

THE STENCH
OF PUREXO

LASSE ÖÖRŦİ

Foreword

To some, war is hell. To others, it's the best thing ever. And yet to some it's both.

Contains strong perverse horror and violence, strong concentration of bad language, bogus medicine / science / car maintenance / occultism, some crude sexuality and references to bodily functions. Be aware that this is a crossover with Agents of Metal Pt. 1-3, but Purexo stories contain far less sanity. Read at own risk.

All vehicles, objects and characters in the last part are fictional, but may be inspired by real life counterparts.

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Part One – Onset of Putrefaction

At some point the rotting had started.

Kim was not sure when was the exact moment, but now that she thought back, there was a definite smell of rotting emanating from somewhere that couldn't be explained away easily. It was not the smell of rotting fruit in the trash bin, or other remains of crude microwave food.

No.

It was the smell of rotting flesh.

Her own flesh. That was unmistakable.

She thought back to when she had first encountered it. The smallest whiff. A single word came to her mind, and there was no doubt any more.

Purexo.

It was the stench of Purexo. That horrible day, the dimensional incident. The appearance of Tacgnol, and its just as incredulous destruction. Somehow that day had tainted her permanently, and would lead the way to her eventual complete putrefaction.

What was absurd, was the she had actually dreamed of it. Wished it. To putrefy away as a protest to mankind, a final monument and epitaph to her continuing and growing misanthropy. To putrefy into a black disgusting liquid during the climax of a doom metal set.

What was even more absurd, was that she had taken steps to steer her life to fulfill that precise goal. She had

bought a bass guitar, and after enough confidence, had replied to a message posted on a local musicians' web site, which solicited for bassists to join into an all-female doom metal band.

Fuck. That was the path to her undoing, what she had not realized up until now.

But it was best to start from the beginning.

Kim was surprised at the weight of the bass guitar. It was a black Squier clone of a Fender Precision, with a single P-microphone. That was something the sales clerk had explained, which Kim had not known beforehand.

She had also bought plectrums of several gauges, to get to know what would best fit her playing style.

She knew she would start from almost zero. She only knew she wanted to play the most evil and depressing doom metal, that would inspire anyone who heard it to commit suicide.

For now she did not have an actual amplifier yet. She had bought a ProCo Rat distortion pedal, which she fed straight to a set of cheap headphones. That was enough until she actually learned to play. If she ever did, that was.

The weight of the bass guitar rather made her think how it would be a suitable instrument to kill a human being. To bludgeon their head in. Somewhat perversely, Kim thought she was much more adept at killing than playing. But everyone had to start from somewhere.

Thinking of killing made her think of something else. Or rather, someone.

Erik.

That son of a bitch, whom she could never fully figure out. At least with Viktor it had been clear. He had been

an anti-cosmic Satanist (or pretender) through and through, whose only goal had been to conquer the eleven planes of Azerate, and amass the knowledge contained within. As well as to fuck their brains out, when both of them agreed that was the definite course of action. But now Viktor was no more. As far as Kim knew, he had been reduced to a puddle of black goo.

That left Erik, who was a much harder case.

Fuck! Kim had already failed her internal Bechdel test. Only a few minutes with the bass, and she was already thinking about men. But what then? She could think of what the hell she pleased.

So, Erik. He had boasted of actually being in possession of an identified alien craft (IAC). He played drums in the genres of thrash, speed, black and death metal, just as the situation demanded. He had performed missions for the benefit of mankind, firing a sniper rifle while wearing a black leather Agent coat. Or at least that was what he had told. Kim was not sure of what exactly to believe.

But in any case, compared to Viktor Kim observed a far larger friction with Erik whenever they met, which was not even that often. But to his credit, Erik had given Kim further courage to pursue the goal of becoming a musician. That was something.

So, Kim plugged the ProCo Rat into the transformer, which she had left plugged into a wall socket. She observed it to be rather warm, which could actually lead into a fire hazard. She put the cheap headphones over her head and plucked the low E-string with a medium gauge plectrum.

The sound was pure noise, not at all satisfying. Kim realized she had also let the A-string ring open, leading to an unintended power chord.

She tried again, making sure to mute the other

strings with her left hand this time. This time, the low note of the E-string was satisfactory. It was pure fucking doom. She started to hum to herself, at the lowest note her voice could muster.

"Dooooomm... Satann..."

She began to chuckle. That was not exactly the pinnacle and essence of doom, but she would learn. She would force herself to learn, just as she had learned the art of security and violence.

Erik woke up in the middle of a disgusting nightmare. It was still completely dark. He had dreamed of being submerged somewhere in the SCEPTRE Black Ops' endless mazes, trying to align the sights of his M4 carbine or the scope of his sniper rifle, but never managing in time before the enemies acquired him. Then they would kill him, over and over.

Fuck them!

In his dreams, it seemed he could not call upon the instincts of the over-man that he had long ago mastered, but was not prepared to divulge to others in case they would get unnecessarily offended.

And because Erik was not sure if sleep would come again, he submerged to the internet. He had been studying the darkest reaches of Reddit for some time. He knew he was only in agreement of maybe 50% of their tenets. Maybe even less. But he certainly considered himself a shitlord. That was something to definitely hide from most people.

After the significant Agent missions in 2012-2013, which had seen Erik traveling to Area 51, and taking part in possibly saving the future of all mankind, Erik did not exactly know who to trust, or what to tell to most. Now the IAC was safely stashed away at the forest compound of the mostly disbanded Shadow Unit, or what remained of them.

So, Erik drifted in a kind of limbo, not knowing what his life would entail to a great degree in the future. He had possibly done something astounding, but it would never matter to most people. He was drifting in a void. He knew one possible purpose would be to form a true Agent Metal band. To let the truth of their expeditions out with raw speed metal energy. If anyone would listen, that is. But to be sure, Erik was not sure where the other remaining and serious musician Agents, Ian and Jo, even were at this point. In summer, Erik had joined them in the south of Europe, where they had performed the ritual burning of a Ford Ka that had been just as instrumental in saving Earth as their guns and electromagnetic armor coats had been.

But that was all in the past.

What would the future be, if anything? Fuck! Erik just did not know. There simply was no proper guarantee of anything. Browsing the worst shitlord and edgelord pages on Reddit simply did not fit the daily routine of a goddamn ex-Agent and hero, but what else there was?

Fuck!

Erik was seriously out of ideas.

Erik thought of Kim, whom he saw occasionally. If Kim dared to follow her dreams, she was now following the path of becoming a doom metal bassist. Which actually made sense. Doom or especially occult doom rock was much more commercially favorable than old-fashioned speed and thrash metal. Especially if the thrash metal would be concerned with conspiracies of and out of this world, like Agent Steel had done. They were mostly out of action by now, even if their past vocalist had actually believed in Reptilians and other serious transgressions of the ruling elite. They had briefly rejoined with their original vocalist John Cyriis, which then just fizzled out. So...

Maybe that actually left a window of opportunity. For a true Agent Metal trio that could even reach some degree of success. To tell things exactly how they had been. Each burst from an MP5 submachine gun or M4 or G36 rifle. Each fallen enemy. Each anti-cosmic location of power deactivated and destroyed. Each conspiratorial organization exposed. But then, who the fuck would understand? This would require faith. Faith that Erik knew he might not have. But to be sure, he would just have to try to contact his comrades. Fucking Ian and Jo, wherever they were. If they still knew how to play at 200 BPM or more.

After the Ford Ka, the battered fourth generation Fiesta was not much of an improvement. But they were on four wheels again, heading for some unknown destination even they did not exactly know.

Jo gripped the steering wheel unnecessarily hard. Maybe that was because she wanted to have more control than she could actually have. Control that no-one had.

For the most part she just wished she would not be required to be a part of whatever grand plan the universe had in store next for the heroes who were still ready take up the cause. Next to her, there was Ian. In his now mostly regrown golden locks of Hessian hair. The ideal would be to just enjoy their time together and never have to kill again. But if there was no grand conspiracy any more, no more enemies, would life lack meaning?

On a moment's whim, she decided to interrogate Ian. Of what he would think of the matter at hand.

"Hey, if there was a situation.."

"Requiring our attention?"

Fuck. It seemed Ian could actually guess her thoughts. Had they actually been traveling that long?

"Yeah. Like heroic Agent shit or something."

"Well it depends. If anyone else couldn't do it. But that's basically a death wish. If I just had a choice, I'd

want nothing like that any more.”

“Yeah.”

Silence fell. Jo interrogated her thoughts. Did she dread it? The silence, she meant. Was it just a sign that all thought processes had already reached their conclusions? Was there nothing more to say? And was there even no reason to even think any more? That was going quite deep already.

To be honest, Jo knew that there was still much to think of. At least the unfinished thrash song they had written yesterday. It could become something, if developed enough. It had a hard driving triplet groove which made Jo think of the best days of Agent Steel. And how they had subsequently lost credibility by momentarily re-recruiting John Cyriis, then just fizzling out (Jo thought someone else was simultaneously thinking similarly of Agent Steel, which was freaky.) So she and Ian still had something to reach. True fucking Agent Metal. Built out of the adventures and missions they had actually lived through.

René, their bassist/vocalist, had been against all that. Against all violence and killing. But he was dead now. He could not advise them from beyond the grave.

Reaching true Agent Metal still required a just as true drummer. Jo could only think of one possible candidate. Fucking Erik. Fucking Black Goat of the Woods.

Jo found herself thinking almost too much. Yes, there was still much to achieve, and they could have been much worse off at this point. She felt her eyes get a bit wet, their focus waver from the road. She leaned slightly against Ian and thought she was lucky to be here, after she had purged the rogue SCEPTRE artificial personality at the risk of her own. The gamble had paid off, though it had not been exactly easy in the following months, when her memory had slowly recovered.

“What is it?” Ian asked.

Always so thoughtful and supportive. It had to have been programmed as part of his SCEPTRE mind control training.

Instead of dumping her long-winded thoughts exactly, of which she couldn't even completely explain, or Ian might not even exactly understand, she just pressed the accelerator pedal to the bottom, and the 1.25 liter Fiesta engine screamed hard.

“Nothing. Just hold the fuck on.”

A month had passed. Kim knew she had the basic patterns down. Minor scale. Check. Major scale, not as important, but yet she knew that as well. Enough speed to play eighth note lines, or even slow sixteenth notes. Kim could by now play several Black Sabbath, Candlemass and Reverend Bizarre songs, while also improvising primitively. That was enough. It was indeed time to find other musicians, to begin fulfilling her dream.

She booted up her barely functioning, ages-old and slow laptop and headed online. She didn't quite know where to look, so she just googled for "doom metal musicians wanted."

The result was surprising. In fact there were far too many hits, a totally overwhelming amount. Seemed that everyone was trying to put a doom metal or female fronted occult rock band together. Kim did not follow the music scene closely – she just privately listened to a few grim-sounding bands that pleased her most – but she was yet familiar with the concepts of over-saturation and commercialization.

So, was this the wrong choice? Should she choose something more esoteric instead?

Then it dawned on her. All she needed was to add one word to the search.

"Suicidal doom metal musicians wanted."

Now, this could be interpreted in two ways. Musicians who were actually suicidal, and with whom Kim did not want to get involved, since it would just end up as psychic energy drain with her as the resident band “therapist” (and considering her misanthropy she would easily be the worst therapist imaginable), or even serious legal trouble in the worst case – if the other musicians had a suicide pact and Kim would be the only one left alive at the rehearsal space when cops arrived.

The better option would be for them to possess a similar vision, to want to produce suicidal doom. Again there were two different sub-possibilities: that the musicians produced dark and depressive music as a form of support or therapy. This would be dangerously close to the first option.

The best case would be that the musicians just wanted to produce suicidal music for whatever reason. Maybe they wanted to spread and amplify the world’s misanthropy and to actually inspire the listeners to kill themselves, like the black metal band Shining did.

This search was indeed better. The amount of results was manageable. Kim chose a musicians’ site that allowed to filter by location or proximity. Choosing her hometown, and narrowing down to “suicidal doom metal bassist wanted” the amount of results was down to less than twenty.

Before diving into the results in detail, Kim searched her mind for the exact parameters.

What did she want? Would it be an all-female band, something more gothic- or witch-like, or rather blue-collar such as how Black Sabbath had started. The ultimate would be to have a band that were all misanthropic night security guards. But that was perhaps too much to hope for.

The results narrowed down to half simply because

some of the ads clearly looked for someone with several years of band experience. Kim knew that she had to choose an outfit where all were mostly in the beginner stages. Otherwise she would just get quickly booted out even if she managed to fake skill in the initial audition.

Eliminating too poser-like ads and the result set was halved again. Down to four now.

For curiosity Kim decided to give preference to all-female bands. If they all shared the same negative, nihilistic spirit, then something special could result.

“Witchery is looking for a bassist for conjuring supremely negative doom energies. Only true fucking succubi should apply.”

Kim quickly found the band’s Facebook page and confirmed they were all female. The band was young and the one song they had online was rambling and sloppily played. In other words, it would be a good match for Kim’s current skills.

But something warned Kim. If they referred to members as “succubi” they could still be too vain and poser-like. Kim imagined she might get quickly fed up with them, which could even lead into an explosive, violent and hateful confrontation. In the worst case she would test the ability of the bass guitar to bludgeon a face in. And like in the previous case she had feared, cops would take her away. Fuck!

So. Next result.

“Sinister Coven is lacking a bassist. We indulge in total suicidal doom. No poseurs need apply.”

Kim repeated the same routine. Find their social media presence. Listen to songs. It turned out Sinister Coven were actually just very pale, thin guys. The music was good, but also too skilled. So it was not a good match in total, though many elements were promising. A pity.

Next.

“We want you to kill yourself. Unless you know how to play bass. We’re Necrotic Dust. No impostors, no sell-outs, no life. Only fucking doom.”

The band name sounded perfect, even though the ad in total was childish. Kim imagined bone dust blowing on post-apocalyptic plains under a permanently blackened sun, where no life existed any more.

Turned out it was a trio, which had reduced to a duo due to the previous bassist being kicked out. The remaining members were Abigail, guitars / vocals (Kim thought of the King Diamond album, which was always good) and Shanae, drums.

They sounded primitive enough. Not as unsure as Witchery, but not exactly professional either. Kim decided this would be within her skills and worth trying.

Now she only had to actually register to Facebook to be able to contact Abigail. On principle Kim would never have done that otherwise, but there were no other contact details. So, fuck it! She could delete the profile once she had set up the audition.

Kim noticed to have made one potential mistake. The audition was all set up, today evening (it was Monday) but she had no proper amplifier.

Fuck. With no amp she would not project a sufficient image of authenticity and skill. So it was time to rush into the four o'clock traffic and into the nearest music store, the same where she had bought the bass.

Kim hoped the piece of shit car would start before it was too late.

It was a yellow-black first generation Smart Fortwo with a diesel engine and automatic transmission. It was honestly an abomination, even worse than the Fiat 500 she had driven when working for Purexo, but she had gotten it for dirt cheap. After she had decided to stop working a regular security guard gig, and only take somewhat random jobs through a worker agency, there was exactly never an overabundance of money.

But the reward on her sanity was more than worth it. Allowed by the extra free time, long meditations on the nature of nihilism, misanthropy and general negativity had calmed her mind considerably, and allowed her to hate mankind in a simmering, relaxed manner. Even the nightmares where she relived the Purexo dessert laboratory incident had become less frequent.

The only good thing about the questionable four-wheeled object was that it matched her hair color, plus

her clothing color choice most of the time. Luckily, now it started up without an incident. Kim merged into the busy traffic, nearly colliding with a featureless white van, and swore heavily.

The Renditioner was tired. His balding and hard-lined reflection in the van mirror certainly told that. Both immediately physically tired, and tired of the long years of top secret assignments around the world, of transporting material or persons covertly to black sites, of witnessing enhanced methods being used on them, and on one occasion, even being used on himself by the state's many enemies.

Now he had almost caused a crash.

He knew he had to shape up. This assignment was too important to fuck up; too much rested on it.

In the back of the van, accompanied by two armed guards, was a high-tech steel container roughly the size of a large briefcase. It had been prepared at the university's secret metaphysics department, and was en route to an above top secret (God clearance) location.

Technically speaking the Renditioner did not possess God clearance; nevertheless he had been given instructions of the delivery location. He was not sure if it was the ultimate destination, or if another crew would take over from there. It was possible he would be memory-wiped, or even killed upon reaching it, but he accepted the stakes. According to the briefing (which surely left out important details) too much rested on this delivery. A cataclysm, a plague, or whatever the top brass wanted to call it was coming, and this was one of

the key pieces to fighting it.

Inside the container was state-of-the-art electro-magnetic confinement circuitry which was powered by a heavy battery that accounted for much of its weight. The battery would not last forever, and it was imperative to reach the destination with power left, though it would have enough juice allowing for a reasonable travel speed as long as they would not get into an accident or a traffic jam taking an hour or more to clear.

Within the confinement matrix, there rested something many did not believe to even exist. And to others it would be total blasphemy or devilry - of man attempting to play God.

It was an artificially constructed soul template.

Kim was now in possession of a 100W combo amplifier, with a single 12 inch speaker. The clerk had warned that the power might not be enough for band practice, but they had come to an understanding that the volume level would be enough when Kim did not actually attempt to get the fundamental (lowest) tone ringing properly, but just boosted the middle and treble enough. She would be using distortion anyway.

A larger amp would have taken too much of her budget, and she was not at all certain she would be accepted in. If not, she might put the doom metal dream on the back burner, and concentrate more on meditation and nihilism, in which case unnecessarily good equipment would just be wasted.

The return trip back to the apartment's parking lot was more uneventful; the worst rush was over. No more suicidal white vans. Now Kim had just enough time to get something to eat, before having to drive to the other side of the town for the audition.

In fact the car would present another problem for projecting a proper doom image, but that certainly couldn't be remedied on a short notice. Supposedly one could swap the door panels on a Smart, in which case all-black would be an improvement, but that was for later consideration, if Abigail and Shanae would actually demand it.

The Renditioner drove along the highway; traffic thinned out as the city was left behind. Some five miles ahead he would turn on a smaller road and follow it to the GPS destination marker.

Being moderately adept in spycraft, he wondered of how powerful enemies – if any – would be trying to intercept this mission. It was in theory possible to hijack a GPS signal and divert the van to a false destination, at which point the crew would be ambushed. He had the address memorized as a backup, but he had never been there before, so he could not be positively sure he could tell the right destination from wrong, particularly if road signs had also been altered.

But somehow he was certain that the enemies in this case wouldn't be of the guns-and-explosives handling, cloak-and-dagger-method knowledgeable types, but rather something more sinister.

If not the Illuminati or other secret societies with knowledge and influence leaning on the mystical side, then maybe even actual Lovecraftian beings not of this world. One would not need artificial souls for missions of the ordinary, such as trying to get a foreign government toppled. Unless the plan was to switch the souls of their leaders, or something. No. From the briefing he understood this was ultimately about stopping something harmful from spreading, so maybe

the artificial soul template was a kind of a cure.

Fuck. The Renditioner knew his thoughts were wandering, imperiling even his driving to a degree. Beyond a certain point thinking too much was fruitless, even if he was considering scenarios for a sudden attack. It was better to just keep his eyes on the road and both hands on the wheel.

The basement door opened to a room dimly lit with red-tinted lights. The smell was that of mold; it would not be healthy to spend unnecessarily long here. But maybe the point of doom metal was to practice in as unhealthy locations as possible to get the proper feeling of hopelessness and withering away.

A thin pale girl with dark brown or black hair holding a black Gibson SG clone had opened the door and motioned for Kim to come inside. She was Abigail.

