this place?

"Yeah. There was a sign near the stairwell. It was like, level one, laboratories, level two, high pressure research – actually that's where the gate spit me out – and then level three, the lowest, is the reactor."

"Fuck."

This again changed things a bit. Even if something was out there, getting as far away from the power plant as possible, as soon as possible, would definitely be a good, no, an excellent idea.

Kim heard the roar as well, as she crawled in the air duct. In this case size was certainly not an advantage, it felt uncomfortably cramped and confining.

"What doesn't kill you makes you stronger," Kim mused to herself, building up rage so that she would crawl faster, and this ordeal would be over sooner.

When the roar repeated, she started wondering. What the hell was that?

Though in the back of her head she already knew. She remembered the flash-like vision she had received.

Large black cat.

Tacgnol.

If she stretched her imagination, the roar had

sounded slightly cat-like.

Was this the time to realign priorities? Was the security center important any more? Would anything she found there do anything to the feline, if it had indeed materialized now?

But no. She had made up her mind, and would follow the plan through. Because she had not seen anyone except Randy after coming back, it might well be that everyone from the research staff had indeed holed up there. If Lothar was still alive, perhaps he could shed some insight...

But insight to what?

Stopping Tacgnol?

Kim was not sure what her aim today would be, after reaching the security center. She just knew that things were still incomplete, and that was reason enough to push on.

21.

Lee signaled for Randy to halt, just as they were about to emerge into the entrance lobby.

“I think I saw movement,” she whispered.

They peered out of the glass-paned double doors carefully. Movement indeed!

Four figures in full combat gear were entering the lobby as well. Two of them had assault rifles (Randy guessed it was the M4), while one had a heavier and sturdier machine gun. The one Rambo used in *First Blood Part 2*! That meant the man carrying it had to be very combat ready. Though these were not really jet-pack ninjas, Randy felt suddenly pumped up again, though he knew it was to be inappropriate – he and Lee certainly were at a disadvantage. To prevail against automatic firearms using just strength gained from Convict Conditioning would be a superior feat. Perhaps extremely trained abs could stop even bullets. Just perhaps. But Randy's muscles certainly were not trained to that degree, yet.

But the fourth figure, last in the formation, was perhaps the most odd, and most frightening of them all. She was shorter than the rest, clearly an elder woman, yet she carried a very formidable-looking sniper rifle,

almost as long as she was tall. It was much bigger than for example the Russian Dragunov rifle Randy knew.

Surely, after being shot by that, no Convict Conditioning in the world would help you.

Lee and Randy waited, being careful to not expose themselves. Using coordinated military-like movement, the figures began to advance through the lobby, heading exactly their way.

Damn! What to do now?

Then Randy knew. Of course.

“Let's circle back and lose them in the corridors,” he whispered.

He knew it would be a long shot. Because they had to move quickly, yet silently. And they could not really hug the walls, because of the still hot fudge trickling down.

“Then we have to go now,” Lee hissed back, agitation in her voice.

And so they took off, heading back the way they came. Randy surely hoped they had not waited too long.

“I'm seeing movement,” Matthew said, peering at the heartbeat sensor attached to his assault rifle. “Two blips. Behind that door, heading down the corridor.”

Rutger nodded in response, and raised his weapon up to shoulder level. He felt a familiar yet pleasing tension, an adrenaline rush. For the moment it made him forget the monstrous cat above them. In case the blips were employees, they would not shoot to kill immediately, but if they were not –

The rest of the team advanced up to them, and then they all burst through the doors, weapons ready.

Rutger took in the situation quickly. Two runners, a boy and a girl. Seemed unarmed, but certainly they could not be employees.

“Halt!” he shouted harshly. “Hands up!”

The boy and the girl stopped, turning in their tracks. The next fractions of a second would be critical. Were they complying, or would either of them rather pull out a gun?

Rutger peered through the sights, the front and the rear post perfectly aligned on the boy's center mass. A snake-like urge in the most primitive part of his brain told to squeeze the trigger already.

If the reactor would be blown anyway, there would be no bodies or bullet wounds left to examine.

But still, he wanted to observe proper procedure. That meant waiting just a second at maximum more...

Exactly at that moment he heard several noises, awesomely loud. From next to him, the thunderous blast of Carolyn's Barrett firing.

From above him, an absolutely giant sucking sound, like an end-of-the-world vacuum cleaner was being powered up. Something told him to look up instead of the runners, and he saw the ceiling tiles start to shake alarmingly.

A second later, a third noise joined the chorus. The shrill scream of the girl.

Rutger looked forward again. The boy was down, with a pool of blood starting to form, and the girl was down on her knees next to him. Her cries would not end.

Next to Rutger, Carolyn looked somewhat guilty. Not exactly professional. Rutger immediately reacted by frowning with disapproval. Proper military procedure has not been observed, especially considering the excessive stopping power her rifle possessed. She should not have fired without an explicit order.

“It looked like he was going for his gun,” Carolyn

stated sheepishly, completely ignoring the tremendous sucking sound at least for the moment. "His hand was in his pocket."

Rutger had had his eyes to the ceiling at the moment, so he could not judge. Well, Matthew and Andy could hopefully say something, but somehow Rutger believed they would rather corroborate Carolyn's story. Yes, indeed, they had a peculiar bond, for each November they would struggle to write 1667 words per day, to complete the so-called National Novel Writing Month challenge.

But somehow the boy and the girl and Carolyn firing at them were all insignificant. Rutger shifted his gaze back up. The noise from above, on the other hand, could present a much graver threat –

Then a crash of tortured reinforced concrete drowned the girl's wailing, as the sucking intensified. Despite all his special ops training, Rutger was horrified to see the ceiling – and apparently all the prison floors above them – go flying through the air, heading further up in a spiral.

Now he could see the cloudy sky through the large hole, with the black cat still towering above, and the prison structures were indeed floating toward its open mouth.

It was fucking eating the prison! Sucking it inside its endless belly!

They had to move right now.

They would be sucked in next.

"Into the corridor, right now!" Rutger shouted.

The rest of his team had clearly noticed the same. They wasted no time in complying. They all stepped clear of the lobby. Rutger was last, and he shut the double doors with force. The corridor ahead was still un-

scathed, but there was no telling how long.

The pool of blood beneath the boy had expanded up to his entire length. The entry and exit wounds had to be massive. There was no way he could be alive.

“Secure the other intruder,” Rutger ordered, advancing again last in the group. Of course the girl might still strike back in revenge, so they would have to watch her closely. Meanwhile Rutger kept his eyes trained on the double doors. To see if and when they would give.

Kim heard the shrill scream while in the middle of navigating a straight stretch of the ventilation duct. The sound reverberated oddly, but its human origin could still be clearly distinguished.

But it could not be Randy's voice. It rather sounded female. So there was at least one individual more roaming the corridors. But why had she screamed? And was she one of the employees, or another intruder?

Well, honestly it was all insignificant. Kim had already decided that only reaching the security center would have significance, and she was about to hold on to that conviction.

Then she became aware of the duct vibrating. And yet another odd noise started, like a strong wind, but rather if it was sucking in gigantic volumes of air instead of blowing.

Lee looked at the soldiers through tear-filled eyes. First Jake, and now Randy. This could not be happening.

From somewhere deep within her soul, a flame of pure hate lit up. The sorrow was quickly pushed aside. She recognized the one who had shot Randy. The elderly woman with the monstrous rifle. She would have to die!

A voice in a small corner of her mind said that what she was about to do equaled suicide, but the red-hot, molten hatred flowing in her veins overpowered that doubt without much effort. Lee sprang on her feet, clawing at the wrinkled face and especially the eyes of the woman, exerting all force she could. On her helmet was the name Carolyn.

Fuck you, Carolyn!

Lee was almost about to successfully gouge one of Carolyn's eyes out when she became aware of a blow to the back of her skull. There was no time for pain to register, she just felt the force of the impact, and then the floor appeared to swallow her and everything turned black.

Randy had seen this before. It was a fairly typical game over sequence: you would see the fallen body of your character, and the camera would spin steadily while rising upward, and then everything would fade either into white or into black.

He was thinking of whether he was about to enter the black underworld he had imagined the pickup truck sinking into. Would that be Hell itself? Or would he rather see something still unseen?