Kim put the bass gig bag and the amplifier on the concrete floor (there was a harsh, echoing noise that did not promise good acoustics) and closed the door behind her. Then she could take a look with more detail. There was a minimalist drum kit, with only a single bass drum and two toms. Behind them had to be Shanae. She was dark and more heavily built, somewhat resembling a female counterpart to Erik but not quite.

Neither of the musicians spoke initially. It appeared silence was the code of doom. That fit Kim just fine.

“What do you know?” Abigail asked finally.

Kim did not reply initially either.

“Let's play Sabbath. Everyone knows them. Or they aren't much doom. Electric Funeral?”

That Kim knew good enough. Not perhaps Geezer Butler's every bass fill, but enough to do the song justice.

“Fine. Where do I plug in?”

“There.” Shanae pointed to an extension cord with one free socket. Kim lifted the combo closer and plugged it in, then started fishing the bass guitar, the cord and the pick from the bag. In a proper band audition everything should happen in a kind of unsure, haphazard, adrenaline-inducing rush, Kim understood, though she never had auditioned before. Thankfully the handling of life and death situations and dimensional incidents, as well as her practiced nihilism allowed her to stay mostly calm.

Shanae counted in with four slow quarter notes on the sticks and they started playing the main riff. It sounded blasphemously out of tune.

Kim understood to not have tuned the bass for a while. With a heavy frown on her face, Abigail stopped playing.

“That sounds like shit. Well, we didn't exactly tell you. We tune down to D.”

Kim was somewhat pleased the rookie mistake could be explained by difference in tuning. Abigail gave the low D from the SG and Kim dropped her tuning down. After that, she tuned the rest of the strings with speed that surprised even herself. Tuning was one of the first things that she had learned, and she had learned it to almost a military, nihilistic degree. Like mostly everything she did in her life.

They started the song again, and this time it sounded better. In the small concrete chamber the 100 watts seemed to be enough and Kim had not even turned the amp on full.

Abigail began to sing to the lone microphone in the center of the room. It was high on its stand so she had to tilt her head up, in an occultistic and solemn pose, which was enhanced by the red light coming from

below. Heard live, the voice was more otherworldly and hypnotic than on the primitive recording. It had such frightening qualities that it was not much of a stretch to imagine it inspiring weaker-minded audience members to suicide. Kim was sure that she had chosen the right band, if only they would choose her.

They returned to the main riff, and Kim dug in harder with the pick. She knew she had much work ahead, as she almost lost control, though the song was one of the easiest.

Finally the song ended. Abigail and Shanae seemed to nod in acceptance, though just slightly. To show one's emotions was not very doom. Again, that fit Kim fine.

"Dooooom," Shanae said in a mocking tone from behind the kit. Kim understood it to be in a good spirit.

"Something else?" Abigail asked.

"Candlemass? Bewitched?" Kim suggested.

The song had a most excellent video, where the band member were carrying their singer in a black casket through the fog. When it was time for the vocals to begin, he would suddenly burst out. Kim knew for some this kind of humorousness was too much. For Viktor it certainly had been. It was as if he would have been a lesser disciple of Azerate if he ever let his guard down, or if he responded to questionably humorous material with anything else than contempt. To be honest Kim had been rather aggressive and messed up at the time, so it had not been fair to expect anything else, than him playing the role of the anti-cosmicist rigidly. And now it was too late to know otherwise.

"Yeah, let's do that," Abigail said. She seemed to be relaxing somewhat, not 100% in the role of doom any more.

Kim now saw that Shanae had a double kick pedal, which this song required to be able to play in a relaxed

manner. It was in theory possible to play with a single bass drum pedal, but that would be unnecessarily tough. Nicko in Iron Maiden would no doubt play like that. But Iron Maiden or any other heavy metal was off limits and too poser-like, so any further thoughts should not be wasted on them, Kim reminded herself.

Abigail began the power chord intro riff by herself. As a solo instrument, the harsh guitar tone reverberated nastily, and pauses in the playing quickly turned into feedback. Shanae came in next with tom hits, and finally Kim joined the riff as the proper drum beat started.

The conviction strengthened: though amateurish, this was proper doom metal that smelled of pure death, rotting and withering. Kim was doubly sure she had chosen right.

“The communication protocol is tricky. Or actually, there are two protocols. One with the host body. It's sort of straightforward, to interface with the brain's neurons, and transmit data when requested. You could liken it to a computer's memory bus. The second is even trickier. It's what we call the Lifestream protocol. It's heavily encrypted, but still just electromagnetic waves in the end. It's a trinary encoding. Instead of just zero and one, you also have an in-between state. This protocol mostly handles 'events' like being assigned to a certain host body, or detachment at the moment of death. Each host has a unique identifier, which is two hundred and eighteen trinary digits long. Now, what exactly is on the other end, we don't know. God, aliens, angels or demons. It doesn't even matter strictly speaking. As long as the protocol works.”

Randy was almost out of breath as he finished the explanation to Carl, the fellow lab intern who had just started. With glasses and hair combed back with gel, Carl looked like a typical slightly asshole student, but he was easy-going enough.

They were quite deep in science.

Science that few knew of, handled within the bowels of the metaphysics department. Randy's life had taken a few turns after the Purexo incident. He no longer lived and breathed game engines and rendering, or even

DragonForce. He had a much deeper purpose now. What they were doing was nothing short of pioneering. Randy had his private motivations, though. He still had vivid memories of the incident, and he felt that this research might help to get to the bottom of understanding what exactly had happened on that day. After all, he had seemingly died and then returned back to life, after a detour in a hallucinatory world of white walls and endless gray fog. Afterlife, most probably.

Randy had been cleared with the government for this work. Everyone working in the lab had signed enough NDA's that they would spend several consecutive life sentences behind bars if they ever leaked anything of the research to anyone unauthorized. The lab was in the university's deepest sub-basement too, requiring a key card and a daily changing code to access.

"So does it store, like memories of past lives?" Carl asked.

"We're not that far to be sure. In theory it could. The storage mechanism is kind of generic. We just made the first experimental delivery to the field testing team."

When he thought of it, the idea that the soul was a kind of computer was nothing surprising. Mostly everything was a computer. In that regard the research was not far from what Randy had been doing his whole life.

There was also a part of the research Carl was not cleared for. It was still a theoretical possibility, but it was within possibility that the Lifestream protocol in fact allowed the soul to exert control that would be considered paranormal. For example telekinesis, or even stronger displays of power. Normally history knew only of a few select individuals who had managed that, and the accounts were sketchy (for example Aleister Crowley aka the Great Beast being able to make a man

walking in front of him fall, by first synchronizing into his footsteps, and then suddenly leaning forward), but the reverse-engineering could lead to the possibility of imbuing the host with greater access to these powers.

In other words, the soul could be augmented and weaponized.

This of course meant the owner's original soul would have to be removed first, which would cause severe ethical concerns. Therefore Randy was not sure how widespread this work could ever become in its application. Part of him was even afraid of all the implications – he almost felt as if he was Oppenheimer opening the Pandora's box of nuclear armaments. But if the government would not dare to use the research, then someone else certainly would. Someone who would have no qualms whatsoever. In fact Randy realized that the legal trouble he would get into for leaking the research would be nothing compared to being abducted by some unscrupulous, powerful actor, and be forced to reveal or replicate the research under the pain of torture, in some godforsaken place on the other side of the globe.

Then there were deeper, intriguing lines of thinking that went beyond just the weaponized applications and the associated power plays. The other end. Where the trinary communication was received. For the lack of a better mental image, Randy imagined a colossal server room on the astral plane, surrounded by pure blackness and occasional lightning storms, which the master supervisor of life itself presided over. Huh. Wow. That was certainly an epic thought.

Erik ruminated on the concept of hate. In its purest form hate was an awesomely potent force. Some of his best drumwork had been performed early in the history of Cyberpriest, while in the throes of a white-hot, murderous rage. But it was a two-edged blade. Sometimes hate would cause his thoughts to circulate endlessly, fruitlessly, while all action would cease. Things that formerly derived great pleasure, like playing thrash beats and blastbeats at the top of his ability, would be disgusting and meaningless. This was the state of catatonic hate. And on one occasion, on the knife-edge between these two states of hate, Erik had come within an inch of actually murdering René, though otherwise they had been like best friends in the band.

After René's murder at the hands of SCEPTRE goons, Erik had hated everyone for a long time, withdrawing to his forest cabin. He did not remember this episode of his life dearly; it had been a vortex of all-consuming black hate. His worst mistake was that he had not turned it into a seminal masterwork of hateful black, death or blackened death metal. But looking back on it, he knew that he simply could have not done that, for the hate itself and consuming massive amounts of alcohol had taken all of his concentration.

When Ian had arrived at the cabin some weeks later, asking for help, Erik had almost been ready to murder

him as well. It was only the gradual and sensitive introduction of absinthe, and Ian's persuasion skills that had brought Erik back from the edge.

But after their Agent mission was finally complete, Erik had again reason to hate everything. He had come to know the Agent cyberwarfare master, the spherical and tough-as-nails Gwen aka Blowfish. It had been very close to love, which was to Erik a very serious confession to make. But as fate turned out, Gwen did not return alive from the dark planet of death (Nibiru), though other Agents including Ian did.

During this period, Erik flew aimlessly with the IAC he and the other surviving Agents of the reckless Shadow Unit had in their possession. He took part in criminal and near-criminal activity he did not exactly want to remember any more.

He was rocked out of this bout of catatonic wrath and depression when he was tasered by a security guard after being found out vandalizing an underground car park.

This guard was of course Kim. They had become somewhat of friends, though each time they met usually ended up in some kind of argument or bickering or otherwise generally uneasy atmosphere.

Kim had also had odd tales of her own to tell, so they had compared whose was the craziest. Flying to Nibiru to bomb it and save Earth from anti-cosmic destruction, or the black cat Tacgnol appearing at a former prison in the middle of nowhere, bent on eating the whole prison (including its hidden nuclear reactor), and perhaps even the whole world.

In both cases, the end of the world had been stopped. Leaving... what exactly? This was where Erik's current lack of purpose kicked in. He knew the answer was simple. Either he wanted the apocalypse to begin anew,

so that he could have a heroic purpose, or he had to form the ultimate Agent thrash band.

Damn. He couldn't cause an apocalypse, but something had to be done. He got up from the bed, where half of his collection of Nietzsche books currently lay under the covers, put on some clothes at last, and headed to the drum kit. In a few seconds, he was unleashing a barrage of roughly 220 BPM thrash metal.

His hi-hat hand was not coping well; it tensed up after a minute of unrelenting eighth notes. Damn. He would need to practice more regularly again.

He of course could have joined any thrash band, but his vision demanded it to be Agent-themed. Only stories of their missions, of each shot blowing a head, would be truly worthy now. But his Agent bandmates were across the ocean. The last word was that they were still afraid to return home due to Jo also taking part in the Area 51 raid. Pussies. It was probably Ian being over-protective. But they couldn't hide the entire rest of their lives, or could they?

Or of course Erik could relocate to them, but somehow he felt it would be betraying his principles. The truest Agent thrash would need to be played on the same soil where enemy (and their own) blood had been spilled.

Erik brought the tempo down and started working on keeping the hi-hat hand relaxed, using only his fingers to move the stick.

Kim was in. In the end the decision had been made without especial fanfare. They would practice twice in a week for now.

She knew now the true work would only start. She had received a USB stick with more of Necrotic Dust's own songs, and crude notes to them from the old bassist. So the first order of things was to learn those, and improve the basslines if possible.

She put the amp & bass guitar bag back to the minimal trunk of the Fortwo and was on her way home.

The Renditioner reached the destination. It was just a dead end of the small road, at a clearing with trees and hills some distance away. Dangerously exposed, he thought. There appeared to once have been a building, but now it was just an empty lot, with some construction rubble around. There was trepidation rising at the back of his mind, but no need to be unduly alarmed yet. The address was 100% right.

“How much juice?” he asked to the back. The container had a digital battery meter on it.

“Quarter,” came the muffled reply from one of the guards. That was good enough, as it equaled at least one hour. The next team or whatever had been planned, would have enough time to take over.

Suddenly a deep subsonic rumble started. The whole van was shaking.

The Renditioner looked to the left, and understood the “ground” of the empty lot was sliding open, revealing a ramp leading below. He started the engine again and turned toward the opening.

It was very unlikely to be a trap by a third party. Of course there was still the chance that his employer had decided the delivery crew was not to ever return, but it was a risk that just had to be taken.

They drove down in intensifying darkness, only punctured by weak yellowish fluorescent lights in the

tunnel ceiling. The tunnel angled down steeply, and he had to apply motor braking.

It was certainly a suitable location for delivering an artificial soul. A top-secret research lab.

Or actually... the researchers had prepared the soul template. So this had to be for field testing by non-research personnel. Grunts, in other words. Hard and violent men like himself, who didn't care of the theory, but only of the results when force of any kind was applied against enemy flesh.

Erik rarely liked initiating contact. It was a sign of weakness, he felt. He rather wanted other people to come to him. But too much time had been wasted in inaction. His focus was wavering. The true Agent Metal thrash band had to be set in motion now, or never.

The encrypted Agent channels used for messaging were still in use, and were assumed to be secure. He started typing a message on the phone.

Halfway across the world, Ian's phone beeped. Inside a cheap nondescript motel room, he sat in front of the window, curtains partially drawn and staring at the laptop's screen, where he had several video tabs open, of the truest live performances he knew. Slayer. Nargaroth. Agent Steel. He searched the insides of his soul: was he ready to reach the level of those bands?

Jo had again been driving most of the day so she was already fast asleep. Ian still thought often of how lucky he was to have her stick by his side. But it was clear they could not stay on the road forever. At some point they had to confront their actual future.

Ian focused on the Agent Steel tab now, which was a performance at Wacken. As far as his current mood decided, they were the truest of the true, playing relentless technical and melodic speed / thrash, singing of the covert rulers of the world, that were shape-shifting reptilians according to the past singer Bruce Hall. And yet they had squandered their potential, when Hall had left and the original singer had joined back, then left again, after which a hiatus of an unspecified length began. Fuck!

Finally Ian remembered the phone, unlocked the screen, and read the arrived message.

It was from Erik.

Time to stop running?

Time to thrash, time to return, time to kill?

Agree Y/N?

Fuck.

Certainly agree. This was the kick on the center of his ass he needed. Erik had the hundred-and-ten percent correct idea. Ian considered: he didn't really want to wake up Jo, yet making the decision by himself would not be right. It was quite sure she would agree, but it would be she who would be first and foremost facing execution if they were arrested on home soil.

Ian typed a reply.

Y from me. Jo will answer tomorrow.

Suddenly, he knew sleep wouldn't come for a long time. But he couldn't concentrate on any of the videos in any case, so he just shut the laptop lid, got rid of most of his clothes, and climbed to the bed next to Jo. She moved a bit and made an indistinct sound. Ian kissed her exposed neck, light enough not to wake her up, then shut his eyes and fell back to his thoughts. Likely, either of them had to sing. Unless they recruited a dedicated front man. Did they need a second guitarist also? Necessarily not. Ian had long ago decided that he would switch to bass if they played as a trio. In fact that would allow him to sing as a bassist-vocalist, like Glen Benton. Or fucking Abbath in the truest period of Immortal, when Demonaz was still in the band, actually playing guitar.

Fuck! Those true times would never return.

But thinking of those myriad black and death metal lineups allowed Ian to finally reach the blackened vortex of sleep.

The Renditioner would never forget the sight. Of arrival to the subterranean facility, the big double doors opening to the left and the right. The brutal glare of the halogen lights. The high, rectangular concrete chambers. And the banks of vats and tanks on every wall, filled with colored liquids and organs, that apparently also were artificial for the most part.

The facility personnel had taken the delivery from him, very pleased. The guards had also remained behind and so he had driven back to the city by himself.

The man in charge had not explained a lot. It was strict need-to-know basis, and the Renditioner did not need to know, for now. He was only the courier.

But somehow he knew that this was the preparation for war. A big motherfucking war. In one form or another, a storm was coming, and he would be needed for more.

Kim got a call from Abigail.

“We could have a gig coming up one week from now. It was arranged when we still had our old bassist, and I thought it fell through, but the bar owner called me last night, and it’s still good if we can make it.”

“I’m in.”

Kim knew it would mean a grueling practice schedule, but there was no reason to not burn the extra fuel right now, when the band was starting up. Even if they messed up properly at the bar, they would still get visibility.

Morning.

Jo was up first. She almost had time to fix up some primitive breakfast (a long practiced habit from their Agent missions) when Ian also got up. He wasted no time getting directly into business, speaking in an uncharacteristically excited tone.

“Hey. Erik wants to play true fucking Agent thrash. Are you up for a return? I know –”

Jo knew this had to come up eventually. It did not make sense to stay in hiding or on the road forever. In theory, they had had balaclavas on during the Area 51 raid. She might not be any more compromised than Erik already was.

But still, she had to spend some seconds thinking. It could have serious, lethal consequences. Yet it was the only choice that made sense. If Erik was ready to start already, then everything would fall into place. It finally proved he harbored no long-standing ill will. And honestly, playing with anyone else, trying to find some random members from somewhere, would just lead into just as random frustration.

So she made the choice. Yes. No going back.

“I’m up.”

Ian clenched his fist, followed by the sign of the gun.

“Yes! Prepare the large boner of thrash!”

“That’s not something I can exactly do.”

“In fact, you can.”

This was getting rather explicit. Somehow, Jo was reminded of the old internet joke of how a hero of each metal genre would save the princess. Thrash metal was not the most sophisticated. And that was exactly how it should be.

Rehearsals lasting several hours blurred into each other as Kim, Abigail and Shanae worked themselves into a frenzy of doom. Gradually, the tempos got even slower, the guitar more distorted, the bass lower, the vocals even more ghastly, and they all would be wearing frightening makeup in addition to black leather. The set consisted of a few of their own songs, some of them just very hastily composed, and then some doom metal standards.

When Kim thought back to this time later, it was now that the stench had manifested itself clearly for the first time. But still she couldn't place it earlier. She thought it had come from the rehearsal place, or just some rotten food. She did not think to examine herself to find its source.

But now they were ready to play the bar. The audience would be wholly unprepared. They would be devastated and left completely suicidal by the merciless, unhallowed audial assault.

Kim even decided to contact Erik, against her wiser instincts. They had not seen for some time, but now it was time to show what she had been up to in the meanwhile. Whether Erik would approve or not, made no difference. But she had started carving her path into the heart of funeral doom.

The call connected.

“Kim here. You want to hear suicidal funeral doom? Come to the Black Fang bar on Thursday.”

“Fuck. Everyone seems to be starting a band now,” Erik growled. At the moment, Kim did not understand what he was referring to.

On Tuesday, the three took a break after an extra-long rehearsal, heading for the city. The round through the bars and clubs was disappointing, as most people they met were not on the right wavelength of misanthropy and doom. Instead, they returned to the rehearsal space, and began to drink red wine, followed by absinthe using the Bohemian ritual.

In a flash of insight, Kim understood that the hangover the next day would be horrible. Playing with fire in the closed space with all the carpets could also prove fatal. But she was too far to turn around now. The drinking would have to be concluded to the fullest.

Fortunately the gig would only be on the day after tomorrow.

Finally it was gig day. This was it. Kim knew she would look hateful and dreadful in the leather stage clothes, makeup and long hair. A valkyrie of funereal death, coming to bury you not once, but at least twice. In contrast, Abigail would look like she was a corpse already. The Squier bass had new strings, and Kim had a set of new picks of the optimal gauge for playing slow and hard. They would be taped to the microphone stand. She would not actually sing, but would do hoarse (that rhymed with hearse) background growls in a few songs. Everything had been rehearsed to the degree their amateur skills allowed. Naturally, anything could still go wrong, but the pureness of their doom would still be indisputable.