In a way it was relieving to know there indeed was something after death (he could not really be alive, after being shot with that monster rifle, could he?) but what was not relieving to see was how Lee had tried to attack the sniper in revenge, only to be cruelly clubbed down with the butt of an assault rifle.

He had failed to protect her.

He imagined a mission failure screen, listing all the objectives he had completely blown in bold red letters.

Then his thoughts were interrupted as he became

aware of tremendously fast movement. His consciousness was ascending rapidly, flying above the prison –

And his mind's eye saw it.

He never had thought this moment would come.

This was supremely, tremendously, extremely pumped up. Too bad he was no longer alive to fully enjoy the sight.

For he saw Tacgnol, its black body rising to monstrous heights, perhaps even up to the stratosphere, and it was vacuuming the whole prison into its gaping mouth in large chunks of concrete and steel!

Would it eventually consume even the reactor? That was both an awesome and an absolutely scary thought. For the power of nukulation could make it grow uncontrollably large, until it would threaten to throw the Earth's orbit out of alignment.

Or if not that, maybe it would eat the whole Earth.

Randy felt desperation, as his spirit's journey continued onward, leaving even the cat below. He wanted to stay here, and fight Tacgnol (though he had no idea how he could actually fight it), but that was not to be.

The motion turned into a complete blur, and Randy became aware of a high-pitched noise, the one that was commonly associated with an out of the body experience. That late? Now that he thought of it, should he not have heard it much earlier, when first seeing his lifeless body?

Maybe it meant that only now he was truly about to enter the astral plane.

Kim rounded yet another corner, when she became aware of something that could no longer be avoided. Maybe it had somehow been brought into motion by the vibration and the reverse storm, but in any case, a

torrent of hot fudge was coming down the duct at her.
Nowhere to go.
Stoically she prepared herself for the burning pain.

22.

The spinning upward motion did not cease. A crazy thought emerged into Randy's mind, repeating over and over:

“He is strong. If I die I have to go before him, and he will ask me 'Forward or deferred rendering?' And if I don't know which he will cast me out of Valhalla and laugh at me! That's Crom - strong in his mountain!”

Randy considered it – what if he would soon arrive before a deity which would ask exactly that? What would he answer, and what would actually be the right answer?

Forward?

Deferred?

Light pre-pass?

“Gaaaaaaahhl!” Kim screamed, for so intense was the agony, that her resolve to be calm and stoic meant frankly nothing.

Only a few seconds later she understood that Gaahl was the name of the ex-Gorgoroth vocalist.

The hot fudge burned through her clothes almost instantly, and her skin started to blister up and singe. The hands were the worst – she had no gloves, and she

needed her hands on the duct surface to get forward. The molten fudge stuck to her fingers; it was impossible to shake off. The duct itself also started to feel intolerably hot.

Yet she had to go on.

The odious smell of her own burning skin reached her nostrils, and she felt either like vomiting, or losing consciousness. But there was no time for that. She focused on the pain, how it made her stronger, and continued, with painful step after other, left hand, right hand, left again...

Until she came to a T-intersection. Here she could clearly see that the torrent of fudge had come from the right, where the duct sloped down. It had been blown by massive air pressure – or perhaps suction – from the lower floor. But on the left the way was clear, and the duct felt mercifully colder. There was also light shining from some distance away.

It could be the security center. To tell the truth the route had been confusing, so it would be partially by luck if she did reach her goal. But then, would that matter?

She picked up speed, not caring of the burns any more, though she could see how her hands left bloody prints to the metal surface. She would certainly need medical attention soon, but there should be supplies in the center.

At the grate, which was near the ceiling – she would have to drop down – Kim stopped and watched.

It was indeed the security center.

There was a large group of people gathered. It appeared to be all the employees of the facility. Then there was a man with a gray suit who seemed to exude authority – Kim had never seen him before. Ed was

manning the security console as usual. But Lothar was curiously absent.

The man in the suit represented a possible threat. An unknown element. Would she just have to ignore the threat and barge in?

Yes. There would be no time (or possibility) for stealth. The grate would make a hell of a noise as she opened it. She would just quickly drop down, then re-evaluate the situation and the threat.

She had surprise on her side, and furthermore she probably looked horrible with the burns, which would add to the shock value.

She gave a forcible shove to the grate, and it fell down to the floor with a metallic rattle. Then, she turned around in the duct – which she just managed in the limited space – and followed, dropping down feet first.

Several audible gasps followed from the employees. Ed was staring with his mouth wide open. The man in the suit looked alarmed.

Kim quickly checked that she had not lost the taser and the pepper spray. They were still there. She would be ready.

“What is this congregation?” she asked roughly.

“We figured this is the safest place to wait for rescue,” the suit replied. There was a tiny waver in his voice, as if he –

Was lying?

It could be just total nihilism and cynicism, but the idea that rather crossed Kim's mind was that these people were not waiting for rescue, but –

Execution?

No. That was too crazy. Gather more evidence before you jump into conclusions, Kim reminded herself.

“Ah, you probably don't know me. I'm Klaus-Marius Goldigger, the assistant regional director.”

“Where is Lothar? The head scientist?” Kim pressed on. His absence was the most curious aspect. Had he perhaps opened a gate and never returned?

“Ah – he turned violent, and had to be locked up,” Ed replied in a slurred voice.

This situation was turning even more curious. Ed was not exactly bright, but his matter-of-fact explanation did seem credible. Kim had seen the scientist exceedingly angry. If things did not go like he wanted, it was well possible he could turn into physical hostility. But had Lothar's experiments summoned Tacgnol? Had he wanted that to happen? Or was it related to the suit instead?

Fuck!

Kim was losing patience fast. And she had to get the burns treated as well. But first this situation had to be resolved.

Lothar found he had dozed off, due to the after-effects of the tranquilizer drug.

His escape! He had forgotten it!

Damn, shit, fuck.

But that sounded like a familiar voice. It had to be Kim! Despite her hostile nihilism, she could be certainly trusted. She could not possibly side with Klaus-Marius.

Lothar cleared his throat. Now it was imperative he would get the message through loud and clear. He did not have an exact idea of how long he had slept, but it was possible there was not much time anymore.

It was also high time the others knew.

“Kim! That piece of slime has ordered a team to nuke this facility! They'll induce a meltdown in the reactor!

He has gathered all of us here to wait for death!"

Kim was somehow startled by Lothar's shouted words, but in a few tenths of a second everything clicked. Everything made sense. In fact her thinking has not been overly cynical, but exactly right!

She noted the people gasping again, and Klaus-Marius going for his suit pocket.

From it, an odd-looking pistol materialized.

Fuck.

Kim drew the taser, took quick aim at the suit's chest, and fired the darts, holding down the trigger to direct high-voltage, low-current electricity down the wires.

Klaus-Marius convulsed and dropped the gun, falling to his knees.

Kim felt some kind of deep satisfaction at seeing the man go down. Now the real questioning would begin. Lothar was also to be released, fast. That would be delegated to Ed.

"Ed, unlock the cell now! You don't want to follow orders from this piece of shit."

Ed spat at Klaus-Marius, then went to the cell door obediently. It appeared that he had not known the truth either.

Satisfaction was however replaced by an odd discomfort. It was not related to the threatening situation, the time pressure they had, but the returning discomfort at possibly betraying her nihilistic and misanthropic ideals, and acting like a "hero" of some kind.

But right now she had the possibility of being an anti-hero, or rather, the hero in torture. The female equivalent of Jack Bauer.

She smiled cruelly at the thought.

She heard footsteps from behind; Lothar had been released and was now beside her.

“When is the team arriving?” Lothar asked Klaus-Marius with an angered voice.

“They're already here. They're former special ops soldiers. You stand no chance trying to stop them,” Klaus-Marius snarled.

“Fuck you,” Kim replied, and applied another jolt of electricity. It possibly did not have any benefit, but it felt good to do it, just because she could. That was the power of Jack Bauer!

“They're equipped with PK – that means psycho-kinetic – ammunition,” Klaus-Marius went on, having difficulty with words as he was still convulsing from the latest jolt. “They're therefore the only chance we have of stopping the dimensional threat. You'd just better stay out of way.”

Hearing this, Kim imagined Tacgnol again. Would any human technology stand a chance against that? Well, at least a nuclear explosion would be much more efficient than guns, no matter what effect those so-called PK rounds would have.