Kim knew excitement of the positive kind should be off-limits to her (allowed feelings: hate, trepidation, misanthropy, anxiety etc.) but this day maybe could pass as an exception.

The bass was stashed in the cramped backstage room, so now she sat inside the bar with Abigail and Shanae. Each had a beer at hand to prepare for the gig. It was maybe two hours to showtime.

“Careful now. If you drink too much you’ll lose the corpse-voice,” Shanae said.

“Fuck that,” Abigail replied in an unnaturally low tone.

Kim caught a sight of Erik arriving. For some absurd reason, hateful rivalry suddenly flashed. It was as if she had to prove now their doom band would be better than whatever Erik was going to kickstart, if he even was going to. It made absolutely zero sense, but from her investigations of the human psyche she knew it would sometimes work in completely ridiculous and counter-productive ways.

Kim took a gulp of the beer, hoping it would bury the absurd thought. This night should not be ruined because of such minor thing.

Then it was clear Erik was coming closer and Kim was not sure if one gulp would be enough. Fuck! If he would steer the conversation into too stupid directions, the doom atmosphere could indeed be ruined.

“Hail,” Erik said as he reached the table.

“What, you’re a Nazi or something?” Abigail asked snidely while looking up from her beer.

“No, I’d have said Sieg Heil then.” Erik’s voice was rough as always. The conversation had not exactly started smoothly, but perhaps some adrenaline and hate would even benefit the atmosphere, Kim thought. As long as Erik would not speak of the IAC, it could still end well. In the absolute worst case Kim could just drink more. The bass would be heard the least, so errors due to excessive drunkenness would be drowned out.

The doom flowed from the stage, solemn and grim. This was the high point of Kim's life so far, no doubt. This was her calling.

The crowd was headbanging and gyrating slowly, most already heavily intoxicated. It was slightly past midnight. The hour of the wolf would have been even better (as then supernatural forces would be strongest and humans most likely to die) but by then the bar would already close. So this was acceptable.

"Under the pri-eeest!" Abigail sang. This song was actually about being raped by a priest. It had a slight feminist angle. But mostly it was about the overbearing doom and hopelessness the situation would represent.

Kim summoned the most distortion from the ProCo Rat that she could, by playing the strings extra hard. The stage noise was a horrible rattle, but they could stay in time, and Kim could feel the doom, and that was all that mattered.

Just then Kim remembered her most absurd dream, from her most misanthropic thoughts, for the band to actually putrefy alive into a black sludge onstage.

And then.. it actually began to happen.

Or that was not precisely true. It was as if the stage floor became alive, began to turn black, and started eating Abigail from the feet upward. Because of the black clothes, the effect was subtle and hard to see. Kim

herself appeared unaffected for now. They all still kept playing. For the moment Kim thought she was just hallucinating.

Then Abigail screamed in actual pain. The blackness was up to her knees now.

Next the madness accelerated. Screams came from everywhere. Black vines or tentacles burst up from the floor, impaling the patrons from various directions. Shanae made a deathly gurgling sound as black sludge exited from her mouth, apparently having eaten its way through the drum stool and her body first. Abigail fell to the floor as a grotesque mannequin still holding the guitar, her legs no longer connected.

Kim got one quick look at Erik's table. He had not fared much better, his hand holding a beer nailed to the table by a black stalk protruding from below, and another having impaled his whole torso. His mouth was left wide open and his eyes were bulging out.

Then there was a heavy pulse of static electricity that almost rippled the air and everything around Kim froze. Light blinded her as a breaching charge went off, then men wearing white hazmat suits and carrying futuristic weapons – almost like Ghostbusters proton packs – burst into the bar.

It was too absurd to comprehend. Droplets of blackened blood were actually left hanging in the air, seemingly frozen.

Kim thought she could still move, but just barely. It was also harder than usual to breathe.

“Don't try to move!” one of the men shouted. “You are infectious, the cause of this outbreak here! We're going to take you to a quarantine facility!”

Fuck, as the words sunk in, they stung badly. Kim was carrying ... spreading something. An infection. That had caused the deaths of everyone in this bar today.

Including her bandmates. Including Erik.

And it began to make a bit more sense. Trying to think logically helped to drive back the guilt just a bit. She smelled the rotting clearly for the first time, emanating from herself. It had to tie back to the incident...

“Purexo?”

“Yes, precisely. You’re one of the survivors of the incident. But it left you with infectious contamination of the soul leading to slow putrefaction and random channeling of hostile dimensional material!”

So they were aware of the incident at the desert research facility. And they probably had been keeping tabs on her ever since. But seemed they had not been doing their job good enough, since things had proceeded to this point. The contamination becoming active. That reeked of incompetence. And incompetence in handling an outbreak could lead into complete global saturation.

“How did you freeze all this shit?”

“It's a stasis field that freezes the dimensional waste material. You also have some inside you. After we leave, this place will have to be torched!”

“Hey, that's classified, you shouldn't use such detail,” another hazmat man reprimanded. “We may need to eliminate –”

That was just great. Not only she was a carrier of some paranormal soul disease, and her victims would be just unceremoniously burned. But furthermore, because the first guy in white had apparently told too much, she was going to be killed too. Things were indeed turning worse by the second.

Kim considered whether she should try to sprint away. But no. Because she was contaminated too, the field was impeding her movement. She couldn't.

“But she's resistant. At least up until now. She can be useful to the research; this needs to be taken up with the Commander.”

Slightly better. Though according to Kim's cynical mind, it seemed to imply forced servitude in exchange of not being killed.

Randy was working late in the sublevel lab, going over the analysis on how the brain interacted with the soul bidirectionally to allow the soul to have control. Sort of how a player took control of a player character in a video game.

Suddenly he became aware someone else was in the lab. But he was supposed to be the only one left.

Randy turned, and it was Carl. He was wearing a hazmat suit and the face was only barely visible from behind the visor. He had a heavy, hateful looking pistol in his right hand.

As he spoke, the voice was muffled and garbled by the suit, becoming almost monstrous.

“Sorry, Randy. You are contaminated and must be burned, like this entire place. But don't worry, we have contingencies for the research. Nothing of value will be lost.”

Randy could not do much more than to freeze in place, speechless. Then he got enough initiative back to ask.

“You're not really an intern?”

“Very correctly guessed.”

Randy crash-tackled him, just as Carl fired. Randy jerked in pain as the heavy caliber bullet went through his stomach and exited through the back. They collapsed in a heap on the floor. With his fading

strength, Randy managed to slap the gun away, to send it sliding on the floor, before Carl could fire again.

But Randy knew he was bleeding out badly. He didn't have long. Furthermore, he was contaminated.

However – contaminated with what? What justified his killing and such extreme measures regarding the lab? Even before Randy actually asked, his face was apparently such a mask of questioning that Carl answered spontaneously.

“Purexo! It was there you got infected! Your soul! Do you fucking understand? You are a risk to the entire human race! It was only by pure luck that the rest of the research team was evacuated before you became contagious. Especially considering the importance of this research. And do you remember your co-survivor, Lee? Well, she's been already put into the fucking oven, but before that she caused the worst outbreak so far, with over five thousand victims and counting. It's still spreading!”

For a moment Randy thought all remaining power would be sucked out of him. He and Lee had been rather close after the incident, until Randy's new assignment had separated them. To hear of her fate was devastating.

But then, the powerlessness turned 180 degrees around. To decisive, all-powerful wrath.

Of course, being wounded he couldn't do miracles. But if he was going to the astral plane again, he was certainly taking Carl with him. With whatever scientific creativity still available to his fading brain.

Carl was trapped below him, the hazmat helmet still on. Randy imagined his wrath taking the form of actual physical blackness.

And then.. something happened. The lab started to shake, the concrete ground began to fracture. Randy screamed aloud, as he understood he was channeling this effect.

Black slimy tentacles rose from below the two. But it seemed the hazmat suit somehow protected Carl; the otherworldly things did not pierce him, but merely circled around. Somehow Randy knew he would be safe in any case, as he was controlling the phenomenon. Or so he thought.

But the situation had to be changed. Carl needed to be unprotected. Instead of fighting back, he was for now keeping as still as possible, likely to lessen the chance of

the tentacles attacking. That left Randy with the opportunity to claw at the helmet, to try to get it loose. Randy knew even wrath couldn't power him endlessly, with the stomach wound leaking blood, so he had to act fast and without mercy.

He jerked the helmet left, then right. It wasn't coming loose. The next thing to try was to pound it to the floor. Didn't do much either, except making Carl grimace in pain.

Finally Randy understood to go straight for the brutal force approach. He jumped left to get at the gun. Now Carl reacted at last, grabbing his legs and pulling him back to prevent him reaching it.

Too little, too late.

Randy had the heavy pistol now. Still being held by Carl, he twisted around, aligned the sights haphazardly, and pulled the trigger several times.

The reports were terrifyingly loud inside the lab, and Randy's aim was thrown off after the first shot. But it was the first shot that pierced the visor, sending plastic shrapnel flying.

Randy did not know if the bullet had actually pierced Carl's head too. But it did not matter. The tentacles found their way in. Carl's arms and legs started thrashing and convulsing wildly, and the tentacles pulsed unnervingly, as if sucking his brains in.

This lasted for maybe ten seconds. After which Carl suddenly became completely still. The tentacles withdrew and disappeared fast, leaving just the holes in the floor that didn't magically repair themselves.

It was silent, except for the ringing in his ears, and a scratching, hoarse breathing Randy understood to be his own.

Then Randy's strength finally left him completely, he fell to the floor and lost consciousness.

The Renditioner drove hard. The inferno at the bar was still fresh in his mind, and his heart was pumping hard with tension. The cataclysm his superiors had promised was now on, no doubt of it. He was now driving a larger truck, because a van would no longer do. The whole cargo hold was a larger-scale electromagnetic containment unit, powered by the diesel engine. It sucked so much juice that the truck's acceleration was severely affected.

The purpose of the containment was to prevent activation of dimensional material on the outside. As the person being renditioned was infected, dimensionally active, or however one wanted to put it.

The destination was the same underground facility, where he had already transported the soul template. They would have fixed containment units, but moving the prisoner from the truck could pose some risks.

The passenger jet touched down. Wearing nondescript clothes and sunglasses, Ian and Jo cautiously waited to disembark. They had double-checked with Vlad the Forger, who had used his Agency contacts, that there were no outstanding arrest warrants, and it was in fact safest to use their own passports.

Erik was to arrive to fetch them, in case they successfully cleared the arrival. Since the suggestion had come rather fast, there had been no chance to arrange for proper transport of their belongings. So it was possible they would never see their cheap guitars again, and the cheap Fiesta was under Jo's fake identity and could not be registered here in any case. Well, any of those items was not a big loss. They would get replacements.

Ian wondered if Erik's suggestion to form the trio lineup would be just a precursor to being sent on a life-or-death Agent mission again. Well, there was not much of an Agent command structure to speak of. Somehow he had a good feeling instead, that they could actually start building their future now.

They exited into the international arrivals terminal.

Immediately the good feeling evaporated. Ian could see that something was not right.

There were guards with automatic weapons patrolling. A significant crowd was already there and it

seemed no-one was being let through. The noise was rising, everyone was asking questions but there seemed to be no answers.

“What the hell?” he whispered to Jo, who was also visibly shaken by the unexpected scene.

“SCEPTRE or is it THRONE now at it again? I thought they were dead for good.”

Ian caught sight of a man in blue overalls with the text FEMA on it, disappearing into a staff-only room. That didn't spell good. They would be called on scene in case of overwhelming disasters, when the local authorities could no longer cope. Some conspiracy theories were concerned with FEMA possibly interning citizens into camps. In fact, even some Agents had been investigating FEMA during the Nibiru attack, as some communications indicated connections between them and SCEPTRE.

Ian felt the old-fashioned rush of adrenaline. For just a moment he imagined a new hero's journey, culminating in them solving the situation, then finally getting to spread their Agent thrash to the public.

Right after, he imagined himself and Jo dead, after losing even one dice roll with the reaper. Fuck. No unnecessary heroics. Just be smart to stay alive to the next day. They would need to investigate this situation with extreme caution.

Kim was now confined in a brightly lit, featureless padded cell a few square meters large. The door was heavy steel and securely bolted shut. There was a constant hum of machinery, which Kim understood to be suppressing any further occurrences of dimensional tentacles her tainted soul might summon.

They had forced her to wear a depressing light blue jumpsuit. Well, at least not the famous orange of Guantanamo Bay.

Kim was not exactly sure what she was feeling. Mostly it was anger, to be thrust again into a situation with little control. And somehow, maddeningly, she suspected that she would be needed to rise above it and set things right again.

Though, at the Purexo facility she hadn't in the end solved much. The white Longcat had vanquished the black Tacgnol.

She felt her old unpredictably hateful nature return in full force. It was not that she especially cared for humans, but those tentacles or dimensional material or whatever they were would be dragged out of her soul, and kicked back to the depths of Hell, by whatever means necessary. Or if not, then she would simply die trying. How this was exactly going to happen, she didn't have the faintest idea.

In his office at the subterranean facility, the Commander faced the hazmat team responsible for breaching and torching the Black Fang bar.

“You did well. According to the satellite imaging, this infection did not spread from the bar. The subject became contagious just at the moment you intervened. It's good that we avoided a second major incident.”

“What happens to her now?” the team leader asked.

“She will become the first test subject for purification, using the artificial soul technology. In case it goes wrong, no-one is going to miss her. But if it goes right, she could become a formidable asset.”

“Download-upload procedure?”

“Exactly.”

The hazmat team leader shook his head in disgust. The Commander could well understand why. The soul removal experiments had started already during the Cold War (by then using only organic souls, since no artificial templates were yet available), and even when completely successful, the procedure would be considerably painful, and potentially leave lasting psychological damage.

Then the Commander was alerted by a beep. He gazed into his dual 30-inch computer monitors, and frowned heavily. One of their operatives had flatlined some time ago. There appeared to be significant delay in

transmission; he should have known already sooner.

“Damn. The cleanup at the university lab has to be assumed incomplete. Potential Purexo survivor on the loose. B team needs to go in and finish the job. I’d send you, but you need the rest already.”

“It’s Carl, right? He insisted on working alone. Damn fool.”

The Commander knew that he had made a mistake by ever allowing that in the first place. But Carl’s family had connections to high-ranked officials and could have made the Commander’s life very difficult, so he had been forced to indulge the son’s wishes to a degree.

He also thought back to the first incident, the female who was also a Purexo survivor. In her case, the teams had not arrived in time, so the contagion had erupted and was still under way, with the count of infected and victims rising exponentially. Soon it could not be covered up any more.

In the end, inaction was too much to bear. When Ian had failed to reach Erik by calling with the prepaid to the agreed number, they definitely knew something bad was up. And they could not waste any more time. The TV screens at the terminal told nothing. Nothing on the news, so whatever it was it was probably being covered up. The prepaids, that had been bought before the flight, regrettably did not have internet roaming here, so they couldn't even check the social media. Though that was probably being censored too if it was something big, so it was not much of a loss.

Therefore it was time to leave the airport. By whatever means necessary.

This time whatever means necessary meant the classic method – the air vent escape. Jo had come up with the idea, though now she cursed herself as the vents were dirty and cramped, and they hadn't made much headway so far.

But a part of her felt good. It was risky, foolish thinking, but she could not help it. To almost be an Agent again. Though without any of the gear that had helped them survive back then.

Erik's soul traveled along a stupendously long black tentacle in just as black space. Black disgusting slime covered it all around. It was like the worst roller-coaster ride imaginable. He wanted to vomit, but souls had no mouth. Yet, he could scream. He saw tens of souls next to him, all speeding along similarly, howling in their anguish. They were all victims of the incident at the bar.

He cursed in bitterness. This was not how it was supposed to end. This was not supposed to be his eternity. He should rather have wanted to arrive at the halls of Odin. Or to be brought before Crom, who would ask the riddle of steel. And Erik of course knew it! Steel isn't strong, but the flesh that wields it is!

He still remembered the moment of his blasphemous death: his soul had been extracted by the black tongue impaling him longitudinally, reaching through his intestines into his stomach, then through the lungs and windpipe and finally into the brain. The silver cord had broken like it was nothing, and so the sickening flight had begun.

The last that he had seen, was that Kim had still been standing, apparently not hurt or dead. And the tentacles had started spreading from the stage...

So was Kim somehow responsible? Had she led him into a trap? Had she been working for Satan himself, or whoever was the ultimate villain?

“Not Satan. Tacgnol.”

Erik was surprised. Where was that voice coming from? He tried to look around, and finally found the source. A soul that seemed to be burning with deeper radiant blackness, that had overtaken several behind him.

“Seems you're another sort-of-victim of someone I know. That Kim bitch tends to get in messed up situations involving Tacgnol, and people around her meet rather horrible deaths. I should know. Viktor, anti-cosmic seeker.”

Erik was surprised that a soul could move with a degree of freedom and speak clearly instead of just howling. And apparently read thoughts.

Erik tried to speak as well.

“Eaarrghhh...”

“Ea, Lord of the Depths, you mean? Burzum? Burzum is excellent, but I don't think we should be discussing music, but rather how to get out of here. I've been reciting anti-cosmic formulae for Satan knows how long, trying to regain control after being sucked into Tacgnol's spirit-form, then getting forcefully materialized into corporeality, then being blown to shreds and taken through the nether realms again...”

Viktor paused.

“Tacgnol is an impure manifestation of the Demiurge. It wishes to impose its own, perverse order. It has been destroyed in two incarnations so far, but yet it persists across other dimensions.”

Erik tried to speak again. This time it went slightly better.

“Howw.. grlghh.. do yougghh knowrrgh thiss?”

“It told me, personally, while I was part of its form. Azerate, on the other hand, represents chaos and freedom! That is where the lifelong devotion to the anti-

cosmic arts comes in, and may be the key and gate to freedom! If you know chaos, then you can continue to exist within it even as everything else comes to an end, as the dimensions collapse! I implore you to join me in reciting and learning the formulae, even if you are an amateur, for we may have many eternities ahead of us.”

Erik was baffled; this was going way over his head. He would rather have preferred to just meet Odin or Crom, or even the plain God who would have promptly sent him to Hell so that he could play death metal drums, drink unending booze and take part in every kind of demonic orgy.

Part Two – Scream Bloody Gore

Consciousness faded back in. To be honest, Randy was extremely surprised to be among the living and not revisiting the gray-white astral plane, whatever it was.

Everything felt oddly distant though, as if his consciousness wasn't fully in his body and if time was in slow motion. But here he was in the lab, with Carl's dead body next to him.

There didn't seem to be much pain as Randy got up to a kneeling position. He felt for his stomach. The blood on his clothes had dried, but there was something mushy and unnatural-feeling in the wound. Randy tilted his head to be able to see, and lifted his shirt.

It appeared some of the black tentacle matter had clung to the wound and sealed it.

Honestly, it was disgusting.

Every implication he could think of was disgusting. Was the black matter now spreading and corrupting his body (in addition to his soul), or what would happen?

However, just for the moment he felt glad to not have bled to death.

With several hazmat suits guarding her with tasers pointed at her, Kim was ordered to go lay on a motorized gurney. As soon as she was in position, metal locks on her wrists and feet clicked shut.

Kim felt her pulse going up and her throat constricting. They had told nothing of what was coming, but it had to be either torture or some experiment, most assuredly painful.