Of course it would not exactly be nice to be in the epicenter of the meltdown.

Kim thought of escaping. But there were many people here. Would she have to try to save them all? Her Fiat would only take five at maximum, and then there was no telling if they could even get far enough of the blast. Or alternatively, the engine noise she had been hearing might actually turn into a debilitating fault at the worst possible moment. Everything considered, they might still get severely – fatally – irradiated.

Fuck! She had no responsibility to save anyone but herself! But yes, it felt conflicting.

She then made a firm decision.

It was not for heroism, not for saving people, but to just see things into a conclusion. Like she had already decided before. She would not be getting away, no matter what, until everything was properly resolved. And she would not waste time any more by endlessly considering options. Now that Lothar was out of the cell, there would be a scientific opinion to consult as well. Though she reminded herself that she did not like the scientist especially, she despised him like she despised most other humans. But, he had at least succeeded in opening dimensional gates, so –

Did that not mean that he was in fact responsible of everything that was happening in here? And if Viktor was dead, of which Kim was quite sure now, was Lothar guilty of that as well? Should the taser wires rather be attached to his skin instead?

But no. That was too complicated thinking. And she was wasting valuable seconds. She remembered deciding that for Viktor's death, the otherworldly entity was to die in pain, not those who had caused it to be released. And that was good enough. That decision would hold.

“We have to open a gate,” Lothar said suddenly. “The emergency team will no doubt raise the control rods, then sabotage the controls and all backup systems so they can not be lowered again. But if we flood the reactor with bun pudding, it might prevent the meltdown.”

“Wait a minute. How does a gate help with that?” Kim snapped.

“Well, Klaus-Marius explained the modus operandi of his scientists, who have traveled in the dimension before. They actually ingest bun pudding, then activate it with the harmonic overtones. After that they are

transported and are free to move in the dimension. It is all in the power of mind. Yes, I know that sounds unbelievable, but it might be our only shot. I postulate that sufficiently concentrated mental effort can also open new gates at will. We need actually two gates. One from the kitchen to the dimension. This can be opened ordinarily. The second is from the dimension to the reactor core. This I will try to open once I'm there."

Kim stared at Lothar in disbelief. Had he lost it? Though honestly she did not have a better idea, and this strategy did not require getting into line of fire, or actually going into an irradiated area.

"Let's suppose you succeed. How do we move the pudding?"

"Using the air compressor. From what I understood, once you invoke the portal internally, you can breathe normally, so I don't need it."

"What about the rest of these people? The corridor outside is caved in. The only route out of here is through the ventilation -"

Just as Kim was about to finish her sentence, a loud blast of air interrupted her.

She turned to look.

The security center's door flew away, and behind was no caved in corridor. Instead, the room appeared to now be under open air, as not just the door, but the whole corridor was flying upward in a spiral, heading toward Tacgnol's mouth.

The cat was enormous; much larger than the "vision" Kim had received had led her to believe.

It was sucking the whole prison inside its belly. Now Kim understood perfectly what the noises and the vibration of the duct before had been. Somehow the thought of a nuclear meltdown did not feel like the

worst possible scenario any more.

Lothar was also clearly stunned.

“What on Earth is that?” he asked.

“Tacgnol.”

But what would happen now? Would they be sucked in next? In that case there would not be opening any gates any more, just a cruel trip through the air, and then digestion.

Tacgnol gave a long, disappointed roar, and then turned in the other direction. Next it started sucking the swampy ground in instead.

Luck was on their side. Now they had a little time. At least until it turned its attention on the prison again. But there certainly would not be time for any medical attention; Kim would just have to suffer.

23.

At last the dizzying motion came to a sudden stop. Randy found himself lying on the floor of a gray-white room, whose walls seemed to extend somewhere far away, covered by fog.

He did not feel either cold or warm.

Instinctively his hand went to the bullet wound.

There appeared to be none.

This was confusing. He remembered traveling as a spirit at a dizzying speed, yet now he appeared to be corporeal. What the hell was this place? And was he alive or dead?

And then Randy found he was not alone.

Out of the gray fog, appeared the man Randy had seen earlier in his premonition, when he had been about to crash into the prison gate.

Now things clicked into place.

This was also the same place he had seen earlier.

Back then he had decided it to be some kind of after-life. Therefore, he had to be dead now. He felt his shoulders sink. If he was dead, there would be no way he could get back to Lee. She was in the hands of the soldiers, and they might do something evil... and then there had been the awesome roar from outside, which

might represent something even worse.

“What is this place? Why am I here?” Randy asked the man. He was surprised that he could speak in this realm. But were these the most logical questions to ask? Well, he would probably have plenty of time to formulate and ask more.

All eternity, possibly. The thought was frightening.

“To the first, I actually don’t know the answer,” the aged man answered with a hoarse voice. “But to the second ... you wanted to see me.”

“Fuck! No I didn’t. I want to get back to where I came from!” Randy shouted with defiance.

“That might turn out to be a bit difficult. I would certainly want back as well, and I’ve spent quite a while trying to, but – no luck so far,” the man replied while shaking his head.

Now Randy noticed the guitar the man was carrying. It was a pink Hello Kitty Stratocaster. Ordinarily Hello Kitty was disgustingly cute, but to see it in this place was somehow pleasing. Randy felt at least some of his rage to dissolve away, when looking at the round kitten face.

“Nice guitar. By the way, who are you?”

“The name’s Okko.”

“I’m Randy. How – how did you end up here? I believe I was shot with a big fucking rifle.”

“Well, it was a long time ago. I was young then. Me and my band had just been playing the gig of our life at YBBES. We had a whole recordful of songs written. I was playing and singing like – like I was channeling God’s angels and Satan’s demons at the same time. And the crowd was absolutely, absolutely nuts. Like they wanted to eat me alive. Then that fucking pink Cadillac burst through the club roof, and fucking pink mist

started spraying out of it. It covered everything, the crowd, us, the gear, and then – I don't remember anything, except waking up here.”

The guitarist's tale was fascinating, but also frightening. If he had been young, but now looked rather aged – did it mean that you actually aged here? Randy did not want to grow old and weary in here. He would rather want to cease to exist completely, than to feel continuous regret.

“Now that I think, the whole thing was too suspicious. I should have known. It was the cigar-smoking man who offered me the gig. ‘I need your favor’ he said to me. What a favor it turned out to be! Fuck!”

This was perplexing. Was this turning into X-Files direction instead? But no, that was the Cigarette-Smoking Man. That was a definite difference.

Rutger's team advanced toward the security center through the ground level corridors which had seen considerable damage. In several places the ceiling was missing, and at other places even the walls, leaving stretches of open ground where they could see Tacgnol, for now turned away and swallowing the marshland behind the prison instead.

Andy carried the female intruder on his shoulder, while Matthew lugged his M-60.

“I'd rather carry the gun,” Andy grunted.

“The security center is not far ahead, and there are holding cells,” Rutger said. “We'll leave her there.”

As final acts of preparation before heading out to create some pudding gates, Kim and Lothar commanded Ed to lock up Klaus-Marius in a cell, then armed themselves with Benelli 12-gauge tactical shotguns.

“Buckshot?” Lothar asked while rifling through the weapons cabinet.

To be honest, Kim was surprised to hear Lothar even knew that shotguns used buckshot.

“No. We’ll take 12-gauge slugs instead. They’ll do much more concentrated damage, in case they have body armor. But we don’t want to fuck around with that team – we’ll avoid them if we can.”

“What if there is no team? If Klaus-Marius is bluffing?”

“I wouldn’t bet on it.”

Kim also thought of what kind of damage the slugs would do against Tacgnol.

Not much at all, was the probable answer.

She also wondered about Randy. That stupid asshole. Though she detested him equally as most humans, he should have stuck with her for the sake of his safety. Was he in the lower floors now? Was he possibly exploring the reactor level? But what about the scream she had heard – was he even alive at all? Damn. She would have wanted to be omniscient, but as of now she would just have to live by her wits and the little available information she had.

“Listen,” Lothar addressed the employees. “If that cat starts sucking in the prison again, head to the ventilation duct where I came from, and downward. The laboratory level’s probably safe, but you can further down if necessary.”

“But the reactor’s on the lowest level,” the employee known as Laszlo protested. “Going down is getting closer to it.”

“Well, if it blows it doesn’t matter on what floor you are,” Kim answered truthfully.

Then there was nothing further to do here. She and

Lothar left the security center.

Kim thought that Lothar had taken seeing Tacgnol quite calmly. But then, he was a man of science, so it was to be expected.

Lee felt some degree of consciousness returning.

The first thing she was aware was that her head hurt like hell. And there was disgusting, dizzying motion. Then she understood she was being carried to somewhere, and that the one doing the carrying was a soldier. She hoped the destination was not a trash compactor – or a nuclear reactor.

For now she decided to pretend she was still out cold.

Kim and Lothar made a quick detour to Lothar's office. Now they were additionally armed with two laptops, which could produce the needed sound signal to activate gates, plus some nylon straps.

“Good that there are no dimensional entities loose in the corridors,” Lothar said.

“Except the cat.”

“Indeed. I would be tempted to believe that the shadow-entity, or entities, have changed form, and merged to become the cat. But I don't think Klaus-Marius was aware of such possibility. The look on his face when he saw it was total amazement and horror. So today, something is different than in any of their earlier experiments.”

Kim let Lothar muse and theorize on his own. She did not care much for how Tacgnol had formed; it would just have to die in pain, and then she would be satisfied.

But as they ascended the stairs back to the ground

floor to reach the kitchen, she slowly became more curious. If Viktor had been swallowed by the shadow, had he possibly been the critical element, the catalyst that made it possible for Tacgnol to emerge? But she certainly would not discuss Viktor with the scientist.

Instead, Kim started thinking of the actual internet meme. Before Tacgnol there had existed Longcat, the long white cat that spanned all the dimensions. In internet lore, Catnarok was the day of apocalyptic battle between those two felines. If no human technology could not stop the black cat, perhaps Longcat could.

But how would they summon Longcat? Would they possibly find it beyond the pudding gate? Fuck. She could never discuss Longcat with Lothar either. The scientist would just think she had lost her mind.

Kim was awakened from these thoughts by a red laser dot on her chest.

Instinctively she ducked.

A split-second later came a thundering gunshot.

“Get down!” she shouted to Lothar. Only then she did look into the direction of the dot to see if she could pinpoint the attacker, or attackers.

And it was clear.

Two figures at the top of the staircase. They could keep Kim and Lothar pinned down forever.

The situation was indeed shitty.

24.

Lee heard the gunshot. And she cursed silently, because she had possibly waited too long. It appeared that Carolyn and the other soldier had stopped at the stairwell to keep watch, while the leader and the one who was carrying her went further on.

She imagined herself attacking Carolyn from behind, making her topple down to the stairwell and crush her skull on impact with the stairs.

But now that was not to happen.

Or perhaps it would?

She would just have to be more combat ready than she ever had imagined. But having just woken up from a head blow, she would be groggy and disoriented. A definite difficulty modifier. At least 2x, if not 3x. It would require several quick-time events executed without the tiniest fault.

Fuck quick time events!

Lee raised her eyelids cautiously to see where they were headed now. They were entering a room with a lot of people. There were several wall-mounted monitors. Had to be the guard station.

There also were a lot of people. Unarmed though.

Could they all be turned against the two soldiers?

“Where is the assistant director?” Rutger asked roughly. He did not like the situation at all. Too many people. They had all been herded here – no doubt the doing of Klaus-Marius, but it would now be a possible strategic disadvantage. Even more so since Rutger had ordered Carolyn and Matthew to cover the stairwell, to look out for possible intruders or interdimensional phenomena from below.

Rutger scanned the faces quickly. The guard at the security console looked openly defiant.

“We know of your plan. You’ll nuke this facility. And we won’t let you do it,” he said in a blunt voice.

Damn! How could this be? The emergency procedure was clearly above the guards’ clearance, and Klaus-Marius would never have revealed it –

Unless he had been interrogated!

Using enhanced methods!

“Andy, check the cells!” Rutger ordered.

Andy put the girl down on the ground, then went to check. Meanwhile Rutger covered the people – and especially the guard – with his assault rifle. If any of them made even one false move, they would be quickly shot dead. Rutger recognized the nightstick, the electric stun gun and the pepper spray on the guard’s toolbelt: none of them would be a match for 5.56 NATO rounds, unleashed in accurate and lethal three-round bursts.

“There’s a man in a suit,” Andy’s reply came back quickly.

“That’s the assistant regional director. He must be released.” Rutger motioned with his assault rifle for the guard to comply.

Lee waited for the moment, one eye half-open. Now both the soldiers were facing away from her, concen-

trated on the guard's effort to get the cell door open.

Now was the time!

She got up and rushed out from the room.

"Hey!" came the leader's rough shout. Her escape had been noticed.

Lee ducked out of the doorway and into the corridor which was no longer an actual corridor. She shuddered as she saw the large black form in the open, towering some distance away.

She knew exactly what it was.

Tacgnol.

But she could not wonder this sight for long, for a burst of gunfire came from behind. She kept weaving left and right, trying to avoid being hit.

To be honest, she was confused where to go. Now the most imperative thing was to get back to the stairwell, and knock Carolyn down. Nothing else mattered. Even if she got herself wounded or killed, it would not matter if that succeeded.

Then came another gunshot from ahead, and it was now clear where she should go. She ran with all strength she could summon, and to her surprise she found herself not that disoriented. The headache was still blasphemous, but it could be ignored. Or actually it too gave her extra strength. She imagined it would stop the instant Carolyn fell.

She closed the distance.

Yes.

Perfect.

Now she saw the two soldiers, the one with the machine gun, with whom she had no especial quarrel, and then her nemesis, who absolutely had to die, the short woman with the disproportionate sniper rifle.

They were still focused on the stairwell, their

weapons trained below. Was there something below? Were they shooting at a dimensional shadow? Fuck, if Carolyn fell down to be mutilated and eaten by a shadow, even better!

Only a few metres more –
And touchdown!

Lee gave Carolyn a hard push, driving her against the railing. Then Lee ducked down and grabbed her legs, forcing them over it. Only then Carolyn became fully aware of what was happening, and started shrieking high and loud.

Lee in turn became aware of the machine gun's muzzle turning toward her. And there was nowhere to go. She was already ducked down. The soldier would have no difficulty shooting her very dead.

But Carolyn was already over the railing, falling down.

Therefore, mission accomplished.

The machine gun fired.

The shriek of the sniper, and the sight of her falling, was the sign for Kim to fire at the other soldier like there was no tomorrow. She could not exactly understand the turn of events – was it possibly Randy who had attacked her? – but it did not matter.

Boom!

She then racked the shotgun, and fired again.

The machine-gun wielding soldier fired wildly, out of control: it could be already his death throes. Kim wanted to be sure, so she fired the third slug, then the fourth.

Finally the machine gun fell silent. The quiet gurgle of a dying man was the only sound Kim could hear. She looked to her side, and saw the fallen sniper woman,

with head twisted in an obscene angle. She most definitely had fired her last round as well.

But now it was not yet the time to let one's guard down. The one who had toppled the sniper might not be friendly at all. Kim peered upward cautiously, but could see nothing yet.

What about Lothar? In the heat of the gunfight Kim had forgotten him completely.

"That's some ear damage," the scientist said, crouched next to her. Except for hearing, he appeared to be unhurt.

Lee's expectation of the pain stopping did not quite work out. In fact she became aware of a stinging agony in her right shoulder, and she could see blood seeping through her shirt.

But she was alive, and Carolyn most likely was dead. That was certainly worth celebrating.

Though – what about the gunfire from below, which had killed the other soldier? Sounded like a shotgun. There had to be humans down there.

"Hey," she shouted over the railing. "Don't shoot, I'm on your side!"

To be honest, she could not be exactly sure of her words. What if there were armed ninjapirates below, or cultists of Tacgnol?

That was something Randy would have said. And now all the sorrow of his death came back to Lee, and she understood that there could be no celebration. Instead she felt tears coming to her eyes.

Two figures emerged from the stairwell. A scientist, clearly, judging from his white laboratory coat, and a woman, who looked tremendously combat ready, though also frightening as both her face and hands had

what looked like burn injuries. Both of them held shot-guns.