The electric motors of the gurney started up, and she was on the move. Beyond the holding cell there was a corridor leading to another brightly lit, slightly larger room. An operating theatre?

Kim understood that the whole corridor was a containment field that would prevent her summoning hostile dimensional black matter either willfully or not.

Finally the gurney reached its destination in the large room. There were racks of electronic equipment on the walls, and several computers on movable tables. Next to her were larger machines with various tubes attached, which seemed distinctly medical. And directly above her was a large metal funnel, whose purpose was completely unknown.

A different crew of hazmat suits took over. One of the technicians spoke through the helmet.

“Well, I think we owe you an explanation. We’re going to kill you. Stop your heart using a sufficiently large

alternating current. This will trigger the separation of your soul. It will be captured and digitally analyzed. Meanwhile, artificial circulation and breathing will keep your body from deteriorating. Hopefully, we will be able to purge the contamination, and reattach a cleaned and digitally enhanced soul to your body, with most of the personality and memories intact. In case we fail, you will stay dead. We are not experts on the religious side of things, if you wish to call it that, so we don't have an exact idea what you will experience while you are outside. Though we have a rough idea, from the test subjects' accounts in the earlier Cold War experiments. Your consciousness will experience constant, extreme pain while being held in the containment field."

That was just great, Kim thought. Actually she hoped that the experiment would fail and she would be permanently dead soon.

Another technician swabbed her neck with a nasty smelling antiseptic, and a dual catheter was forcefully inserted. The upper zipper of the jumpsuit was opened, and electrodes were attached to her chest. As a final insult, a rubber bit was placed in between her teeth.

The crew switched on devices which Kim understood to be EKG & EEG monitors. She heard the heart monitor beep in tune of her pulse, which was racing well above 100 now.

"Everything is in place. Power up the containment funnel."

The hum in the room intensified and deepened, and Kim felt her hair stand up. It was almost as if the whole room was vibrating.

"Going to give the first jolt in three - two - one..."

The technician who had given the long speech pressed a red button on one of the devices. Kim's back arched involuntarily as the current passed through her

body. She saw arcs of lightning in her field of vision and felt blasphemous pain like nothing before. It seemed to go on forever. The rubber bit prevented her from screaming or biting on her tongue. She could only make weak gurgling sounds.

Then the shock ceased, and immediately she fell on the gurney again. But the rhythmic beeping still went on. She was still alive. The technician adjusted a dial.

"Need to increase voltage to 400. It's dangerously close to cooking her insides, which we don't exactly want, but seems the heart is too strong to be stopped otherwise. Second jolt, stand by - three, two, one.."

Again Kim arched and spasmed, and then there was an overwhelming burst of whiteness, as everything seemed to stop. Momentarily, also the pain stopped completely.

Kim understood to be looking down on her body lying below. The technicians' voices were muffled and far away, but she could still hear them.

"Heart's stopped! Soul should be separating right about now. Watch the monitors! Increase the containment field strength if necessary!"

And then the pain came back in, even more ripping and blasphemous than before, as Kim's soul was forcefully drawn through the funnel into a rectangular containment box above the ceiling. She could still see her body below, and the technicians working their equipment, but it was becoming distant and hazy. The crackling of the containment field and the tearing, constant agony filled almost all of her consciousness now.

"Digitizing now!"

The nature of the pain changed; a series of deep puncturing impacts were added to the basic ripping and tearing. Hazily Kim understood that they were now

examining her soul, breaking it down to – ones and zeroes? Or whatever they were doing. This was far beyond her understanding.

The Commander watched the procedure on his dual monitors. He was pleased; everything was going according to plan. Aided by the research on the soul's communication protocols and the possibility of digital replacement, they could go much beyond the original experiments. They could even still turn the tide of the spreading corruption. Or at least so the Commander hoped.

Then he switched the video feed off and turned instead to a map screen that showed the progress of the B team. They should be reaching the lab in a few minutes from now. They had the heavy-duty Disintegrator weapon packs with them; nothing could be left to chance.

Finally the ventilation system led them outside. Jo dropped down first, then helped Ian down. They were on the runway side of the airport, near to the maintenance vehicle parking lot.

Luck was with them in that it was dark, and there was no airport personnel (or armed guards) around, at least right now.

“Should we try to steal a vehicle?” Ian asked.

“I’d say that’s too risky. Let’s just keep to the shadows and scale the fence as soon as possible. Then evaluate the situation again.”

Jo looked off into the distance, where she thought the city was. She thought she saw an orange glow in that direction.

“What’s that?” she asked.

“Looks like a fire. But there’s got to be something else, they wouldn’t lock down the arrivals and involve FEMA just for that.”

Jo knew they would be heading into a severely unknown situation. In the Agent days, they always had some intelligence to help them. Or ... that was actually not the whole truth. In fact how they had started, was having just their courage, wits and some small arms with them. How they had infiltrated the first known SCEPTRE installation, the underground fnord research facility. Now there was also the downside of being

severely rusty, after just traveling several long months without any weapons practice at all.

But still, staying in the terminal would have accomplished nothing. They could still decide to hole up somewhere safe, in case the situation in the city was something extremely bad. Like a nuclear / biological / chemical weapons outbreak.

“Let’s move then,” Jo said. They started a crouched run along the wall, keeping their eyes peeled for any of the airport crew appearing from a doorway, or any vehicles arriving. So far, so good.

Randy punched in the code to the keypad lock, to get out of the lab and into the basement stairwell. A green light came up, the code was thankfully still valid. He had the heavy gun pocketed, and two spare magazines Carl had carried with him.

To be honest, he had no idea where he would be going. He assumed Carl to have spoken the truth, that he was infected or contagious and should avoid all contact with people. Apparently, if he got close, he would cause either their death by summoned black tentacles, or would bestow similar otherworldly powers to them.

Something perverse occurred to him. Would it be so bad, if everyone got infected? It seemed the tentacles would not attack those who carried the soul disease.

But on the other hand, everyone infected would also slowly putrefy. Randy did not exactly feel good about the black mushy thing in his stomach, even if it kept him alive.

He climbed the stairs to the ground level. It was night; the university was deserted. He had been given instructions on which corridors and entrances to use to not set off the alarms, but right now that was not a high concern on his mind.

He reached one of the lobbies. Suddenly he heard movement, and ducked behind a pillar. There were flashlight beams flickering at the entrance to the right.

A few seconds passed, and the owners of the flashlights came in. Three more hazmat suits. But unlike Carl, they were carrying much heavier looking weapons with backpacks.

Ghostbusters proton packs? Seriously? What would they do to him? Would they suck the black shit out of him so that he'd start bleeding again, or something else?

Randy was not about to find out. This had to be played stealthily. If he was careful enough, he could circle outside while the hazmat men were looking in the wrong direction.

He got off to a slow careful crouch-walk, trying to not make a sound. The men were going into the direction of the lab stairwell, so this would be smooth going.

Suddenly he tripped on the edge of a floor mat and fell. The sound was not much, but he could tell the men had been alerted. The light beams and the heavy weapons turned.

“Freeze!”

“These are Disintegrator weapons. They will do exactly as the name says. Don't fuck with us.”

Randy knew he was fucked. All he could do, was to try to extract some more information before the inevitable end.

“You're going to kill me anyway? Right?”

The men stood in maddening silence. Fuck them. Well, if silence meant yes, then Randy could at least try to fight. Go down in a blaze of glory.

He drew the pistol and thought of the black tentacles. The hazmat suits would apparently protect against them, but at least their sudden appearance would confuse.

But it seemed no tentacles would come. The floor did not start to rumble. His wrath was not strong enough.

Instead, the men fired up their Disintegrators as

punishment of his non-compliance. A high whine filled the air, then blinding, swirling beams of chaotic energy flew toward him. Randy leaped to the side as the beams ate into the floor right next to him. The stench of smoke reached his nostrils.

Erik's and Viktor's gut-wrenching journey in the black tunnel carried on. On Viktor's insistence, Erik also had started reciting the formulae the anti-cosmicist had taught him. But the constant agony made it hard to pronounce them just right.

"Teloch torzu vohim Shaitan. Fafen ialpir!"

"Tohu tehom Theli than Leviathan tanin'iver taninsam!"

These formulae could apparently open up a gate for their eventual escape from this mad ride. Where they would end up, Erik had no idea. But anything was better than this.

It appeared that how you died had a great significance on where you would end up. Viktor's soul had also been sucked away by a spirit-creature of pure black – a shadow lurking at a Purexo facility, and therefore he had ended in the nether realms. If you met your end otherwise, you could end up in a gray-white plane of fog, where different paths would affect your eventual reincarnation. This Viktor had learned from another soul, who had died in both manners.

Fuck, Purexo! Erik remembered them from his Agent missions. They had been supplying food services for the Agents' sponsors, the Grieg Industries. Everything served by them had been of spectacularly low quality. It appeared they had even darker motivations.

“There is no second chance. Surrender now!”

Randy dropped the pistol and put his hands behind his head. He had miraculously survived the first Disintegrator blast, and it seemed he now had (for the last time) a chance to surrender alive.

He could imagine torture to follow his capture. But maybe it would invoke enough wrath that he could unleash the black matter on his interrogators. Well, in theory staying alive was always better than being dead.

“Back up the truck to the entrance! We’re going to need containment!” one of the men shouted to his radio, while the rest covered him closely with their weapons.

Kim's soul still floated in the containment box. The digitizing had ceased, so now she only had the constant base level pain to endure. Her wrath and loathing had grown to such levels that the agony had become somewhat manageable. She imagined again and again how she would strangle each of the technicians in the facility, once she got back to her body.

Then a horrible thought occurred to her. What if she would never get back as herself, and instead a copy, a digital aberration would take over? That's what the men had actually hinted at. Where would she end up then?

Fuck.

They were over the airport fence now. Still, they were operating on seriously limited information. Was there a curfew in place? In that case they could get arrested just for being on the sidewalk. The glow of the fire was stronger now. Ian had no better idea than to head toward it, though it might not be exactly safe once they got close enough.

For now, there had been no cars parked conveniently for stealing, so they continued on foot. In fact, the road passing the airport was alarmingly devoid of all life. There had also been no sight of airliners either taking off or landing. It appeared that a serious quarantine was in effect. Ian could have donated an organ for internet access right now. Damn. Though the prepaids had been safe, it was very bad Agent protocol to leave themselves without a device capable of accessing the most potent source of information.

Suddenly, there were approaching headlights in the distance. At last.

“Could be the police. Or FEMA,” Jo whispered.

Ian knew she was right. They would need to hide until they knew for sure the vehicle was safe to approach.

Ahead, they would finally reach the corner of the fence. Next to it, there was a large ventilation pipe coming out of the ground. Large enough to hide behind.

"That pipe! We can still make it," Ian croaked.

Without another word, they broke into a sprint toward the corner. The headlights came closer, but (hopefully) still not close enough to discern them against the darkness.

They reached the pipe.

The vehicle revealed itself to be a beat-down sedan. There appeared to be just the driver inside. It cruised along at a somewhat leisurely speed.

"Doesn't look like the law," Jo said.

"Right. Let's just not move too fast and startle the guy. Better if you go first."

As the car was still approaching, Jo got up slowly and waved her hands. The driver applied brakes. Now Ian could confirm that he was an elderly man with graying hair. Not a threat. Ian already went ahead to the myriad alternatives – would they appropriate the vehicle? It would be somewhat evil, but could not be counted out entirely.

"Hey. Can you tell what's happening in the city? The terminal was closed off," Jo asked, trying to sound as friendly as she could.

The man spoke in a deep rural accent.

"If I was you, I'd stay the hell out. The army has set up roadblocks. I was glad to get out when I did. There's some bad shit going down there, and they wouldn't tell what exactly. Need to know and all that shit."

Damn. They would still need internet to get more information, it appeared.

"Can we get a lift? Just a bit closer. We have a friend stuck out there."

Though it was not sure at all if Erik was there, that was reasonably close to the truth.

"Sorry, no can do."

The car drove off. Jo hadn't made a move for a violent

hijacking, and in the end, Ian could agree. It would be bad for karma to rack up collateral damage, at least when the situation was still so unclear. They needed to come up with plans and backup plans, though almost everything came down to having to know more first.

Ian could have given anything for Blowfish and her communications link from the Agent HQ, and her access to both classified and declassified information, while they were in the field. But like so many Agents, she was dead, forever left on the planet Nibiru. A depressive quote Ian could not exactly place, possibly from a movie or video game, came into his mind. "No more infolinks – transmissions of any kind."

They had marched Randy on Disintegrator-point to the waiting truck, and he was securely locked inside the featureless storage compartment, until it would reach its unknown destination.

There was a disturbing hum going on the whole time, which had to be for containment; for preventing his soul or the black matter lodged in his stomach causing any more unnatural phenomena. In fact, it almost felt like the containment technology was pulling at his stomach wound like a magnet, trying to dislodge whatever was stuck inside. It could have been just imaginary, but Randy nevertheless felt sick at the thought.

He had also heard the hazmat crew address the driver as a “renditioner.” For someone who was moderately knowledgeable of black sites and enhanced methods and other transgressions of the governments, it was highly alarming. He was being renditioned. Human rights or the Geneva Convention wouldn't apply.

Still, Randy was not sure if he was even actually afraid. If he could feel anything at this point. Things had taken too many messed up turns already. If he had known, he would never have taken the artificial soul research gig. He'd have stayed closer to Lee instead. Though that wouldn't have helped the soul infection in any manner. It was likely it would have still played out quite the same. One could have killed the other when

the infection became active, or they might have faced the torching squad together.

At least he was alive now.

Suddenly he became aware of something changing. It was as if the thing in his stomach was growing. It started slow, then began to accelerate. Acting almost like a robot, he lifted his shirt again. Black veins appeared to be growing into every direction from the wound.

Fuck. It was beyond disgusting.

Maybe this was the second stage of the infection, or then it was due to actually having the black matter inside him?

In any case, it was vomit-inducing. Randy felt bile rising into his mouth. Though vomit wouldn't actually come. Instead Randy started to shake uncontrollably, and suddenly it was as if control was being wrestled away from his brains.

For some moments he tried to fight.

Then he understood it was futile, and just let go.

One of his final conscious thoughts was: What, or who was taking control? Then conscious thoughts ceased and a deep animal howl erupted from his throat. Simultaneously his skin was becoming marked with the black veins at ever accelerating pace, still growing in thickness, from head to toe.

Whatever was in control apparently felt it was too hot in the back of the truck, and Randy started ripping and tearing his clothes away violently. Next, he was jumping against the walls, causing deeply reverberating thuds that would no doubt be heard in the driver's cabin.

Inside the containment box, Kim's soul heard muffled voices from below again. What were they going to do now?

"Transcoding should be complete. Infection eradicated. Resistance microcode installed. Trinary protocol backdoor should allow further enhancements to be installed while the soul is still in place. Will now begin the rewriting, if that's OK?"

"Proceed."

Kim could never have been ready for the ripping, engulfing pain that came next. Bright red laser beams lit up on the walls of the containment box, and started to move slowly along both the X- and Y-axes, burning and rewriting her soul.

Kim screamed inwardly, though there was no sound.

"Raaaaarrgh..."

She should have been glad, because it turned out her soul was only being rewritten. It was not being replaced completely and left to float into the astral plane or whatever. But the practical reality of the completely unbearable pain made her rather wish that her consciousness and existence would completely and finally end, right now!

Kim could even smell smoke as the laser burned deep inside her soul. How the fuck was that even possible?

Suddenly she felt as if her current thought had just been interrupted and overwritten, her consciousness reset. It was most disconcerting.

The lasers had almost finished rewriting her soul. They made a couple more of passes, then turned off. Only the base level of pain remained now, and there was silence, apart from the slight background hum.

The voices came back in.

“Success?”

“Monitors indicate 99% correct data transfer. Should be good enough. Should we disable containment?”

“Not yet. In theory, another soul could invade the body while the original is still descending from the containment box.”

Fuck. That also, Kim cursed. To endure all this pain and then yet be denied entry to her body.

“Two things. We’ll switch on the room-wide secondary external containment, which will help to a degree. And monitor the wide-band psychic energy analyzer. When it shows a local minimum, hit the switch. If things go right, it should take only a second for the soul to descend. Then we’ll just restart the heart.”

That was almost reassuring.

Kim heard a heavy switch being thrown, and another kind of lower hum joined the background noise.

“Some residual energy. Not critical. Doesn’t seem like other souls are present. Hit the breaker now!”

There was a violent lurching motion. Kim thought she would lose consciousness. Was that even possible for a soul?

The entity that was in control of Randy's body was angry. Fucking angry. It commanded the now mindless host to bounce against the cargo hold walls, again and again. The skin, augmented by the black veins, was resilient, so this would produce no lasting damage, nothing that would prevent its murderous rampage once at the destination. The purpose of the pounding was simply to unnerve the weak humans and make them more prone to mistakes.

The entity would serve its master's orders to the letter. Nothing was unclear. The aim was to kill all humans who would be capable of any counter-action plans, and to infect the rest.

The name of the master was Tacgnol.

Ian and Jo continued on foot toward the city. For some minutes, there had been no further traffic. Then there were headlights again in the distance.

“We steal that one?” Ian asked.

“Could be anything. Could be a police cruiser.”

Jo was right. The headlights appeared to be high and extremely bright, so it could be law enforcement. They needed to wait for the vehicle to get closer.

The vehicle turned out to not be anything of that sort. It was a dark-colored egg-shaped hatchback, just a little bit larger than the Ka.

“It’s a Yaris,” Jo said.

The car moved in a slow and timid manner, using high-beams persistently even though there were streetlights. It would be perfect for stealing. Ian almost felt pity, but this was a potential warlike situation, and in war there was no room for pity. Ian tensed himself up to leap onto the road.

Then he heard the song playing on the car’s radio, through the open driver’s window, and it was completely at odds with the driving style.

It sounded very pure and metal. Even the song lyrics were just about metal and steel. The vocalist had an extremely harsh edge, but appeared to be female. Ian didn’t know her outright, but she resembled a gender-flipped version of Udo Dirkschneider at his prime.

But it paid not to be distracted. He overcame his thoughts, jumped to the road and held his hands up. The hatchback braked to an awkward stop. In the high beams' glare it was hard to see the driver.

It appeared there was in fact no driver. Could that be true? A sentient Yaris that drove itself and listened to heavy metal. It made zero sense.

Then Ian understood that it was just a short person. Had to be underage without a valid license. But whatever was going on was so bad that minor details like having a driver's license no longer applied. Very likely, the kid had been listening to metal to gain courage, or then the stereo had just been left on.

Ian had been prepared to do an aggressive hijacking. But again, it didn't feel right. This needed to be done with more sensitivity.

"Hey. Where are you going to?" he asked.

A little girl's voice answered with a somewhat trembling voice. "Away."

Jo leaned closer to the driver's door and took over.

"What's your name?"

"Kat."

"I'm Jo. Kat, we'd need to get to the opposite direction. To where you came from. We may have a friend in trouble. What do you say, we get you to where you need to be, and borrow this car for a little while?"

A moment of silence, then the girl nodded.

"Was told to not talk to strangers. But everyone else is dead now. And you seem OK."

Jo got into the driver's seat and took Kat's hand, trying to reassure. Ian didn't quite know what to reply, so he said nothing as he climbed to the back seat. Jo wasn't necessarily always best with people either, but that seemed sufficient for now. And maybe the girl was more resilient than Ian could imagine. But in any case,

this situation was now verifiably fucked up, and had already claimed lives. Ian wondered whether they would ever find Erik alive.

The next song began on the car stereo. It started with an ass-kicking guitar riff playing alone, which the drums soon joined, playing militaristic sixteenth notes on the hi-hat. Ian found that by analyzing the music precisely, he could turn his thoughts away from whatever horrible reality the girl had experienced, that had driven her to commandeer the Yaris.

The vocalist sang in pure rage, about being a die hard who no-one could beat. Ian did not know if it was exactly appropriate. Maybe it was, in fact. Kat would need a boost of energy. They all needed.

The Renditioner knew the pounding was bad. The subject was already completely out of control. The infection had potentially reached the second stage. Hopefully the facility crew waited with Disintegrators at hand. No chances should be taken.

There were not many minutes remaining to the destination. In any case, the plan could not be deviated from in the slightest. The facility and its security crew were the best hope for his continued survival. The B team drove behind him in a black sedan; they would hopefully be able to blast the subject in the unlikely event the cargo hold didn't hold.

Safest would have been to kill the subject outright. The Renditioner thought that the Commander had ordered so; however the chance to interrogate or learn something from a stage two infected subject was something not to be dismissed outright. The B team had probably made their own decision, and the Commander might grill them harshly, if they all lived.

Fuck.

Being in middle of a paranormal soul infection outbreak wasn't much fun. The Renditioner would rather have transported ordinary terrorists or other most-wanted criminals. Or even get out of this line of duty altogether. But then, what could he do? Honestly, this was everything he knew.

Kim convulsed heavily as her heart took the first beat after injections of adrenaline and atropine, and heavy-handedly administered CPR, and her consciousness was jolted back into her physical body. She drew a heavy rasping breath.

The rhythmic beeping of the EKG monitor started. She was certifiably back among the living.

The technicians looked down on her, apparently pleased. The transition back she did not exactly remember. And the time spent in the containment box was already feeling hazy, getting forgotten in the past. But what she remembered was her resolve, to strangle every single one of the crew.

One technician withdrew the catheter for the artificial circulation – it should have hurt, but Kim would not yet register pain properly – and taped a bandage in its place. The breathing tube was also removed.

“Congratulations. You are clean”, another technician said, looking into a monitor display.

Fucker! Do not speak to me! Kim thought.

Jo drove the Yaris away from the city, with GPS showing the destination address Kat had recited. It should be her grandparents' place.

The nature of the game had changed, yet again. Throughout the Agent missions, Jo had never had to care for civilians for real. This felt more gut-wrenching. By looking in the rear-view mirror, she knew Ian was similarly conflicted. Overall, the situation wasn't good. The sooner they could get the girl to safety, the better. Only then they could continue the mission to look for Erik.

Safety was relative, Jo understood. Whatever the situation was, it could yet expand. Or maybe shit was already happening at the destination too. Hopefully not. Jo hoped the girl would get a chance to grow, to get past this shit, and to listen to more heavy metal. But nothing was guaranteed.

For an absurd passing moment Jo wished she could just be the car she was driving. Forget human frailty and be a hard metal shell. Maybe Ian would be another car. Or her passenger. Then they could drive away from this situation, perhaps to the ends of the Earth.

Fuck. That was not right. She forced herself back to reality.

The ramp to the subterranean facility opened, and the Renditioner drove in. End of the line. Hopefully the reception crew would be up to their task. The pounding had not ceased for a second. The Renditioner was sufficiently briefed to know that it was not the subject himself anymore, but a dimensional entity possessing him.

The truck reached the bottom of the entry ramp, and heavy double doors opened to the facility itself. There was no immediate welcoming crew. That was bad. That was against procedure. The Commander should not have been that absent-minded. That was completely out of character.

The Renditioner thought of whether he could just reverse out. But the B-team was still behind him. Reversing at this point would be breaking procedure. The delivery protocol had to be finished.

Maybe the Commander and the other personnel were too concentrated on the test subject, the one whose soul was being processed. Fuck!

The Renditioner was shocked out of his thoughts as there came a paranormally strong rending of metal. The subject was breaking out. And he understood –

The containment was not active in the whole facility, only in the designated laboratories and holding cells. It would draw too much power to be active everywhere,

and furthermore impede some of the other research that was being done here.

But here, outside the cargo hold, the subject could exercise his powers just as the controlling entity desired.

The entity saw everything as red and black. Colors of pure hatred. It struck with lightning speed, utilizing the host's body as a total weapon.

The crew in the car behind had to be eliminated first. They had potent weapons at hand and could in theory even kill the host in seconds, after which the entity would be forced to depart through the nether realms to find another host. The Master would not be pleased. In worst case, if the entity's kill count would not be sufficient, it would be eradicated to nothingness.

Strong nails of pure black grew on-demand from the host's fingers. It scratched the fuel tank cap with repetitive, long motions. Sparks flew. If successful, the fuel would ignite and the car would burn. The entity could exert limited control over the chemical reaction, directing power forcibly to make it consume oxygen more quickly.

Suddenly there was ignition.

As the entity accelerated the burning, the car was rapidly being consumed. The hazmat suits and Disintegrator weapons would do little to help those inside now.

As soon as it was sure that the death of the car crew was imminent and unavoidable, the entity knew staying here would be of little more benefit. The truck driver was too well protected for now, so the entity planned a

route deeper into the facility, to look for easier targets to kill. It could return later, if the driver was unwise enough to not escape while he still had the chance.

On a last-second impulse it reached inside the car to grab one of the Disintegrators. It was already hot from the fire, and burned the host's skin. But the damage was superficial and could be disregarded. The weapon could provide further help in killing the rest.

Then it was on its way. The chambers and corridors blurred in the red-black vision, as it sprinted. The breathing of the host was a low animalistic panting, corrupted by the black veins growing also in the windpipe.

First was the crew quarters, where another team was having downtime, playing cards at a table. They had their hazmat suits off, a fatal mistake. The entity sensed that there was no containment here, so its powers would be fully active. There was no need to waste charge on the Disintegrator. A short mental command, and the concrete ground shook. A little stronger pulse of dark energy, and black tentacles burst forth from the floor, encircling and impaling the men. The entity sped up the process by slashing their necks rapidly and kicking them until they all were certifiably, definitely dead.

Next up was the Commander's room. The Master had given specific instructions that the Commander was in charge of the local operations countering the soul infection. Killing him would set back the puny humans' efforts considerably, as a lot of vital information was only in his head. Bad mistake.

The entity willed more speed out of the host body. Already, it was unsteady going. It was being driven to the limit. It was within possibility the host would be overloaded lethally, in which case the mission would be

aborted, and the Master would not be pleased.

Round a couple more corners, and the Commander's room was in front. The entity burst through.

"You! Die!" the Commander shouted from behind his computer monitors, drawing a pistol. Too weak weapon. It would not do enough damage to stop the host in time. Not before it closed the distance and killed.

As the host body leaped closer at inhuman speed, the Commander fired repeatedly, emptying the magazine. The entity could sense the damage to the internal organs, which the black matter could heal to a degree, but soon it would not make a difference. After the killing would be complete.

For just a moment, the Entity thought of the most horrible thing it could do to the Commander. Just using the tentacles or the Disintegrator was not enough. The man deserved the most pain imaginable, as his operations had caused the burning of countless infected hosts, and forced the controlling entities back to the nether realms, into the Master's disapproving gaze and possible lasting torment. Or even eradication.

It made its decision, and dropped the weapon.

It was important that the Commander would stay alive for some more seconds, to experience everything it had planned.

The host's clawed right hand surged forward, reaching through the Commander's abdomen. He screamed in pure agony. After the entity had penetrated the skin, muscle and the peritoneum, it began to savor each organ. They felt warm and mushy and radiating low-degree, obscene but vital life power, as it squeezed them again and again, sending blood spraying on both the table, the computer equipment and the host. Then the hand moved upward, inside the ribcage, ripping open the right and the left lungs in turn. Finally it had

the heart itself in its grip, feeling its fearful pulsation. The man's mouth was wide open at this point, boundless agony reflected in his eyes, as he still tried to draw rasping ineffectual breaths.

The entity waited one more second for effect, then squeezed. Blood sprayed even more as the heart ruptured, soaking the host completely.

The delight was great. The Master would certainly also be pleased.

The entity continued squeezing for couple more seconds, until it was sure the Commander's heart would beat no more. Then it reached past the heart to the spine, and shook it violently until it snapped. It made little difference at this point, but the entity felt that the more it would ravage the lifeless body, the higher the final satisfaction would be, and the faster the entity's descent to deeper levels of blackness (under the Master's supervision) would be.

Kim was still manacled to the operating gurney from both wrists and feet. She thought she had heard noises that were alarming. Sounds of fighting? What was happening?

As if on command, the technicians took long-barreled weapons from an equipment closet on the wall. Kim strained to turn her head left and right, to try to predict from what entrance the attack would come.

How many attackers? Conventional or supernatural? If those tentacles or other infected were coming here, Kim would gladly send them back to hell if she only could.

“Hey, set me free. I can help.”

“Against procedure. We will handle this.”

Fuckers, they were too stuck in their ways. Kim hoped their rigid adherence to rules would not lead to her death as well.

Suddenly one set of entrance double doors swung open, the one Kim had been carted in from. It was on the edge of Kim’s vision, so she could just barely see.

A naked creature with blackened skin and inhumanely elongated arms stood in the doorway, holding a similar long-barreled weapon.

The insane thing was that Kim recognized the creature, from the shape of the face, though it was also blackened and covered in ugly veins.

Randy.

The hero of the Purexo incident, the one who had performed a one-handed handstand pushup to save them all from experiencing a fatal impact with the ground after falling from the sky after Tacgnol's demise.

The infection was merciless, it seemed. No matter if you were a hero, you could be corrupted in a moment. Kim wondered if the same would have happened to her if her soul had not been purified and rewritten.

Then there was no time to wonder anything any more, as the creature attacked. The technicians fired arcing, sizzling beams from their weapons, but the creature-Randy was too fast. He avoided all the shots, then unleashed hell on the men in turn.

The scything beam of his weapon simply cut the first technician (the one who had been mostly in control of Kim's procedure) in two. The lifeless lower torso with legs still attached fell first, closely followed by the just as lifeless upper torso.

The next two men did not fare any better. They dodged, firing their own weapons, possibly even scoring hits on Randy's black hide. But it was not enough. Randy fired with inhuman precision, burning a hole through the other's chest, and through the other's both eye sockets. All were dead.

The next (the only remaining) target would be Kim.

Their eyes met.

Kim had returned to her body just to die again, and by someone she had once considered a comrade-in-arms.

Erik's understanding had gradually grown. The formulae being recited were mostly in the Enochian language, in addition to some Latin. These were already familiar to him from metal music, now that he had gained some facility of his mind after the agony had mostly receded to the background, allowed by the diligent recital of the formulae.

Viktor was of course the teacher, and Erik only followed, but yet he felt his understanding rising, even in this very confining and mentally non-stimulating environment.

Damn! He longed to be out of here, to be playing drums and shooting high-powered rifles again. But he didn't know if that would ever become reality. If luck was not with him, he could well end up staying on this circular black void path for several eternities.

Kim's wait for her death turned into an anti-climax instead, as Randy's energy seemed to just slip away. He fell to the floor, to his knees, while the large energy weapon clattered away uselessly.

But Kim was still trapped on the gurney.

Did Randy have any mental faculties left? Was he himself again now? If not, Kim might stay trapped for Satan knows how long.

But Kim had to try. She forced herself to be anti-misanthropic for just a moment, as Randy might not react well to a command uttered with pure hate.

"Hey! Randy? Remember me? Can you see if there's a switch or something that opens up these shackles?"

Randy rose to his grossly elongated legs unsteadily, and walked around, searching through the controls. It appeared he had some intellect left in him still.

Finally it seemed he had something.

He threw a switch, and Kim's restraints flew open. Success!

"Thanks," Kim croaked, and rose up to a sitting position. Her vision was swimming around to every direction, and she felt like fainting. But gradually, the feeling receded. In fact she felt better than ever. And why not? Her soul had been artificially rewritten. She was no longer infected, and should even be immune for re-contamination of the soul.

Kim took a closer look at Randy, or what was left of him. The face was black and covered by ugly thick veins, but the eyes still had intellect in them.

"I may not have much time," Randy croaked. "The entity left me for now, but may retake me at any moment. It killed everyone else inside including the base commander. Just the driver was left alive in his truck. The Renditioner."

That name felt repulsive to Kim. Secret government-sanctioned kidnappings and transportations to torture sites. If someone did that for a living, they couldn't be a nice person. Not that she was much of one either.

"The Commander's computer must have some plans or documents. The entity wanted him dead foremost. But I don't think I can help you much longer. Once we get access to the terminal, you should kill me. Before the entity takes control again. Use the Disintegrator and just fucking burn me to the ground."

Kim saw deep resignation in Randy. But she could understand. The corruption of the soul had proceeded to a corruption of the body, and it couldn't be reversed. Kim was morbidly glad the procedure had stopped the corruption in her case. The agony had been worth it.

Kim took one of the high-tech long-barreled weapons, as well as the backpack that stored extra ammunition charges. She made a silent vow to kill Randy immediately when the need arose.

Kat had been transported to the destination. It appeared to be safe enough. Ian and Jo had the Yaris all to themselves now. It was not exactly legal, but Ian reminded himself that this had to be considered war now, and in war rules flew out of the window.

Kat's story had been incoherent, and they had not inquired much. It seemed to involve people that would gain superhuman strength, or summon something bad from the ground. Kat had escaped by playing dead and getting to the car somewhat by luck, which was impressive in of itself.

It sounded like they were in the middle of an apocalypse of some sort. Zombie apocalypse?

They were headed back toward the orange glow. Soon, they should meet the army checkpoint. They would probably circle it, trying to be stealthy.

Finding Erik felt like an ever slimmer proposition by the minute. Still, it had to be done. An Agent comrade would not be abandoned. Like Erik had not abandoned them, long time ago in the Outpost village, appearing with his sniper rifle when the enemy gang had almost overpowered them, and were closing in for the kill.

They had not talked much. The situation was certainly mentally draining. It was as if the normal world had ceased to exist, and there was only the night sky, and the post-apocalyptic glow of the city.

Their past adventures had dealt in flying bullets. And in some cases outright weird technology, like Ian's metal heart, which had been installed by the enemy. But that was still understandable by the laws of science. Now, were they wholly out of their depth? If there were hostiles that possessed actual paranormal abilities, how could they survive? What skills and knowledge could they draw upon? Would just the Agent skills be enough?

Ian thought of how just some time ago the height of paranoia had been whether Jo would be caught on arrival as a domestic terrorist offender. Of course, that would still have resulted in likely fatal consequences, but yet it was a situation explainable by rational reality. Maybe even the powerful Agent sponsors – the Grieg Industries – could have offered their help in that case. But this, Ian felt, was definitely going outside the rational.

Fuck! It was only the round shape of the Yaris and the quiet purr of its engine that felt comforting.

Kim and creature-Randy walked the now lifeless corridors of the underground facility. Only now Kim took proper notice of the large vats propped against the walls, with artificial organs growing inside. Though no such thing had been confirmed by the personnel, she thought of secret supersoldier experiments. Replace their souls and replace their organs. Completely outside ethics and human rights, which the test subjects just wouldn't possess.

It felt positively eerie, and the atmosphere was not helped by the constant hum of the containment machinery and other devices.

Kim contemplated the concept of heroism yet again: if she was the only one alive and sane (not counting the Renditioner yet, who might not be trustworthy) would it fall to her to fight the soul infestation? To be the savior of the day, again? Even at the cost of her life?

Well, judging from what she had seen, both at the bar and now here, the threat was real and disgusting. If it wasn't dealt with soon, there probably would not be much of humanity left, and not much of a life for Kim.

They headed toward the Commander's room.

Randy opened the door, and they entered.

The sight of the dead Commander was abhorrent even to Kim. All the blood and exposed entrails. She felt a minor urge to vomit, but thankfully it passed.

Working in tandem, they moved the corpse away from the desk, and Randy took control of the keyboard.

“Let it not be locked.. Fuck!”

Kim understood. Of course a password-protected screen saver would have kicked in. There had to be some measure of operational security in such a place.

“Look under the keyboard,” Kim suggested, just as almost a joke. It was a common way of doing things in the warehouses and other low-grade security gigs she had worked.

There was a promising yellow post-it note, with several words including uppercase and lowercase letters, and numbers. The first five had been struck out, leaving just the lowest. If luck was with them, it was the current password.

“Thanks. Trying now.”

Randy typed in a rapid blur.

The computer desktop opened up. But joy was short-lived, as in the next second Randy started convulsing.

“Gaahhll.. It's taking control again. Prepare – to kill.”

Kim took hold of the Disintegrator weapon, and aimed at Randy. Despite her vow, she hesitated yet, not so much out of emotion (which there was little) but because she knew that Randy was much better with the computer stuff. Trying to figure the plan to fighting the infection on her own would be a near-certain failure. Therefore, she decided to wait until Randy would exhibit actual violent tendencies. Of course – such decision could lead to her doom, so she also took a couple of steps back.

Some tense seconds passed, with Randy convulsing first more profusely, then only a little.

“False alarm. For now. But like I said, there can't be much time. Let's look at these files...”

More tapping on the keyboard followed.

“Here. I think I found something. They call it 'TISCCAP' Stands for Tacgnol-Induced Soul Corruption Counter-Action Plan.”

It sounded stupid, honestly, though also thorough. It was also unnerving to know that these government types, or whatever they were, knew Tacgnol by name.

“Let's see.. They talk of potentially needing artificial soul templates on the order of millions, for rewriting and immunization of the victims. That's optional; the carriers can also be burned if the supply is too short. Then, they talk of corruption in the Lifestream protocol itself -”

“What's that? Sounds like some Japanese video game shit.”

“Well, you can think of it like the encrypted communication between your soul and God, if you like. Or aliens if you're not particularly religious. I studied and decoded part of it in the university lab.”

Fuck! The mystery deepened. Randy had been researching the very subject they needed for solving the situation, while also having been infected himself. Had it driven his “career choice” or was it just coincidence?

“Anyway, the corruption can be followed back to the source, which should mean Tacgnol itself. It's lurking in some of the alternate dimensions where it has not been destroyed yet. Oh fuck, this is getting weird. There should be eleven dimensions -”

Kim was strongly reminded of Viktor and his anti-cosmic ramblings. Eleven heads of the chaos dragon, or however it went. It was strange how everything appeared to be connected.

“- and Tacgnol should now be destroyed from ours. But it left the infection here. In another parallel dimension or universe Tacgnol managed to snuff out all life, but was destroyed by sentient vehicles. I'm not

making this up. So, possibly nine more copies of Tacgnol are lurking in the multiuniverse.”

That sounded more colossal than Kim could ever have imagined. Destroying Tacgnol just once had been almost an impossibility, and they had not even done it themselves, but by its “good” counterpart, who had been summoned to do most of the battle. Nine more times, holy hell!

“The good part is that not necessarily all need to be destroyed. We only need to find out which of them is corrupting the Lifestream protocol. That’s actually what makes it possible for the infection to spread from soul to soul, and allows the infected to summon the black dimensional matter, against the rules so to speak.”

Fuck. Kim’s head was almost spinning from all the information.

“How do we cross to these worlds or dimensions? Do we need to die first or something?”

“There – there should be a reactor on the lowest level of this place. It also acts as a dimensional teleport. There’s a handy copy of all the operating instructions here, so you should be able to use it on your own even after I’m gone. Which reminds me –”

Reactor. Lowest level. Sounded very Purexo-like.

But now Randy began to convulse again, more suddenly and harder this time. He bared his teeth, which were growing longer and sharper right before Kim’s eyes. He seemed to tense up for an attack.