“Who are you and why are you here?” the woman demanded angrily.

“I’m Lee. I – came here with my friends Jake and Randy. And then – everything went to hell. But at least – at least the sniper bitch is dead,” Lee strained to answer. She did not think she would have strength for even one more word. That answer had to be good enough.

“You’re wounded,” the scientist observed. “Ah, I’m Lothar Wagener, scientist in charge of this facility, and this is the night guard Kim. We are en route to open some bun pudding gates, but clearly you must be tended to first.”

Rutger and Andy rounded a corner to see the group of three disappearing into another ground floor corridor.

“I’ll waste them all,” Andy hissed furiously.

“That’s not the mission. That’s not a priority,” Rutger said firmly. “We’ll head directly to the reactor to initiate the meltdown. After that we’ll deal with any remaining belligerents.”

“Fuck,” Andy replied, still in rage.

They headed down the stairwell. Andy picked up Carolyn’s Barrett rifle, which the enemies had not snatched for themselves. But the M-60 loaded with PK rounds – Andy’s signature machine gun – was gone. That too brought him tremendous wrath, but he imagined some comfort in ventilating them with carefully aimed .50 caliber rounds instead.

Lothar had guided Kim and Lee to the prison kitchen, which had mostly survived from the black cat’s wrath,

though on one wall there was a giant hole, from which bun pudding had apparently gushed through. He observed Lee almost go into shock from seeing the dried down pudding on the walls. Well, he could not fault her.

Lee's shoulder wound was now dressed; Lothar had accomplished that with slightly questionable first aid materials from a wall-mounted emergency cabinet. The laboratory level would have contained fresher supplies, but time was kind of short. Kim's burned hands were wrapped in bandages as well.

"I suggest that only I head through the - internal - gate. It has to be enough. Meanwhile you start the compressor, and make sure the pudding is flowing into the gate. After that is done, just get the hell out of here." he suggested.

There was certain wrath and disobedience on Kim's face. She probably wanted to see the far side of the gate with her own eyes. Well, Lothar could not fault her either.

"Internal gate - what does that mean?" Lee asked weakly. Though there was a certain look of understanding as if she already knew.

They were pressed for time, but still Lothar was glad to explain for anyone who had an interest in the *scientia maxima*, the pursuit of knowledge itself.

"I will ingest bun pudding, and then stimulate it with a series of flute-like high frequency overtones. This should transport me into the dimension beyond."

"I've been there. It's dangerous," Lee replied.

This was very surprising. Very unexpected. Clearly this girl might even have more experience of movement beyond the gate than Lothar. She might be critical to the success of the operation. But she was also wounded. She was not to be risked any further. No, Lothar would

just have to do this on his own.

“The first thing to check is whether the pudding on the wall is still reactive. Of course, if it's not –“

Lothar did not want to finish the sentence. If they would actually have to bake fresh bun pudding, they would be completely and utterly screwed. The remaining soldiers would have no problem inducing a melt-down in that time.

He powered on the laptop from sleep mode. It was a much fortunate act of foresight that he had kept it fully charged.

Then he pressed play on the media player –

And nothing.

No gate formed on the pudding on the wall. It was completely inert. It might be the fact that now he was using even worse speakers – the laptop's inbuilt ones – but more probably it was that the pudding was just too old.

Fuck.

This.

Shit.

25.

“Well, have you thought what would be the key to getting out?” Randy asked.

“Fuck, believe me, I've had lots of time to think. First of all, I think this place is alive. It's observing me. It's observing both of us. I'm not saying this for certain, but there possibly is some test that you must complete –“

Randy felt Okko's words fading away somewhere far away. Immediately his mind went hard at work to think what such test would be. In the twisted logic of the afterlife it certainly would make sense.

Would the test be personal? Or was it the same for everyone? Randy could not possibly know what Okko's ultimate test would be, maybe to compose the most ultimate song or play the most ultimate guitar solo of all time.

But as for Randy's test –

He came to two possible conclusions.

One: to demonstrate full combat readiness, the master step in all six moves.

Two: to program the ultimate deferred renderer.

But he had no computer in here. Therefore the second option was out of question. But he certainly appeared to have his body here, though it might be an illu-

sion – his real body probably was dead back on Earth – and one's body was everything one needed in Convict Conditioning.

“Have you ever heard of Paul Wade?” Randy asked.

Okko shook his head.

“Well, you'll see.”

Of course Randy would have liked to have the 303-page book with him here. But no such luck. Instead he would have to try to remember all the exercises.

Shit. Even that would be tough, not to speak of actually performing all of them.

But what if he went directly to the master step in each category? Could he remember them? Maybe being in the afterlife would allow him to cheat a bit. Probably his muscles would never get tired here.

It was worth a try...

Rutger and Andy reached the bottom floor. Third sub-level. Reactor core.

The corridors were drenched in oppressive red light. Rutger preferred it that way, it gave the place a credibility a secret nuclear power plant should have.

The layout was clear as ever in his head. As well as the maintenance access codes, which would allow to bypass all the failsafe circuits and to allow to raise the control rods to the far upper position, which would accelerate the neutron production to uncontrollable levels, further speeding up the uranium fission and raising the temperature, eventually leading to a full meltdown.

“What if you just have to soak it a bit?” Lee asked.

“Good idea. It's worth a try,” Lothar said. Meanwhile he observed Kim looking on like a quiet angel of death.

Lothar took a water hose, conveniently hanging on

the wall (possibly it had once been used for riot control in the dining hall) and attached it to the faucet. He started with minimum water pressure, for he wanted the pudding to only become a little wet, not disintegrate.

He guided the water stream carefully from left to right, up to down, soaking the pudding, until he was satisfied.

Now it was time to try the audio signal once more.

Lothar pressed the play button once more.

Still nothing –

Or?

Sometimes the few first tenths of a second were the most excruciating, when you had just started the experiment, but did not know yet whether it would work.

But then, something started to change.

The pudding started to ripple, slightly at first, then it grew in intensity.

And then the gate opened, like a majestic revelation!

The blackness, the stars, the nebulas and the nameless spiral structures. And most importantly, the vats. They were all there, just like before!

Now Lothar knew it would work. But the gate was not to be held open unnecessarily. Rather, the next step was the internal preparation. He pressed the stop button, and the gate vanished promptly.

Then, he ran up to and opened one of the high-capacity ovens, which still had unused bun pudding inside, and scooped a large portion on a plate.

Then he started wolfing it down mechanically. Klaus-Marius had mentioned a rather large amount – one and half kilograms.

After coming to halfway he started to have difficulty swallowing. He took a glass of water – the faucet was

rusty and it was possible the water in this floor was not entirely sanitary, but at least it helped him ingest the rest. If he guessed at all right, drinking unclean water would be the least of his problems today.

At last everything was in his stomach.

For how long, Lothar could not know.

“When you want to get back, you just have to vomit everything out,” Lee said.

Ah. That was helpful to know.

Though perhaps the most crucial part was still a total unknown. Whether it was indeed possible to open another gate from inside the realm, by using only the power of your mind. That was pure conjecture from Lothar's part, he had not heard Klaus-Marius speaking of any such experiment ever having been performed.

Using the nylon straps, Lothar secured the second laptop on his chest. He powered it up as well – its battery was 75% full, which had to be good enough. The theory was that having a sound source with you would help opening the second gate, if the vibrations from the first were not strong enough.

“Let's test the compressor now. Just aim it roughly on the pudding, where the gate last opened. I believe that once I fire up the sound signal, I will vanish immediately. But I have complete faith in you.”

“What if one oven's worth of pudding is not enough?” Kim asked.

“Very good question. Well, considering that it might indeed be best if you disregard my earlier instructions and do not get the hell out immediately.”

Lothar watched Kim and Lee position the air compressor next to one of the ovens and guide the hose inside. He understood the compressor was not meant for this and would possibly cease functioning rather soon.

In fact the whole plan was a sorry mess. There was no telling if bun pudding could indeed act to retard the fission reaction, at least to a sufficient degree. But to be honest – and this he could not say aloud to Kim and Lee – his most fervent wish in case he was going to die anyway was to traverse the foreign dimension once more, with the additional insight he had gained from Klaus-Marius, and now from Lee.