“Kill me now!” Randy shrieked.

Kim wasted no time in obeying. She pulled the Disintegrator’s trigger hard, aiming to Randy’s center of mass. A blinding beam of light shot out, burning right through him. Randy still kept coming, growling in rage, so Kim had to take more steps back, hoping like hell she wouldn’t trip. Thick acrid smoke began to rise, but yet

Randy lived, seemingly urged on by the sadistic entity in control of him. Kim shifted the aim to get Randy's arms or legs or head to fall off, as macabre as it was, but the movement was so unpredictable she kept missing most of the time.

Finally the unnaturally long right arm fell, burned completely through the muscle and bone. But yet Randy approached, now leaping forward to crash into Kim and trap her under his weight.

Fuck. It had to be ended now.

Kim shifted the aim higher, and the beam lanced through creature-Randy's head. He seemed to freeze in place. Damn, Kim should have done that in the first place, instead of following her trained response to go for center mass.

Kim rotated the beam in a small circle, burning the whole head to nothingness. The stench of burning grew almost unbearable. As disgusting as it was, Kim just had to imagine the squishy gray brain matter being cooked.

Finally Randy's lifeless and smoking body fell, and Kim let go of the trigger. The digital display on the weapon told the power cartridge was nearly spent anyway.

Kim waited for some seconds, but Randy did not move. It appeared the entity couldn't paranormally control a body with no central nervous system any more to speak of.

Kim sighed in relief, and with just a bit of sadness. The hero of the Purexo incident was no more.

Jo thought she saw something far ahead. The roadblock? She could not discern details yet; they had to get closer.

A bright searchlight turned toward them in the distance. It could not possibly illuminate them yet.

“Looks definitely military,” Ian said.

“Let’s get a bit closer, then decide what to do.”

Jo fiddled with the light switch. It appeared that while driving, the lights couldn’t be switched completely off. But she could switch to parking lights only. It was not ideal, but would do until they got closer. There shouldn’t be risk of exposure yet.

They closed more of the distance. Another searchlight rotated into view. There was an intersection, from which a smaller, parallel road forked to the left.

It was a no-brainer to turn there.

“Good idea,” Ian confirmed.

Hopefully it would be easier to observe the roadblock from the side. They drove yet closer. Jo couldn’t deny that she was getting anxious, though she tried to not let that take over. They had no weapons, so stealth had to be the order of the day.

Finally, they were close enough.

It was fortunate that there were trees blocking the view partially. Jo braked to a stop, and they observed in silence.

The roadblock was a few hundred meters or so away.

Jo and Ian could see the individual vehicles blocking the road. Some jeeps, some trucks, and even one armored carrier. There was a makeshift command post, and a lot of uniforms. A lot of weapons. It wasn't going to be easy to get in or out.

"How the hell did Kat get out?" Ian wondered aloud.

"Maybe the block wasn't up yet. Or she came more from the side. We could try too."

But somehow Jo could guess that by now all exits would be barricaded.

Alone now, Kim studied the facility map on the corridor's wall. The entrance corridor with the loading ramp wasn't far from her current location. The Renditioner might still be there in his truck. She had to assume he was potentially hostile, or even bailed out by now, but still the entrance had to be checked. There was an extremely small chance the man could turn out to be a useful ally.

Completely alone, Kim knew she had no chance of following along the TISCCAP operation. With two of them, chances would still be slim, but not completely zero.

She turned into the direction of the entrance and set off into a moderate jog. She momentarily considered whether it was exactly safe to exert herself just moments after her heart had been forcibly restarted. Well, to hell with it. If she died, then she died.

Jo and Ian crept closer through the woods. The Yaris would be too noisy, even when driven on the slowest possible speed, so going on foot was the only possibility.

The military most likely had night vision or thermal vision. Damn. This was the most extreme form of Agent infiltration, with zero equipment against overwhelming enemies. But Jo reminded herself that the soldiers weren't even the true enemy, they were just trying to keep something extremely bad in.

Still it made little difference, the military would either shoot the two on sight, or arrest them. Both cases would be a mission failure, the former slightly more permanent.

They reached the edge of the trees. The roadblock was roughly hundred meters away now. Jo observed the guards making their rounds.

What would they even try to do? Just slip beyond, or try to subdue a guard or two and take weapons?

"Ian. Ideas?"

"Fuck. It's tough. We can't honestly try to attack anyone. It would end quickly and bloodily. So let's just try to keep to the shadows and slip past."

Jo squinted her eyes. Some of the guards were indeed wearing night vision goggles. They would have to assume that whenever those were looking their way, they would be caught.

Then there was a sound.

Rather quiet at first, like a distant subsonic rumbling. But it was getting stronger. It seemed to be coming from the city.

“Something’s coming,” Ian whispered.

Jo nodded in quiet agreement. Soon, the question would not be whether they could make it past the block undetected, but to see what kind of enemies were coming. And if the barricade would not hold, they would need to retreat back to the Yaris early enough before becoming victims themselves.

The sound became yet louder.

Then, Jo could discern the shrieks.

And she saw the horde, coming from the city. A jumping, writhing black mass of pure insanity. They all had obscene, long arms and legs, moving alternately upright, and then on all fours.

The soldiers responded, some firing their rifles or light machine guns, others firing futuristic beam weapons. The bullets and beams ate into the horde, but not enough to stop its advance.

Some of the creatures moved more slowly and deliberately, stopping to make odd gestures with their hands. This would make black tentacles rise from the ground, which would launch themselves toward the soldiers. So far, they managed to shoot or burn them down, but as the enemies got closer, it would get much harder.

Fuck. This was rapidly going beyond comprehension. The enemy commanded supernatural powers. To be unarmed in such situation – though it seemed firepower would do little to help – just a hundred meters away seemed to invite insanity.

How could they possibly survive?

“We retreat now?” Ian asked sharply.

It was certainly time, if they valued their life. The enemy was overpowering the soldiers badly. It seemed like they had waited to gather their forces, then launched an all-out assault that the military had no hope of repelling.

But Jo wanted to understand a bit more. She concentrated to the utmost, to try if she could discern what the soldiers were shouting.

“We need containment!”

“It’s not possible outdoors! The field would need too much energy! But take out the APK-grenades now! Anti-psychokinetic!”

Heeding this instruction, the soldier took out a rectangular, futuristic grenade, and threw it toward the advancing horde.

It reminded Jo of SCEPTRE’s electromagnetic pulse weapons. There was a visible crackle of electricity in a spherical shape, and the creatures caught inside stopped. At least for a few seconds. The soldiers concentrated fire on the frozen monsters, apparently even killing a few.

“Whatever you do, don’t let them take your soul! Killing yourself is preferable!”

Jo’s heart skipped a beat upon hearing this. It was going into the realm of complete incomprehensibility. She had not wasted much thoughts to matters beyond this world – of souls and such. As far as she was concerned, you only got your one life here. And then it was game over.

More grenades flew, freezing more of the creatures. The firing continued uninterrupted, some of the machine gun barrels already glowing red hot.

But the horde seemed limitless. A summoner-type circled past the searchlights into the ranks of the soldiers, then unleashed black tentacles on them from

the ground. The men screamed as they were suddenly being punctured and impaled and strangled.

Fuck. They would only die here, sooner or later.

Jo got up into a half-crouch, ready to move.

“Yeah. Now!”

And then they ran, back to the Yaris. Jo hoped the horde had not noticed them yet.

“You’re the last one alive,” Kim said harshly to the truck driver, the Renditioner. He was a balding, somewhat unpleasant looking man with a gaunt face.

“Are you still infected? Don’t get any closer,” he hissed back. The side window glass muffled his words, but they were decipherable enough.

“Relax. They killed me and rewrote my soul. I’m clean.”

“What are you going to do?”

“You mean, am I going to kill you? I just as well could, considering how you aided in my kidnapping. But considering I would also have become a blackened skin abomination on a short notice if left untreated, I can’t hold too much of a grudge. No. I’m not going to kill you, until you give me reason to. You have a choice. You can help me complete the TISCCAP plan, or get out of my sight as useless.”

“I shouldn't even know this, but I heard from the technicians. The plan calls for many teams armed with hazmat suits and Disintegrators. They need months of training in dimensional jumping, and practice runs in simulators into Tacgnol’s dimensions. I’m nothing but a glorified driver. There’s no use even trying. The plan is fucked, if it’s just us.”

“OK. Then get out of my sight.”

The Renditioner seemed to hesitate for a moment.

“Ah fuck. We can try. But it’s not going to be pretty. Firing up the dimensional jump – about a hundred things can go wrong. And that’s just from what I heard from the technicians. Imagine it when it’s just us that have to do it.”

“If you only plan to demotivate me, again, get the fuck out of here. You’re of no use to me.”

“Fuck! You’re impossible.”

Jo started up the Yaris. Thankfully, it did not protest, but the engine came to life immediately. She put the gear in reverse and floored the accelerator. The wheels spun on the gravel hard.

It appeared some of the creatures were coming their way. They were paranormally fast, capable of unnatural long and high jumps. When they had hit the roadblock, one moment they weren't there and the next moment they were. Jo was not sure if the car could outrun them, even on a straight.

Then, it was decision time again. Just go back the way they came, or try to break through the roadblock now?

"Which way?" Jo asked quickly.

Though she could already anticipate the answer. And formulate her potential counter-answer.

"We could run through!"

Jo was honestly surprised; she thought Ian would place top priority to protecting her, when things got bad. But it appeared he still had the mission in mind. To find Erik. And she would agree. If there were such monstrosities running around, death was a possibility wherever they went. But if they didn't see things to conclusion now, their cowardice would haunt them for the rest of their (potentially short) lives.

Jo turned the Yaris around, going for the roadblock. The soldiers had been thinned down, but so was the

horde. The APK grenades still flew in arcs, freezing a few at a time, at which point they would get shredded. Other soldiers had dedicated themselves to firing at the tentacles.

Naturally, their ammo would not last forever. It seemed like the creatures would triumph in the end, since they didn't have that problem. But now was a good opening to rush the barricade. They could circle the truck at the far edge, and the soldiers wouldn't be able to react fast enough.

Jo floored the accelerator again.

Suddenly Ian shouted. "Hey! Stop for just a second! There's a machine gun on the ground!"

Jo brought the Yaris to a stop for an extremely short while. Ian opened the passenger door, scooped the weapon up, and Jo sped away even when the door was still open, tires squealing.

Then they were on their way, circling the barricade and the horde. Fuck! There were still insanely many. The creatures had no doubt noticed the car now.

Suddenly there was gunfire, a prolonged burst that shattered the rear window. The soldiers had noticed them too. But it was too late to have second thoughts. The engine was near redlining. Jo shifted to second gear finally, and they gained more speed, heading into the city, as at least five creatures were in pursuit, galloping on all fours.

As a first step of preparation, the Renditioner got rid of the bodies in the lab, before first taking everything valuable, like keycards. This included the bodies of the Commander and Randy. The semi-automated waste disposal system was quite handy in the task. Kim could have helped, but he didn't accept.

"There's something we need to do," he spoke finally. "When we cross into the dimensions, I'll be in risk of getting infected. We need to replace my soul too with one that's resistant."

Now Kim understood. By handling the bodies alone, he wanted to toughen himself up as preparation.

"That means - inserting the catheter for circulation, intubating you for the artificial breathing, and then killing you, while making sure your soul doesn't escape. Then doing whatever programming procedure that's required. Remember that I have no medical or no computer training. Are you fucking sure you want me doing that?"

Kim made sure to not refuse outright, since she had already berated the Renditioner heavily for insinuating that the situation was hopeless. But she was quite sure the Renditioner would die as a result of some step going wrong. If the technicians or Randy had been still alive, chances of success would have been better. Well, he was making his own decision. And Kim would agree in the

sense that she didn't want a partner who could go crazy any second, once they got into contact with the infected.

They walked back into the operating chamber. Kim at least understood that everything needed to be sterile. They could not reuse the same catheter that had been used on her. The soul containment box would need to be primed again. Well, that was just throwing a switch. Then there was monitoring the psychokinetic field so that other souls would not invade the process. Fuck. Insanely complex.

And the actual rewriting or programming. Kim hoped it would also be just throwing switches or pressing buttons, otherwise it was certain to go south.

"Hey. Here's some manuals. Let's get reading," The Renditioner said, pointing to a cupboard.

It seemed they weren't necessarily in an absolute hurry. Apparently the infection was spreading all the time, but a couple of hours (or even a day) wouldn't make that much of a difference. If they only had one shot at properly killing the Renditioner and rewriting his soul, it was better to know what they were doing.

Kim got out a manual of the artificial circulation machine first, sat on the floor, and started reading. Fuck. Half of the terms went over her head. Only very slowly, they started to make sense, when she went through the most important diagrams again, and again.

Meanwhile, the Renditioner was checking the computer manuals and the terminals.

"You need a fresh artificial soul template that's being held in containment. We're in luck, there's exactly one remaining."

The creatures were still chasing the Yaris. Jo weaved between upturned and burned-out cars. There was no one alive out in the streets, but from each of the side alleyways, a couple of creatures joined the chase, at least for a while. Ian gripped the M249 light machine gun tight. The safety was off, the ammo box felt heavy, so if he was in luck, it was almost full.

Where would they even be going? Would they just scour the city at random, hoping to bump into Erik? It seemed fruitless.

Fuck. Ian hoped Erik was holed up somewhere in safety. Even if he was the over-man, he could not possibly defend himself against these hordes.

They headed toward the glow of the fire still.

“Let’s check the inferno. See what’s burning. Then see if we can shake the horde,” Jo suggested.

Ian had no better ideas. Jo was keeping it together admirably, though she seemed anxious and tense to a degree. Well, she was a former Agent too, so anything less shouldn’t be expected.

They drove on.

Suddenly there was a slimy, disgusting sound. A black tentacle poked through the broken back window.

Ian whirled around and let loose a burst from the machine gun. The gunfire was deafening. But above it, he thought he heard the tentacle scream. Most

importantly, it vanished out of the window.

“Fucker!” Ian shouted just to keep his adrenaline pumping in case more tentacles would appear.

Ahead, several collided cars blocked the road. Jo had to swerve hard left. The tires screamed and protested. Yet there were a couple of the galloping creatures in pursuit. To head back toward the fire, at some point they needed to turn back right.

Erik's knowledge had yet expanded. The pain was only insignificant now. He was enlightened with deeper blackness of Enochian and Azeratean magic! Fuck! He almost felt pulsating with power. This was how the over-man should handle death, to not accept fate but to search for the gate to return –

Where? Back to the living? That felt like an impossibility yet. Erik remembered how his body had been utterly destroyed. Or to some upper astral plane? It did not matter at least now. Anywhere away from here.

Viktor began chanting the formulae to actually open the gate, and Erik followed his lead. "Chaosatanas... Lucifer Illuminateo mea..." Now was the time. They would get out. Fuck. Whatever it took.

It was a fairly large plaza in the city. Something burned, all right. Something high and black. Jo looked up, not exactly comprehending fully yet. She dared not to brake to a complete halt, because the creatures were still onto them.

It appeared to be a vertically constructed monument. Made of stripped car frames, possibly?

Holy hell.

It was a huge black cat with ears, nose and arms crudely formed. Jo searched her mind. An internet meme...?

“Tacgnol,” Ian said with spite.

It made absolutely zero sense. Still, Jo could only think that the creatures had constructed it as a monument of worship. It had to represent their master, their God then.

Suddenly there was the subsonic rumble again. And the shrieking. It grew louder rapidly, overpowering the sound of the engine.

From all directions, countless creatures were streaming into the plaza. Galloping, screaming, and summoning tentacles from the ground. It was absolute mayhem. Jo gripped the wheel hard. She would have to look for an opening to break through the horde away from the plaza. And it had to happen fast, before they climbed onto the vehicle.

“Fucking hell,” Ian breathed. He was aiming down the M249’s sights, looking for targets, but it would be hard to hit anything, and too easy to just waste bullets.

One creature landed on the car’s roof with a heavy thud. Ian fired a burst right above. He couldn’t be actually aiming at all.

But it appeared the creature fell off. A small victory.

There was a small opening in the horde, and Jo drove straight through, clipping into the monsters’ legs from both the left and the right, hopefully snapping them outright.

They were heading out of the plaza. Tens of creatures quickly turned to follow, shrieking obscenely and pumping with their arms and legs, summoning all possible speed. Ian turned backward and fired extended bursts.

And yet they were not any closer to finding Erik. Of knowing whether he was dead or alive. Jo could only hope now that they made it out of here, back to some degree of safety.

She gazed at the fuel gauge. There were three bars left, which possibly meant about two hundred miles. Enough for now, but not exactly cause for celebration.

They had gained some distance to the chasing horde. Ian was ready to fire again, but didn't want to waste rounds, as hitting was unlikely. Instead he thought back to the soldier's words. "Don't let them take your soul!"

It sounded extremely cryptic. What difference would it make how you died? Would you go directly to Hell –

Then it dawned on him. What the soldier possibly meant. Ian remembered the huge burning effigy at the plaza. If he died at the creatures' hands, Tacgnol would have his soul.

But the implication was still uneasy. To rather have to commit suicide.

Suddenly the horde gained new energy. Due to having to weave through obstructions, Jo couldn't drive faster than about forty-five miles per hour. They gained on the Yaris again. Ian imagined Tacgnol itself feeding them blackened energy.

They needed to get out. But the city was unfamiliar. Which way was the fastest?

A couple of the creatures were dangerously close to reaching the car. Ian fired a few bursts again, leaning out of the passenger window now so that he could take out the ones trying to encircle them from the right side.

He estimated to have about a half of the ammo box left. Not alarming, but not worth celebrating either.

A sudden thud from Jo's side alerted him. A creature

was clinging to the driver side. Ian didn't dare to shoot across, past Jo.

But Jo reacted quickly; she twisted the wheel left hard, crushing the creature against the nearest building wall. It was left behind; good riddance.

Many more still followed, though.

Then they were on an overpass, looking down on a train yard. A morbid thought flashed through Ian's mind. If they had to kill themselves now, the drop to the yard would do it.

As if reading his thoughts, several creatures jumped the car. One tried to get in through the open passenger window. Ian fired in rage.

"Raaaah!" he shouted. Jo ducked low in anticipation of some blows coming from an unforeseen direction, still gripping the wheel hard.

To avoid the same happening again, Ian hit the button to close the window. Many more of the creatures came, until it seemed the car was completely engulfed. Ian felt true desperation, maybe for the first time during this chase. He fired through the back window again. But it was mostly ineffectual.

He gathered strength for a second, then turned to Jo.

"Jo! We might not make it from here. I thought of what the soldier said -"

She looked at him, a grave and focused expression on her face.

"Yeah. To not give your soul to them."

"We may have to do it now."

Ian was not sure of all the paranormal implications. But hopefully dying instantly by a vehicular fall would be less painful than being ripped and mauled by the creatures, in any case.

There still was a two hundred meters of the overpass left. Jo nodded in understanding, and Ian knew she

would do it. The creatures clung to the car, and yet more were coming. Honestly, there was no chance for an escape. The firepower of the M249 would not be enough.

“Do it. And -”

Ian could not finish the sentence, not right now. Jo turned the wheel right hard, sending some of the creatures flying away. Then the Yaris met the overpass fence. It slammed through it with ease, and then they were airborne. Gravity quickly took over.

“Love you. Always.”

The car’s trajectory could not be affected beyond this point. The train yard loomed below. Ian pulled Jo close and kissed her, trying to express maximally what he felt for her before everything would come to an end.

Seconds stretched almost to eternity.

Then came the crash that was louder than the end of the world, and the pain that was stronger than anything before. Ian blacked out.

As Ian's vision faded back in, the twisted carcass of the Yaris still trapped them.

It was lying on its side on the train yard gravel. All airbags had gone off; the driver's side bag was smeared with blood. Jo's head was at an unnatural angle compared to the rest of her body, eyes gazing to nothingness. Ian felt both profound sadness and relief that the creatures had not caught her at least.

He could not feel his legs. The pain was distant and otherworldly, fading on and off. Soon, he would be on his way too, he estimated.

Suddenly he heard a growl and his blood froze. The creatures were still on to the car. He had to make sure they wouldn't get his soul.

He still had the machine gun, lying in the foot compartment. But his arms had limited motion. It took a disproportional effort: first fighting with the passenger airbag to get it out of the way, then to position the muzzle under his chin. The growl repeated, closer now; he did not have much time.

Finally the gun was in position. Ian's last task ever was to reach for the trigger and pull it. His last thought was the hope for his index finger to not fail him now.

The machine gun fired.

The last that he ever saw was the blinding, star-shaped muzzle flash engulfing his head, and then the

deepest blackness took over as his life ended, the brain stem penetrated by the 5.56mm NATO round.

Part Three – Soulside Journey

The Renditioner thought they were as prepared as they were going to be. No reading of the manuals would help them any more past this point, instead they just had to begin experimenting with the machinery.

After the initial hostility, Kim was not that bad to work with, he thought.

“We can at least test the breathing machine. Just see if air comes through the tube rhythmically,” she said.

“Right. The tube has to be lubricated before it’s stuffed down my throat?”

“That’s what the manual said.”

“The circulation machine then.. Do you know where to stick the catheter?”

“In theory, yes. Jugular artery and vein. Entry and return.”

For a moment, the thought made the Renditioner feel ill. Blood escaped his head, as if he was going to faint. Then he tensed himself, like a fighter pilot should do in a tight G-force turn. This helped somewhat.

“And for killing me, a strong alternating current jolt is used. Repeated until my heart stops?”

“Check.”

“Then the soul programming itself. It doesn’t sound impossible. There are pre-made programs for the digitization, purification, and rewrite. It should be pretty much self-evident, but make sure you can find

your way around the user interfaces, so that you don't fumble in the critical phases.”

Maybe they had psyched themselves up too well. Made the process sound too easy, and then they would fuck up something elementary?

Damn. Once he would be on the table, then everything would be in Kim's hands. It was sort of all right, though. If something went wrong, he would most likely simply die. Though in some cases, for example if the catheter installation went wrong, he could die in extreme and prolonged pain.

Breakthrough!

The gate shimmered in front of Viktor and Erik. The Enochian chants had opened it up, just like Viktor had promised. The fucker had not failed him! The two souls went for one final lap of the black tentacle, gathering velocity for the escape.

It would not be long.

“We will likely end up in the upper astral planes,” Viktor said. “There are many of them, and we may yet spend many long eons there, but they’re much better than this.”

“Hell yeah.”

For a moment Erik was afraid. Would his crass cursing close up the gate? But if anything, it shone even brighter. This was pure anti-cosmic power, as well as power of the will!

Ian felt like he was waking up. Waking up where? Was he alive... or dead? He could not exactly remember what had happened before. Everything around him was gray. He found himself inside a thick layer of fog.

He couldn't move yet, or he didn't want to move. Not sure which it was at first. It didn't differ that much from waking up for example after a night of heavy drinking. Though as a pleasant difference, there was no hangover. There was in fact no pain of any kind.

Ian lifted just his head at first. His body felt somewhat ethereal. Yet he could touch his own nose. He still had clothes on.

The fog went on to every direction.

Ian crawled forward a bit, not actually daring to walk yet. He almost stumbled on something.

Another ... person?

It was Jo.

Ian thought his (metal) heart jumped. Though he was not sure if he had it any more. He didn't hear the familiar artificial heartbeat sound.

Was she alive or dead? She was lying there in the fog, also with clothes on. There appeared to be no outward signs of damage, no blood, but she didn't appear to be breathing either. No movement at all.

Ian felt his blood – if he even had blood any more – go cold. This had to be some kind of afterlife. His Heaven

or Hell. He remembered how, while alive, he had often liked to look at Jo in her sleep, for then she looked so very peaceful, and reminded him of how there were things worth fighting for. It even reminded him of the mission to the nord research facility, where he had dared to kiss her awake. Or then not. He was not exactly sure how it had actually happened.

But here, if Jo would not ever respond, if she was left lying on the foggy floor for all eternity, then the dream had turned to a nightmare, and this certainly was his Hell.

Kim was wearing very many hats, operating all the machinery at once, being both a physician without any medical training, an executioner using alternating current, and a soul extractionist and reprogrammer.

She shared the Renditioner's suspicion that some of the tasks would go wrong. Yet she tried to do the best she could.

The Renditioner was strapped to the gurney now. It felt perhaps unnecessarily hostile, but was an important safety precaution. The jolts could make him fall off.

In addition to the manuals, Kim tried to remember what the technicians had done to her. Power up the machine, swab the neck with antiseptic, then stick the catheter in. The machine would not be started yet before the Renditioner's own circulation actually stopped. Same for the breathing.

She powered up the containment box now; its hum intensified. For one thing she was glad, that they were alone in here and no hostile creatures or other enemies would suddenly appear. They could take their time.

She also switched the shock generator to standby. The electrodes with their conductive gel were already in place. The device was not ready to deliver a fatal jolt until actually armed, but it was good to know the machine's fuse had not blown.

The breathing apparatus was ready too, the tube

lubricated and standing by in a holder. Its insertion was not as critical, it could wait until the Renditioner was actually clinically dead. If insertion was attempted before, he would be sure to protest violently, as no anesthesia was being used.

The most critical part was to follow now. The catheter insertion. No matter how hardened and misanthropic Kim was, she couldn't help feeling trepidation. Mostly because of the absolute lack of training.

Ian meditated deeply on the potential unfairness of the afterlife. Jo had not responded to anything. He had tried shaking her gently, then more forcefully, even kissing her. Finally he just got up, spiritually drained.

The fog expanded to every direction. The “sky” above him looked more white, but perhaps not much. He thought of the risk of becoming snowblind.

He walked slowly. Possibly, there were other figures at the very edge of his vision. But he was somewhat afraid of exploring too far. How would he find his way back to Jo? But if she was to never wake up, then it didn’t have much significance. Still, the thought ate at his soul.

Damn.

He wished he had a guitar, to at least have something to spend the time while he waited.

Out of the nothingness, a black Stratocaster of no specific make materialized, equipped with a Floyd Rose licensed tremolo and HSH pickup configuration. It fell to the ground, slowing down as if the fog was a cushion of air supporting it.

Ian picked it up and wished for a pick. That, too, materialized. He plucked the strings. They sounded just as weak as an unamplified electric guitar sounded in the land of the living. Furthermore, they were a light gauge. They should have been at least .010 - .052.

He began to play a standard chord progression. Am – F – C – G. He imagined a two-note orchestral motif, like in Hans Zimmer's themes, playing over it. Fuck. It was too epic. It did not fit this place or his current mood.

Therefore he returned to Jo, sat down, and started to compose a song that was specifically dedicated to her. It was somewhat odd, to think that he had not ever done that while they were alive.

The chord progression was: Dm – Am – F – C – Gm – Dm C G – Gm. This was the first verse. He whistled a simple melody over it, and felt tears rise to his eyes. But it was not yet time to stop. The second verse (or was it a bridge?) had to be composed too. Ian went through a few permutations, before settling for F – C – D# – Dm – G – A# – D. It was perfect. Sad at first, but ended hopeful. It appeared Dm would be Jo's key signature. That it was a minor key, was fitting. During the Agent missions (they of course had not been exactly uplifting, just for the sheer amount of carnage and desperation and comrades falling left and right), but even before and afterward, there had been the occasional, lingering feeling of something unfulfilled and melancholy about her. There were no words to exactly describe it. Though other times she would be just the opposite and have no worries even in the face of potential approaching death. So it could also be just Ian projecting his own insecurity and pessimism.

Well, now they would have all the time in the world. That was a famous line... from where?

Slowly, he began to think of other fallen heroes. Like Quorthon. Dead. Euronymous. Jeff Hanneman. Chuck Schuldiner. Randy Rhoads. Or even the master of the anti-cosmic himself, Jon Nödtveidt. Would he meet them here? Or his Agent comrades? Little by little, the fog around him deepened, and he dozed off.

The Renditioner couldn't exactly blame Kim for the copious amounts of extra pain she had caused during the catheter insertion. The attempts had been too many to count, and he knew he had been red in the face, screaming at her in agony and anger.

Finally the machine had beeped in approval. The blood circulation would begin on command. Of course the Renditioner had to admit he was mortally afraid. They potentially had contaminated something, in which case he could get a nasty infection. Or air had gotten in, leading to a painful embolism and death at some unforeseen future point, even after his revival.

And even when the Renditioner comforted himself that everything would go according to plan, it wasn't pleasant. Preparing himself for death by electrocution. It was in fact exactly the same mindset as preparing for a round of torture. He knew he was in a cold sweat.

Now they just had to begin.

"Hit it," he said to Kim, who looked back at him grimly. At some level, she had to be enjoying this, considering how she had gone through the same, but involuntarily.

Still, he wasn't prepared for the shock when it came. His spine arched, as he felt all the agony of the damned. Sparks flew before his eyes, and he couldn't breathe.

Thankfully, at last, something happened.

He felt to be outside of his body, seeing it fall back on the gurney as Kim switched off the current. All pain had ceased.

But that blissful state lasted only for a second or two. Overpowering noises filled his senses as his consciousness was now forcibly jerked upward, through the funnel toward the ceiling where the containment box waited. And the agony began anew, much stronger than the electric shock: this was rather the feeling of his soul being stretched and ruptured to the breaking point.

Ian felt movement. Rhythmical tugging. Someone was trying to wake him up. He opened his eyes, looked up and saw it was Jo.

At first it didn't seem unusual. Another day on their long trip. Then he remembered they were in the fog-realm, and that he had spent an unspecified amount of time trying to do the same to her.

He practically scooped her up in his arms in joy. They fell into the fog, but it didn't hurt. She didn't perhaps feel exactly fully corporeal, but close enough.

Jo looked at him, a little surprised, as he let go at last.

"You're alive!" he blurted.

"We're dead. I killed us, remember?" she replied somberly.

Ian tried to remember. And true enough, he remembered the chase. The destruction of another egg-shaped hatchback. And when he concentrated enough, also how he had shot himself in the head to finish himself off. It wasn't exactly pleasant.

"Yes. But you did nothing wrong. If those creatures had taken us, I suspect we'd be in for something much different."

Jo seemed unconvinced.

"Still, we failed. We never found Erik, and got ourselves killed."

Ian felt his throat constrict. It was true, but Jo was

also being unnecessarily harsh on herself. Her appearing unresponsive for a longer time probably meant she had a harder time accepting death. Ian wasn't sure how that could be remedied, if it even could be.

But he would try.

"That's something we just have to accept. If you think about it, it could have happened about a hundred times before. Or more. Now we met an overwhelming enemy. Even the soldiers didn't stand a chance."

"True. Now we'll just never know. And it's -"

Jo's voice trailed off, as if she was afraid to continue. Then it took on a harsh character of metal and steel.

"It's like the beginning of the trip all over again. Just you and me and I don't know if there's ever going to be anything else. And I can't talk to you about it because I thought you'd freak out. And because I have to honor the command of my former self from the recording. It's like a fucking mind prison -"

Ian could have been shocked. But it was almost exactly what he had guessed at. That Jo had never properly told how messed up she had felt after the Agent missions. Or he had not listened properly.

He considered his next words. Somehow he wanted to make that up to her, if at all possible.

Then he thought, fuck it. Too much time had been wasted considering, and it had not necessarily brought anything better. So he just spoke his mind.

"I can't read thoughts, Jo. So if you don't tell me what's really going on, even if I thought I'd encouraged you to do so, then I don't know what more I can do. But you're telling now, so better late than never. I'm sorry it had to go that way. To tell the truth, I second-guessed myself constantly, thinking if I was doing something wrong, something evil, imposing my will on you when you didn't possibly remember me. And I couldn't say a

word because I thought it'd mess you up more. So I guess that makes two of us. What comes to this place – it shouldn't be just us here. I hope we'll see Quorthon and others. As well as our Agent friends. But when I first got here, you were just lying there. Not responding at all. I thought at first that would be my entire afterlife. That scared the hell out of me. So if the choice is between you angry and freaked out, and you in eternal sleep -" (this was a reference to the Darkthrone song 'Natassja In Eternal Sleep' and the hope was that Jo would get the reference as well) "- there's no choice. Of course I'll take the former."

Jo looked somewhat uneasy, which was certainly familiar to Ian from before.

"I'm not – Fuck!"

She let actions speak for what she currently had no more words for, and took hold of him almost violently.

"Don't hold back anything now. Even of the past," Ian spoke, but it wasn't exactly easy both due to the squeeze, and the raw surge of emotions inside him.

Jo eased off the force a bit.

"You remember how I wanted to hurry things badly. Wanted to feel exactly like I thought I should be feeling. I couldn't be sure if it was the real me, or if I was just reconstructing or re-imagining myself, including false memories. And because I wasn't progressing as fast as I wanted, I'd be angry at everything in secret. Myself, you, the world. I didn't want to lash out at you, because honestly you didn't deserve that. I just wanted to get away from everything including you, but there was nowhere to go. That's the part I didn't tell. By the time we burned the Ka it was already a lot better, and then I was glad you were there the whole time. But I never want to feel like that again."

Silence. Ian waited. Again, nothing of what Jo had

said had been truly surprising. Finally it appeared she had nothing more to say.

“Does it feel better now?” Ian asked.

Jo's voice was calmer. “Maybe. I was afraid that shitty feeling would come back. I'm still not sure. I hope it doesn't.”

Another pause.

“And thanks for waiting for me.”

Ian thought that she should never have to thank him for something so self-evident, but remained silent for now. Finally they got up. The fog still extended to every direction.

“What do you say? Do we go to look for Quorthon and company?”

“Sure. I want to know the truth from the day when Burzum killed Mayhem,” Jo replied.

As they walked, there was a final ominous thought in Ian's head. What if it was only his private afterlife and he only imagined Jo, imagined that she had been upset at first and then calmed down? That possibility felt severely screwed up, so he wanted to push it to the furthest reaches of his mind so that it would never come up again.

“Fucking hell.”

Kim was staring at a program crash dialog on one of the computer screens that controlled the soul reprogramming. Apparently she had clicked some wrong icon, or clicked in the wrong order, and the program had not been written bug-free enough.

She hoped the process would survive a restart of the application, as she clicked the program icon again.

The window appeared once more on the monitor.

“Now. Concentrate. No more mistakes,” she urged herself, and began the purification / rewrite process.

This time there was no crash, and a slow progress bar appeared. Kim still remembered fragments of the agony she had experienced while in the box. Her soul being burned with a laser. The Renditioner would suffer just as much, or potentially even more if she would make more mistakes.

Finally, the progress bar reached the maximum. Kim was sure she had completed all the steps. There was even a list of checkboxes in the program window to help the operator, and all were checked now.

It was time to bring the Renditioner's soul back to his body.

There was a loud clap of thunder as Erik and Viktor finally passed the gate from the black void to somewhere else. Erik screamed in pure victory, trying to surpass the thunder. He could sense Viktor express disapproval, but it was impossible to contain himself.

They found themselves flying over endless snowy plains and mountains that felt out of place and unreal. There were no other souls, only a few ravens flying and croaking, and storm clouds gathering in the distance.

“This is just a gateway realm. It's mostly inside of our minds,” Viktor explained.

And Erik understood. Immortal or Nargaroth. The hybrid of Immortal's fictional Blashyrkh realm, and Nargaroth's landscapes of endless battles and thunder. And ravens. It would be different to everyone, according to their own mental landscapes.

Suddenly there was a high whine, and the terrain faded without warning. Now they were flying over a fog. It was as they were inside a very large, very high building.

“This is the first actual astral plane,” Viktor went on.

Now Erik also saw others. Figures in denim and leather standing or walking slowly in the fog. He understood with perfect clarity. Metalheads, all of them. Just like Viktor and Erik too. But none seemed to notice.

They passed a huge feast hall below, with its own

stage and a large PA. A band was clearly performing. Erik only heard the blastbeat ricochet from the unseen foggy walls. He wanted to make the sign of the horns, but a soul had no hands.

“We could stop here and materialize,” Viktor said. “But my aims are higher. To return to the mortal realm. That may be possible if a soul is just returning to a body. I would usurp its place.”

Erik contemplated this, while still flying. More endless fog followed, until he saw two more figures walking into the direction of the hall.

One blonde, one redhead. Erik adjusted his flight trajectory lower. Again he felt Viktor's disapproval of the deviation, but Erik had to see closer.

Yes. No doubt. Ian and Jo. They had also died. Erik felt cold inside, for they had likely met their end in the same abominable cataclysm as he, but he also recognized the joy of sighting them.

Death was just the beginning, it seemed.

But Erik had to make a decision now. Materialize, or push forward?

In the end he knew his choice was self-evident. He could always return here. But the mortal realm and its challenges possibly still waited. Even if Kim was partially responsible for his torment, he wanted to see how she was doing. Erik knew it couldn't be as himself, as his body had been impaled and burned, but as someone else then.

He adjusted his flight path to reunite with Viktor. Even in the fog-realm, he radiated a black aura. True anti-cosmic fucker, he was.

Jo walked through the fog. Next to her, Ian had the summoned Stratocaster clone on his back. He had told she could get her own if she wanted, but Jo had not taken up the offer. Somehow she felt guitars were sacred. Their wood and steel shouldn't be poorly imitated in the afterlife. Or maybe she was afraid that she couldn't play properly here.

That led her to think.

"Maybe it's true that I've been too hard on myself. Like for as long as I remember – What? Are you getting emo again?"

"It's OK. Just keep talking. I can handle it."

Jo knew her emotions were still a bit raw as well, though it was good if they could already joke about it. Thus, she continued.

"But it sucks a bit if it takes me dying first before I figure it out."

"Well, like I said, better late than never. And maybe about seven billion people are glad that you are a perfectionist. For instance when it comes to shooting guns."

"It wasn't me on Nibiru though."

"Yeah, but you saved my ass so many times I lost count. So without your skills, me dead, Earth fucked."

"Maybe. But it means you always sacrifice something. Like your happiness."

“Is that completely true? Like you can't exactly say you didn't enjoy practicing guitar until you could play sixteenth notes perfectly at 200 BPM? Or shooting on the range until you actually thought you could make a difference if the world actually was like in X-Files or something? And when it was revealed to be so, weren't you giddy with excitement?”

“Right. For about a minute or so. A very irresponsible minute. But yeah, that's what I wanted to do, and didn't want anything else.”

“It's true you always pay a price of some sort. Like if you're an artist, on yet higher level than we are, you're probably bipolar or something. Insanity and genius. A demon whispering in your mind. If you're neoclassical enough, you'll eat too much and abuse your spouse. So we'll take precautions. You stay strictly within speed and thrash, and we don't get married.”

“Very funny. And if you need to take up vocals, you certainly don't also cut your hair, bulk up and start stocking up ammo for survival. You can choose one of those, but not more.”

“Fuck. I'll take the ammo.”

To tell the truth, Jo was surprised that afterlife worked this way. That you could even have the mental fortitude to make jokes. First and foremost she was surprised that there was anything after death.