The women fired up the compressor. It made an odd, strained sound, but nevertheless a veritable stream of bun pudding came flying through, splattering on the wall. The aim was near perfect.

Now the only thing missing was to start the sound signal for the final time. This would be the point of no return, the opening of both the external and the internal gate.

Lothar truly felt like Gordon Freeman about to make the long jump into the Xen teleporter. This was true science, and he had no regrets. He felt elation mixed with sadness, a kind of finality, as he turned to take one last look at Kim and Lee.

“In case we might not see again – farewell. It has been a pleasure.”

He did not know what else to say.

Then he pressed the play button on the laptop sitting next to the kitchen sink one final time.

Even before he saw the bun pudding on the wall ripple again and the external gate open, he was wrenched through the dimensions. The motion was most sudden and violent, and he thought he would either lose consciousness or vomit all his stomach contents out.

But neither happened.

Instead, he knew he had arrived, as the wrenching motion stopped. Floating there in the blackness, he saw

the majestic vats, which had contained the gray soul jelly.

However, something had changed.

For the vats' content was no longer gray. Or jelly-like.

Instead, it was pink foam or mist, swirling ethereally.

26.

It was all in the power of the mind. Theoretically, there were no limits now.

But still Randy was failing. He appeared to not be combat ready. Though his muscles in fact did not tire here, coordination was lacking. The master steps eluded him.

Okko looked on, mostly amused.

“Seems not to go quite as planned.”

“Shut up.”

Randy felt rage rising within him, only fleetingly at first, but then it returned. Stronger.

If he could just concentrate the rage he could also do the master steps! Maybe then he would get out of here. He decided to go for the one-armed pushup first. And he would not quit until he got it.

Rage!

Lothar knew there was no time to waste, though the sight of the pink mist was both unexpected and somehow marvelous. He would have to create the second gate, and make sure it projected directly inside the reactor core where the uranium was fissioning.

To help him in the task, he flipped open the screen of

the laptop strapped to his chest, and started up the flute-like sound once more. It reverberated oddly in the black nothingness.

Down below, far away, he saw the gate from the prison kitchen open. Kim and Lee were indeed feeding bun pudding through it; the dessert floated through the space as in vacuum.

Oh yes, Lothar found that he could indeed breathe in the blackness, like Klaus-Marius had hinted at. It was strange, but he would just have to accept it.

And to tell the truth he was glad that at least something was easy, for the task as a whole was extraordinarily complex; he would either have to open the gate into a precise spot on the path of the bun pudding, or alternatively, using just the power of his mind, he would have to direct the flow into the second gate he would create.

If he even managed to create it!

As the shrill audio signal went on, Lothar became aware of the pink mist starting to move, rising out of the vat. This was possibly also induced by the sound. It rose like a dancing spiral, oddly beautiful, and seemingly possessing a mind of its own. He had to force himself to not fixate on it for the whole time, but instead get into the business of opening the second gate.

For a few seconds it had went smoothly. Then two things went to hell:

The air compressor overloaded. Sparks shot from within it, followed by the motor stopping, and acrid black smoke rising. This was only bad for Lothar and his plan. It did not threaten the life of Kim or Lee. But the other thing did.

For an earthquake-degree shaking and rumbling

started, the loudest Kim had heard so far. And she felt like in an elevator, when it accelerated upward.

She understood that the whole kitchen had been ripped out of the ground and apparently, into the air.

Tacnol!

The next she knew, the whole floor tilted in a 45 degree angle, and she started sliding helplessly toward the opposite wall. The heavy ovens tipped over and started sliding as well; they had suddenly become lethal weapons.

Kim observed Lee grabbing her leg in desperation. That was probably not a wise move, and displayed a sort of misplaced trust. Fuck! Kim did not want any responsibility of others' survival.

As the first oven came crashing toward her, Kim rolled away at the last moment. But there were others to come. And even if they survived the flight itself, they could not possibly survive what awaited after it.

As if to reinforce this thought, the kitchen ceiling flew away, and through the opening Kim saw the enormous black form. Its eyes were glowing white-blue, like there was a huge concentrated electric charge in them.

What did not kill you made you stronger.

This flight quite probably was the most extreme thing Kim had experienced, so she would at least be very, very strong when she finally died.

Damn.

She probably should have got out while she still had the chance. But now the ground was already too far below.

Of course, there still was the gate on the wall. The laptop was still emitting the sound. But would the other dimension provide any more safety?

Kim honestly had no idea.

Lothar noted the ceased flow of bun pudding. Damn! There certainly was not enough of it to act as an efficient neutron stopper.

But with utmost mental concentration – the second gate was now open. That was honestly unbelievable –

Damn! By thinking it was unbelievable, the gate vanished as quickly as it had appeared.

Now to get it back online – and fast – and then to direct the flow of the pudding. Things were certainly happening too fast. Lothar felt like his brains were about to explode.

At the control panel, Rutger finished keying in the final 40-letter code sequence. The flash of warning lights and the blare of sirens was absolutely cacophonous, and well, it should be, for a total uncontrolled meltdown was about to occur.

He and Andy both unleashed their weapons' combined firepower at the console, to make sure no-one could reverse the process. The monitors and lights died off with flying sparks; the control rods would now be permanently locked in the “up” position.

Now to just get out.

Or did it make a difference?

Their mission was complete, but they probably would not live to tell about it.

Finally! Randy succeeded in making a clean one-handed pushup. And not just one, but five in succession.

His level of rage was perfectly controlled, giving him maximum strength and focus, but not yet overflowing into useless intensity.

He looked at Okko, whose mouth hung wide open in

amazement. But the rocker was looking away. He was not amazed by the athletic feat, but something else.

And then Randy saw it too.

He could not tell exactly where it was coming from, for it appeared to be coming from everywhere, surrounding them. Pink – foam?

“Fuck! That's the stuff! That's the pink shit that got me here, and by all laws of logic – I believe that's the way out of here. Yeehaa!” Okko shouted in exhilaration.

Arms held wide apart, he just dived into the pink foam, and disappeared.

Randy did not ponder long. This unusual moment might not last long. And he would be damned if he did not use the chance while he still had it. A chance to get back to life, to reunite with Lee, to fight the fucking Tacgnol!

He got on his feet and followed Okko.

The mist tasted – like Purexo dessert? Lingonberry foam or something like that?

No, it was much better. Much sweeter. Like life itself.

The suction was so great that Kim and Lee flew right through the hole in the ceiling. Now it was too late to ponder whether the gate would have provided salvation, for it was far out of reach.

Kim looked down and now it seemed like the below-ground floors of the laboratory complex were being uprooted as well. Tacgnol was clearly picking up rage, heading for some cataclysmic multi-maximum of unleashed strength and anger that Kim did not want to even think about.

Tacgnol also roared again. A terrible, full-spectrum sound like the end of the world itself.

Their upwards spiraling flight path was surely but

certainly taking them toward the cat's mouth. Kim wondered if what kind of dimension waited there. Perhaps it was a gate as well?

But somehow she knew there would be nothing after that. Being digested by Tacgnol could not entail anything else than complete and utter annihilation.

27.

“Damn! This place is moving,” Andy growled as he suddenly was slammed against the wall, only a few seconds after exiting the reactor control room.

Rutger had to agree. It appeared like they were rising upward.

It had to be the monstrous cat.

It was sucking them in.

Well, in case it truly managed to swallow the reactor whole, it would actually be the best kind of effect Rutger could have hoped for. It could not withstand a nuclear meltdown and explosion within its stomach.

No. It would be ripped open instead.

Die in pain, fucker, Rutger thought.

The transition was more jarring now as it had been last time. Randy found himself being jerked back to his physical body.

His first thought was one of disgust. Had it been too long? Had he returned to a brain-dead and already decomposing body? But no, his thoughts seemed to circulate just fine.

Then he became aware of an amazingly intense heat in his chest. It did not actually hurt, somehow, but it

could not be anything else than spontaneous combustion from within.

He strained to raise his head to see what actually was happening. His muscles did not fully obey yet, and he could only manage only a little bit of movement, but he could see the ragged hole in his shirt. The one torn by the bullet as it went in.

He also saw the actual bullet wound beneath, but the pink mist was swirling inside, rising like smoke. Was it healing him? Restoring tissue viability?

Possibly.

He gained some more motion, and looked up, and to the sides.

It appeared he was under open sky. Most of the prison walls had been completely obliterated, and big pieces of structure were rising up to the sky in an apocalyptic spiral, heading to the wide-open mouth of Tacgnol who still towered above. It looked like the reactor was rising as well – it resembled Wikipedia diagrams surprisingly much.

Shit!

Had he come back to life only to die again by the paws of the cat? How could he now possibly fight it? Though he had demonstrated combat readiness on the other side, now he would have all the weakness of his physical body to contend with. And he would surely be weaker than usual due to miraculously recovering from the bullet wound.

Fuck. He should have been more combat ready and not have got hit in the first place.

But then ... he would have not met Okko.

He turned his head some more and saw that behind him, the pink mist was still floating, receding and dissolving slowly. Had Okko made it out, and if so, to

where?

Lothar saw the mist fly through both of the gates, splitting evenly. It seemed like the vats would never empty. He had actually managed to reopen the gate, and direct some of the pudding through it, but it could not be enough.

But what would the pink mist do in the reactor?

It could be something totally unpredictable.

And then, a flash of insight filled him. He possibly understood what the mist was. When the vats still contained the gray substance, he had sensed a powerful feeling of despair. But now it was gone. That probably meant, the souls – the actual personalities – were gone, possibly to form Tacgnol, and what remained was the pure life essence that had been used to bind the souls to the vat in the first place.

Pure life essence in a nuclear reactor – what would that do? For some reason Lothar wanted to know. He felt an irresistible urge to float through the second gate, though it would possibly be fatal. But where else there was to go?

Indeed.

Perhaps some seconds ago there would have been, but now the first gate shut down, taking with it the way back to the prison kitchen.

It was either stay here forever, or enter the other gate.

Lothar directed his mind's energy to start moving toward it. Soon he would know. For some reason all fear was now gone from his mind, replaced by perfect scientific and analytical calmness. This was exactly how he wanted to be!

Out of the pink mist, Okko appeared. He was wearing black leather, mirror sunglasses, and the pink Hello Kitty Stratocaster still hung on his back, held by a strap with a leopard-skin pattern. He swirled the guitar around, taking it in his weary hands, and consulted the Kitty.

“What do you think? Ready to take on Tacgnol?”

And now Randy understood. Understood how this would precisely go. It had always been Okko who had been meant to fight the abominable cat.

Or perhaps not even Okko, but Hello Kitty?

Hello Kitty did not answer. But Okko was not distracted. It appeared as if he knew precisely what he was doing.

Tacgnol towered up high above, not just roaring, but also laughing terribly: “Ha ha ha ha, hm, hm, hm, hm ... !” It would not be long until it had swallowed everything here, and what would it do then? Go on swallowing the rest of the world, or even rest of the universe? All known dimensions?

But in case there would be a fight now, how would it actually transpire?

Still barely able to move, Randy imagined a Guitar Hero note chart stretching to cosmic infinity. To win, Okko would have to hit every note – without fault – at Expert Plus level, though guitar difficulty normally only extended up to Expert.

But perhaps not today!

This day was a day of the extraordinary.

Upon entering the second gate, Lothar knew he had arrived at a bad time. The meltdown was reaching its zenith, and he was bombarded by insanely high-energetic neutrons. The radiation dose was most certainly

fatal. Ordinarily he should have been dead in a fraction of a second, but somehow the pink mist kept him alive. He felt himself merging with the mist, felt himself distancing from the physical reality. This, too, was true science.

Then came the colossal detonation, and everything split into two.

Tacgnol roared even louder, and there was a muffled, but still tremendously powerful explosion. Randy knew it had to be the nukulation of the reactor, in its stomach. The cat split into two copies. But the two split-up Tacgnols were not smaller or weaker, in fact they were perhaps even larger than the original. How could Okko – or Kitty – possibly win now? Randy knew he was spent, and could do nothing to help.

Without an amplifier of any kind, Okko started playing a guitar solo that was almost as loud as Tacgnol's roar. Randy imagined the note chart zooming by, as the cascading triplet and sextuplet runs – alternating between faultlessly alternate-picked notes and smooth legato phrases – wound their way up the Stratocaster's fretboard.

And Okko was hitting every note!

Speed equaled emotion!

The rock meter was in the green, almost going off the charts. Randy could imagine the crowd cheering and going wild.

Then Okko did something unexpected. The guitar solo climaxed in a long, high, sustained note, bent three semitones up from a high C# (the Hello Kitty Stratocaster had 21 frets) to an even higher E.

For a moment Randy feared the string would break.

But the high, bent note was actually not the un-ex-

pected part. While holding the note, Okko also put his tongue out and touched his nostrils with it.

This was the “Tongue-in-the-nose bend” invented by the godlike epitomes of natural born shredding and wild stage antics, Fat Mr. Crab and Uli CC Rottweiler, and it was most revered by all shred guitarists and those who aspired or pretended to be one.

And then it happened.

The tongue in the nose was the trigger.

The guitar exploded, vanishing in thin air and propelling Okko backward, and out of the void came –

Longcat!

Randy was astonished, but somehow it made perfect sense. Longcat had disguised herself as Hello Kitty, and had been hiding inside Okko's guitar.

The white cat rose upward with tremendous speed, its huge form seemingly appearing out of thin air. While it flew higher, it smiled and made a melodious, pleasant sound, not at all like the beastly roar of Tacgnol.

Somehow the sound made Randy think of Lee. Right now he would have liked to hold her close, but she was nowhere to be seen. Was she floating in the air along with the chunks of the prison?

Damn! That would not be nice. In fact it could be lethal, particularly if Longcat and Tacgnol were about to clash. But what could Randy do about it?

Well..

He could do a master step.

The one-armed handstand pushup.

Somehow Randy imagined that if he did that, he could propel himself up to the air.

It was perhaps totally ridiculous, but it had to be tried.

“Hey Okko,” Randy croaked. “Would you like to help

me a bit?"

"Uh ... what?"

As Longcat started pummeling the two Tacgnols with her eye lasers, they started to shriek in a high, horrifying voice, breaking partially into the shadows Lee had seen earlier.

All things considered, Lee preferred to fall the two hundred metres or so into her death than to be consumed by a shadow from the black dimension. Or Tacgnol. But she might not have the choice.

Next to her Kim kept firing with the machine gun taken from the dead soldier. As the bullets hit the shadow entities, they tore clearly visible holes, but quickly the shadowy matter solidified again. There was no lasting effect.

Longcat noticed the shadows breaking off, and started blasting them with the eye lasers as well, but would that be enough?

Lee hoped she would have been armed too. She rather wanted to die firing and screaming, than just screaming.

The two Tacgnols were still rising yet higher. Then Longcat started wrapping its body around them in a spiraling motion. The question would then perhaps be, which cat would have the most endless body.

But the battle was not exactly fair. There were two Tacgnols, but only one Longcat. As the Tacgnols realized they were being trapped, they too started concentrating their laser fire, and Longcat had to dodge, slowing down her flight.

It was possible Longcat was not yet enough.

Something more would be needed.

Lee observed Kim to run out of ammunition. In dis-

gust she threw the spent machine gun away, and it floated away almost as if weightless.

Okko would help Randy up in the master step position. Right now there was every excuse to cheat in every way possible.

Randy would not even push with his legs. Instead Okko would hold him from the feet, upside down, then Randy would try to get into balance, and finally, if luck was with him, he would do the one-handed pushup.

Some of the pink mist was still swirling around. Randy inhaled it deeply, and it appeared to give him some extra boost of life force.

Then it was time for the first attempt. Okko dangled him from the legs -

And Randy was quite sure he could never do it. It was too soon after coming back from the dead. His muscles would not have the power.

He collapsed to the ground uselessly.

Epic fail.

Then he remembered something.

"He is strong. If I die I have to go before him, and he will ask me 'Forward or deferred rendering?' And if I don't know which he will cast me out of Valhalla and laugh at me! That's Crom - strong in his mountain!"

Crom!

Rage!

Randy needed to live through this so that he could figure out the answer to that question!

YES!

RAGE!

He felt himself filling with power. The blood in his veins was certainly turning pink, or at least so he imagined.

“Let's try again,” Randy shouted. There was no telling how long the surge of rage and adrenaline would last.

Okko dangled him from the feet again, and he felt for the optimal position where he would be balanced –

And now he knew he got it.

While upside down, he gave an infinitesimal nod to Okko, who released the grip, and Randy was on his own. With only his right hand against the floor, he lowered himself down –

Even more down –

Dangerously much down, for he might not have the strength to lift himself back up –

And then he gave himself a terrifyingly forceful push. It in itself was like an act of war against the universe and the accepted reality, and the known laws of physics.

He felt himself detach from the floor, like in slow motion. Under ordinary circumstances gravity would quickly have dragged him back down –

But these were not ordinary circumstances.

Instead, he rose up into the air in a sustained, graceful motion. He knew this was severely breaking the laws of physics, but so was the appearance of Tacgnol and Longcat. Why would he not be allowed to join the fun?

He zoomed past the prison wall which still (mostly) stood intact, rising higher alongside the bodies of the two Tacgnols and Longcat.

Longcat was locked in a terrible struggle; lasers flashed on both sides. Now it no longer sung melodiously; a desperate hatred had entered its voice as well.

A ten seconds more, and he caught a glimpse of Lee and the security guard, who both still floated in the air. He just hoped to reach them quickly enough.

Already he felt his upward velocity diminishing: gravity was affecting him at last. But if things fell into place perfectly, he would reach the two exactly at the top of his arc, and then they would all (hopefully) land safely.

Another ten seconds. Now he was close.

“Lee! And you, security guard! Grab my hand or foot or something if you want to live!” he shouted with all his might. He knew it was preposterous, and was not at all sure if he would be heard over the feline roars and the laser blasts.

Then he got sight of the shadows separating themselves from the Tacgnol bodies. It reminded him of a boss fight in a Kirby game. It possibly meant the evil cats were dying, disintegrating, but the shadows would still present a very real danger. Their tentacles reached out –

He was at the top of his arc now. There was only one way left – down.

A tentacle came dangerously close, and he had to tumble in the air. That was bad, as it would possibly cause Lee to miss. In the next instant he felt something grab his foot, and went through a quick burst of absolute horror –

Until he found it was Lee who had grabbed him. The security guard in turn dangled from Lee's right leg with one hand, while reaching for the shotgun on her back with the other.

As they all started to fall, the guard fired the shotgun again and again at the shadows, until the gun ran out of ammunition. There appeared to be not much effect, but it was the aggression that counted.

The falling accelerated. Would it be too fast already?

Randy glanced upward, and it appeared that the

Tacgnols were disintegrating at last. But Longcat was fading from existence as well. The epic fight was coming to an end, and Longcat had given everything. The shadows still tried to give chase, but the downward momentum was increasing even beyond their reach.

Shit!

That had to definitely mean they were going too fast. It would be death on impact.

Or perhaps not –

Randy realized simply that if he had done an impossible feat once, he could do it again. He would repeat the master step.

The timing would only have to be perfect.

Five.

Four.

Three.

Randy put his hand out, ready to meet the ground. Fuck fuck fuck fuck fuck it would hurt like hell –

No! That was weakness! The aim of Convict Conditioning was to bust free of all weakness! He had to believe, or it would not work –

Two.

One.

Impact. Master step.

They fell in a heap to the ground, and Randy could not be sure if he had managed to slow them down sufficiently, as his head still hit the ground fast enough to be knocked unconscious.

28.

The heavy layer of clouds had parted, revealing the setting sun which now painted the swamp road a pleasant, yellowish color. Kim was not in any hurry; the last thing she wanted was to drive off the road because of excessive speed. She was also very much exhausted by the events of the day.

She barely remembered the landing, which had defied the laws of physics. Apparently Randy had suffered the most, as he was the first to hit the ground. But still he had regained consciousness fairly quickly. Then they had wiped the dust off their clothes, and had headed for Kim's Fiat for the getaway.

Tacnol, its copy, and the shadows that had emerged from its body at the last moment were no more. The dimensional gates had closed for good. There was nothing more to see and do at the now ruined facility.

Gradually Kim became aware of the odd noise becoming louder, until the engine actually misfired a couple of times. The car lost power, and Kim pushed the accelerator further, but it was of no use.

Then there came a louder, grinding steely racket, and the car shuddered as the engine died completely. The generic warning light came on – a bit late.

As the vehicle came to a complete halt, Kim also became aware of a peculiar smell – like rotten fruit. Now she understood that the smell had been there for some time, even before the engine started acting up.

It appeared to be originating from the back seat. She turned around –

Even through her weariness, she felt a deep nausea overpower her, and her heart started to thud wildly and painfully. Randy and Lee were fast reducing to a black, soapy substance. The human forms were still clearly visible: it was a twisted, morbid embrace they had locked into.

Kim vomited right on the front passenger seat. No matter how strong, nihilistic and misanthropic she was, she could do nothing to help it. This was simply too much, right now. After everything that had already happened.

Then she stumbled out of the car and into the fresh air.

And she thought, severely.

From what Kim had understood of his delusional-seeming ramblings, Randy had mysteriously come back to life after dying from a .50 caliber bullet wound.

Only to die again by decomposing alive.

Somehow Kim thought back to Viktor's occasional mad ravings on the nature of the Cosmos and the Anti-Cosmos, and the tyranny of the Demiurge. The Demiurge would seek to always restore order, a kind of reverse entropy.

Was this the Cosmos or Demiurge or whatever restoring natural order, eliminating all witnesses who had seen the other dimension?

But why was she then still alive?

What was the difference?

Well, she had not died and come back to life.

But neither was Lee. What connected those two?

Then realization hit. They both had actually been beyond the gate, while Kim had not. So was that the price one always paid? Lothar had told that Purexo had used dimensional travel even before. Did the scientists who crossed the barrier always end up like this, sooner or later?

Or was this day somewhat out of the ordinary? Tacgnol had materialized, and had it not been annihilated by Longcat, the end of the world could have resulted. So, put mildly, the day had indeed been extraordinary.

But how Kim could be absolutely sure this would not happen to her as well? She had certainly seen things no mortal was supposed to see. What if decomposition would hit her some time later? At best it would come while she was sleeping, which would not be much different than dying due to natural causes. Or maybe it might occur when she was taking a shower – then she would see her own limbs blacken and jellify and go down the drain.

Kim shuddered.

Indeed, how long until she could be sure?

Days? Weeks? Months? Or did it even matter?

Sooner or later everyone ended up as a rotting corpse anyway. Maybe going out in a gross style would fit her best. Maybe she would not even want it any other way? The ultimate would perhaps be to dissolve into a black goo while playing the final chord of a twenty-minute funeral doom epic, live onstage. That would certainly give the crowd something to think about. The YouTube videos made out of that event would scar people for life as well. And maybe you also would dissolve some time later if you watched such

video.

Or alternatively, life would just go on as its usual boring self. Somehow Kim knew already that nothing in her life would ever top this day, when she had emerged as the only survivor after seeing the shadow of Purexo.

Then she became aware of a change.

Like a slow burning deep inside.

Kim remembered the tales of human self-ignition she had read as a child. This was something similar. She also sensed the sickly sweet odor return.

She looked down, and the decomposition into black had irrevocably started.

“Gaaaaaahhl...”

Kim woke up to see she was lying on a stretcher, under the flashing red lights of an ambulance. She was not decomposing. Instead, it seemed the authorities had arrived at last.

Somehow, her first thought was disappointment.

The disgusting coda had only been a dream.

Off to the side, she saw Randy and Lee. They appeared to be alive; they sat next to each other on another stretcher. A plain-clothes investigator was talking to them. Kim picked up the word “hurricane.”

Those stupid detectives!

Hurricane! Ha ha ha ha, hm, hm, hm, hm! If only they had seen the pudding gates, and Tacgnol with their own eyes! Kim decided her capability for misanthropy just doubled, so great was the stupidity displayed.

Turning into other thoughts, Kim decided to never act as a guard for any company that had anything to do with desserts. She also vowed never to eat anything that could be classified as a dessert.

Or perhaps –

Would she still remember the flute-like sound? Kim tried to whistle it, but was not sure if she had the pitch right. Or could one of the laptops with the sound file be recovered from the rubble? In that case, perhaps it was time to pay the closest Purexo restaurant a visit, the next time it was serving bun pudding!