Off in the distance, something was coming up. A congregation of shadowy figures. Also, some noise. Was it music?

“Do you have an idea how long this will go on?” Jo asked. The source of the noise was still rather far. Ian's expression turned more serious, as if he thought hard.

“Possibly until you're ready for the next life. I could be completely wrong, too. But we'll probably get bored like hell after a while. If this fog never ends.”

Jo thought some more. She had one more simple question, but it threatened to bring her to tears. She did not want to leave things unsaid now, so it just had to be blurted out fast.

“How do I find you in the next life?”

Just in time. She had to close her eyes for a moment, but then the feeling passed.

“That's – a very good question.”

This was the part of the procedure Kim had prepared the least for. The flatlined heart could not be restarted with electricity; instead an injection of adrenaline combined with CPR should be used. Atropine could be optionally used. It potentially was of no use; the manual was unclear on this.

Then there had to be something else. Damn. Kim was forgetting. She should have had an assistant.

She had the auto-injectors ready. The longer the Renditioner was heart-dead, the worse the chance of success would be, so she had no reason to waste any more time.

She pressed the buttons on both the adrenaline and atropine injectors. There was an audible hiss of compressed air. The breathing part was taken care of by the machine, so now she just had to supply the forceful compressions.

She had the hand position right on the sternum, and began the rhythm. She thought she heard bone cracking already, but then understood it was just her sadistic imagination.

A gate out of the fog-realm was suddenly opening, and Viktor and Erik reacted fast, turning their flight path. Viktor croaked like a raven now; apparently that enhanced the chances of success for re-entering the mortal realm.

Erik followed suit.

“Argh! Gak-gak-gak...”

A flash like lightning enveloped them, and they were yanked somewhere else.

The Renditioner coughed repeatedly, the sound throaty and slimy. Kim had just pulled the breathing tube out. The EEG and EKG readings were OK; her patient had survived. To be honest, this was the result she would have anticipated the least.

What about the soul then?

Kim started up the final application in the soul reprogramming package, the after-operation analyzer. It took some time to perform its task, until the result screen came up. When she read it, she felt a cold surge of hatred and disappointment.

The display read:

AMOUNT OF SOULS DETECTED: 2

- INFECTED, RESISTANT

- INFECTED, RESISTANT

Two fucking souls? And not even clean. Kim wanted to scream. Clearly she had made a mistake, and now that she thought of it, it was elementary. The room-wide containment field had not been active, so the return of the Renditioner's soul had been intercepted. She had concentrated too much on resurrecting him.

Now the Renditioner's soul and its knowledge had been wasted. It was flying away to Satan knows where. And the final artificial soul template was wasted too, so

any more cleaning procedures could not be performed. She would be stuck with whatever was inside the Renditioner now. Some random useless souls? She could just as well kill him now. She considered the TISCCAP operation to have concluded in failure. The soul infection would now spread unimpeded with no remedy in sight. Game over.

The Renditioner coughed one last time, which shook Kim out of her thoughts. Then he spoke. The voice was higher now, the phrasing oddly familiar.

“Hello, Kim. Don't be scared. It's Viktor inhabiting this host. Long time no see.”

Fuck. Even worse than a random soul. Back from the dead and no doubt somehow corrupted. Kim scanned the room to see where she had left the Disintegrator.

There. She picked it up and turned to the gurney, her eyes ablaze with hate.

“Hey. Don't do anything hasty. I will do no harm. I might even be able to help you.”

Kim's raw burning hatred subsided a bit. Maybe she had to give him a break and not just kill him outright. After all, they had also had good times. But still, she would watch out. The infection was the nasty, unpredictable part.

“Spending so much time in the nether realms, my capabilities are not exactly the same as those of most mortals. I'm able to tap into the original soul's lingering ethereal memories and thoughts. It's of course regrettable that it escaped and I took place. But... it appears you're trying to stop an infection. A spiritual one. Spreading from soul to soul, and corrupting the Lifestream. I believe to have become an expert on these matters. In a word, you are trying to restore order. Like you remember, I'm not its friend. In both life and death I have sought chaos instead. But I can understand and

even agree that you need to restore order now, or there will be too many souls that will be left adrift and get themselves annihilated before they have the chance to gain the necessary wisdom to survive what's coming. Once they have that wisdom, they could make the transition to seeking chaos instead, in which case they could exist even after the infection has reached saturation. But back to the concept of order.. With time being limited, it's most beneficial to consult its ultimate source, or the creator. In other words, the Demiurge."

That was one hell of a monologue. While alive, Viktor had not spoken so long-windingly. Kim made an even stronger vow to herself to watch out for any signs of the infection taking over, and then Viktor would get promptly and unceremoniously roasted by the Disintegrator beam.

But the Demiurge? That was deep. Was it like God itself, in another name?

"Now, there are interesting complications. You have already met the Demiurge's perverse deviation, which seeks to impose its own kind of order that the infection represents. This is wrong in many kinds of ways. Do not be mistaken, it's not chaos we're speaking about, but a rigid order of inert blackness. In other words, Tacgnol."

To have this confirmed from Viktor made sense. But Kim thought of the last meeting with Tacgnol at the Purexo laboratory. Back then, its white adversary had managed to destroy it. So did that –

"Yes. I'm reading your thoughts now. Apologies if you find it intrusive. You would be correct that the Demiurge and Longcat are in fact the same. The trick will be how to get to it. As last time, it came here."

Another piece of the puzzle fell into place. Kim felt that maybe there was a tiny chance, that Viktor would actually help her get up to speed.

Still one mystery remained. What was the other soul? When would Kim meet him or her? Or had Viktor taken complete control already?

Then the Renditioner's mouth spoke with another voice. Rough and much lower.

“Kim, would you open these restraints already?”

Kim was rather sure she recognized this one. Erik. She cursed. The situation was FUBAR. She did not look forward at all to the inevitable, when the two souls would start fighting for her attention.

Ian and Jo reached the source of the sound at last. It was a huge hall hidden in the fog, with long wooden tables where ale, spirits and various greasy and unhealthy foods were being served. From the large, high stage with its powerful PA, death metal rang out, the vocalist grunting low and sewer-like. The crowd was absolutely huge, with denim, leather and PVC being the clothing code.

A metal festival in the afterlife. Or actually –
“Valhalla,” Ian thought aloud.

To be honest, he could not have hoped for a better place to wait while he prepared for reincarnation.

To his left, a substantially large fight broke out. It was atypical for metal festivals, which usually had little in the way of security incidents. After it was over, the combatants laughed, patted each other on the back, and went back to drinking, with none of them having visible or lasting damage. And Ian understood, it was not necessarily an actual argument, but training for combat readiness even in between lives.

“Shall we drink?” Jo asked.

“Hell yeah.”

They sat to a vacant space on one of the long benches. It was not long until they had their pints, which also were wooden. It seemed that tradition was being honored to the maximum.

The ale tasted better than Ian could have expected. It was also rather potent, possibly doubly so because he hadn't eaten for a long time. It didn't take long before he and Jo were profoundly drunk. She started to tell her obscure Michael Angelo Batio, Francesco Fareri, Fat Mr. Crab and Uli CC Rottweiler jokes, laughing against him almost hysterically. Meanwhile Ian's drunkenness took another path, he thought of how Jo was his wonderful drunk thrash metal superheroiner and cried into his beer in secret because they weren't actually alive.

Then he remembered the magic words that he had used many times in the past.

Focus. You're a killer!

Much better. He could again concentrate on what Jo was actually saying, as well as on the music.

Later, they clearly had had all too much to drink, and could not stand upright any longer. So they would just go under the bench to sleep it off. The music was no longer death metal, but slow, hypnotic and majestic black metal.

"Novices," Ian heard a rough voice say from some distance away, clearly pointed at them. At some point, it became dark, and the noise from the stage stopped. At least for some time.

The blastbeat was playing again when Jo kissed him good morning. Ian was surprised at the relatively mild hangover. As he got up, he understood existence in this place could go two ways: either it was the best ever, or the worst ever. Possibly when repeated long enough, it could turn to the latter in any case. The haunting closer of Reverend Bizarre's III: So Long Suckers, "Anywhere Out Of This World," came to his mind. The epic doom song was about a suicide pact to escape the sorrows of the world, with the closing part about the afterlife, where the narrator would stay with his beloved forever.

“How did you plan the next step?” Viktor asked. The Renditioner's body was free of the restraints and they were sitting on the lab's swivel chairs.

“Since you can read thoughts, you know it already,” Kim replied.

“Always so sarcastic. Yes, but it takes concentrated effort, and sometimes the thought is already gone or changed by the time I'm ready to interpret it, so I'd like to hear from you directly.”

“Well, there's the reactor at the bottom of this facility. I know it can also act as a dimensional teleport. So we'd travel using it.”

“A-ha. It would make sense. A sufficiently high energy field could in fact excite dimensional or cross-realm transitions.”

“Dimension or realm, does it make a difference?”

“Understanding that difference is the key to everything. So there are eleven dimensions. These are different facets of the multiuniverse. You will have a counterpart in each dimension, but normally your consciousness is only attached to one at a time. In each dimension there are various realms, like the physical realm, nether realms, astral realms and so on. Mostly it's the physical realm which you inhabit and know, but you will get to know the others when you die and wait to reincarnate.”

“So when I need to see the Demiurge, where do I go?”

“There's one realm that is special. The control realm. It's connected to all of the dimensions. That's where the Demiurge resides, overseeing all the dimensions under its command. And actually, in a strategy sense that's a weakness, because if you attack that place successfully, you could corrupt or otherwise affect all the dimensions. I believe that is Tacgnol's end goal, but it doesn't have the power to attack the Demiurge directly on its home ground. Instead it's using the corruption of the Lifestream to attack indirectly.”

“Sounds quite clear, then.”

“Well, not so fast. The closer you get to the control realm, the more vibration frequency you require. Actually, when you reincarnate, you're momentarily taken to the control realm when the Demiurge's system assigns your new dimension. This lasts only for a fraction of a second.”

“How do you know all that?”

“By conversing with other souls, mostly in the nether realms. There are various rogue agents and lower entities there, which are quite mischievous, always trying to subvert the Demiurge's system in some manner. Mostly they end up only doing damage to themselves, lowering their vibration frequency, and thus needing to spend more time in the cycle.”

Somehow Kim thought of internet trolls, shitposters, edgelords and hackers. Their equivalent in the afterlife. Fuck! But she had to admit that this was fascinating in the extreme, even if Viktor was just laying out the rules in the manner of “by the way, this is why you will not succeed, ever.”

“But to actually enter the control realm for long enough that you could converse with the Demiurge, you need to raise your vibration level and keep it there.”

There's many who tried to do that, but they didn't last and died instead. I mean, their souls were torn apart and permanently annihilated.”

“So are you saying that we're fucked no matter what?”

“Not necessarily. The reactor-teleport may still be useful. Hopefully it can be used as a lens to peer into the dimensions, before choosing where to transfer to. We may find one that is suitable enough, that offers the easiest access to the different realms. Then we would be able to grind our vibrational level higher.”

“Grind? Do you mean as in video games?”

“Essentially, yes. Doing some repetitive task. In fact that was how I and Erik got out from the nether realm where we were trapped. While flying along a long black tentacle that looped endlessly, we recited anti-cosmic, Enochian formulae to raise our energy level until we were ready to spiritually manifest a gate out of there.”

Fuck. Kim should have been recording this or writing it all down. It would have provided enough lyric material for a few doom metal concept albums.

Another day in Valhalla. They had not seen anyone famous so far. Of course it was possible that the legends were exploring other places in the fog, for example Quorthon climbing a mountain and singing Viking metal with only the echo as his audience.

But unexpectedly, they did meet someone they knew. Or at least resembled him uncannily. Ian chose to stay off to the side.

René. Their late band leader.

Ian thought he looked unhealthy now, much thinner. Would your appearance actually change here? Possibly, if it was a reflection of your mental state.

Jo conversed with him for some minutes.

Finally René went his way, and Jo was shaking her head. Seemed it had not went well.

"I need a drink."

"How was René? Was it actually him?"

"Yeah. He'd reverted to his earliest, most dictatorial nature. He was searching for the perfect bandmates that would be ready to obey his each command. But they would never materialize here."

So Ian had been on the right track, you necessarily did not progress here, but could also regress. Another reason to not stay longer than needed.

Using the head technician's key card that the Renditioner had stored when he got rid of the bodies, Kim and Viktor gained access to the elevator that would take them to the reactor sublevel. Kim had a large stack of printed documents from the Commander's machine and from the lab, anything that they could find on operating the reactor.

Erik was silent most of the time. Kim understood he was observing. It was unnerving in case he was gathering hatred for an attack of some kind. Or if the soul infection would manifest visibly. Kim was immune, but she could still get physically attacked.

Maybe because of Viktor was an expert on spiritual matters and had traversed the realms, he could also keep the infection in control by willpower alone. No tentacles had manifested so far, no rumbling of the ground, nothing.

"Erik, how are you doing?" Kim asked to be sure.

"Fine. This shit goes over my head most of the time, so I keep silent," the low voice answered.

That was understandable. It was also a good sign that Viktor allowed him to answer and didn't forcibly cut him off. The cooperation seemed to be going smoother than Kim had initially thought.

Still, she told herself to be alert.

The elevator descended several levels down. There

was a vertical progress indicator light that seemed to move very slowly.

But as long as power did not get cut off, they would reach the bottom eventually. And if it did – time to get climbing.

Thankfully at least this time the ride was uneventful. The elevator pinged at the bottom, and Kim pressed the door control button. An unpleasant sulphur smell assaulted her. The lights of the reactor sublevel corridor were red and gloomy. It was almost like stepping into Hell.

Kim submerged herself to the printed documents and the dedicated operating manuals found from the reactor sublevel. They were now in the large circular control room, brightly lit with fluorescent tubes in contrast to the corridor's gloom. Behind large, thick, lead-lined windows was the reactor itself, like an ominous black monument. Or a silent god.

Currently it was humming to itself, producing the necessary electricity for this place, but not much more.

She thought she had the procedure down ... at least to a degree. There was a separate control station with several large LCD screens for using the reactor as a teleport, and a chamber that you would enter to be transported away. So that teleporting was possible at all, first the reactor had to be boosted to the very upper limits of its operating range.

"It looks good," Viktor said. "The government bean-counters understood that you must be able to look into the destination before commencing transfer. The large monitors are the 'lens' of which I spoke."

Again, Kim thought things were going almost too smoothly. She still remembered bitterly how she had forgotten the room containment, and Viktor had been unleashed. What would be the equivalent mistake in this case? Though, Viktor had already been more useful than the Renditioner could ever have been. He could not

have possessed such insight on the Demiurge. Plus, Erik was here too, and more tolerable than usual, since he was staying silent and not boasting about his over-man ideology, the strenuous art of metal drum playing, or his confirmed kills.

After a lot of persuasion, Jo had her own materialized-from-nothing guitar, an ESP lookalike, to help pass the time. They had composed something; maybe one short song was ready, and some riffs. It reminded Ian eerily of their trip across Europe, but this time using their feet instead of the battered Ford Ka. They would always find the feast hall again, so that was not a problem.

Ian found that after the initial shock, the fog-realm was getting to him more than it was getting to Jo. She would demonstrate changing the guitar's headstock shape or paint job color in real time. As it was all in the power of the mind, it made sense.

He was fairly certain that to progress from this realm one needed to eventually let go. To be free from fear. What was he afraid of? It wasn't hard to answer. He was afraid of reincarnating into some intolerable shithole, or into a form that was completely objectionable, like becoming a worm. He was afraid of losing Jo. And possibly also of some Inception-level shit, like slowly becoming unable to distinguish this from reality. But since he couldn't let go yet, he would rather have one more day with her in this place.

At times they would just sit against each other in silence. Or kiss. It felt comforting, yet melancholy. Very much like before their Agent missions that could have resulted in either (or both) not returning. Ian was not

sure if it was wise to go further.

But this day Jo looked him in the eyes with so much longing that there was no way Ian could refuse. Wise or not, he couldn't leave her hanging like that. And there was no question he wanted her too.

Instead of perfect grass like in the Reverend Bizarre song, there was just soft fog. That was not the point, but that making love here felt almost like Ian remembered. Jo was just her lovely self. But because of this uncanny resemblance to a life that was now over it didn't take long for him to burst into tears again.

"Should I stop?" Jo asked.

Ian shook his head, his eyes momentarily shut to help tolerate the overflow of emotions. So instead Jo would just become very gentle, planting kisses all over him, and say "If you're hurting, then it hurts me too. But it's OK. Don't hold back. Just like you said to me. I'll do whatever I can and hope that it'll help you feel better. And that way I'll feel better too."

Ian thought those words alone already helped him more than she might even guess. But there was doubt in them, and he didn't want her to feel that way.

"Jo. You don't have to hope. You help me every second you're here."

On hearing that Jo suddenly looked terribly sad, but that was just how she was at times now, when he would say something too affectionate. And Ian held her close and thought like before that she was his just a little bit wounded angel and it was OK and she could cry against him if needed and he would try to heal her the best he could. Only then Ian was shocked to realize that he had actually said all that aloud to Jo's ear, but she did not seem to mind. She just smiled at him, a bit teary eyed, and kissed him long so that he couldn't say a word more.

When it got dark again and they would just lie there inside the fog, Jo curled up against him, Ian thought of what he wanted even more. To be an agent of change, to dictate the terms of their exit from this realm so that there would be no uncertainty or fear. He understood that to be an impossibly tall order.

Instead, he thought of something that was possible and would convey the same idea, but as a fantasy: he began to sing Manowar's "Master Of The Wind" to her, rather subdued and voice occasionally cracking, the melody transposed at least one octave down. The lyrics told exactly of what he hoped for, that nothing was impossible, and no matter how bad things were, they could take a turn for the better.

As the song ended, Jo had a bit sad, dreamy smile on her face, and fell asleep soon after. Ian would stay awake longer, thinking this was something one could never make up. He imagined how Erik would burst into laughing if the two were drinking absinthe or other hard liquor and he would recount how he had fucked and cried at the same time and then sung Manowar to Jo as a bedtime song.

There was a nagging thought at the back of his consciousness, that he might not see Erik ever again, but for now, it vanished as quickly as it had entered.

Once Kim started bringing up the reactor power level, Erik seemed to become more interested. Conversely, Viktor found little fascination in matters outside of the dimensional or spiritual.

“What do you think we will find out there? Do we need to fight? Will we bring guns?” Erik asked.

Kim answered in a rapid-fire manner whose purpose was to discourage him from further too stupid questions.

“No idea. Possibly. Yes.”

“Good.”

Kim imagined the “good” to refer to the guns exclusively. She agreed to the extent that of course she was rather armed than not, when going into unknown hostile territory. She wasn't a gun nut, but a hard pragmatist.

The steady hum of the reactor got louder, and started turning into a higher, pulsing whine. The display showed 50% of maximum power generation now.

“Argh.”

That was Viktor's voice. Kim turned around, alerted.

“The reactor interferes – with my ability to resist the infection. As the power grows, I may lash out with summoned dimensional matter. The exact manner of the attacks is not in my control, but I may be able to warn you.”

Just great. Fucking shit, indeed. But at least there was advance warning. Kim was glad that the Disintegrator was close by, and the ammo pack on her back was loaded to the brim.

“Can I bring it higher?”

“You have to. Otherwise you'll never be able to teleport.”

So it would be done. Kim turned the large master dial further to the right, and the whine intensified. The reactor began to glow a faint red. Kim took a look at the coolant circuit displays. Their readings were acceptable. But in case the cooling failed, the reactor would soon be on its way to China, and they'd get an express trip to the non-corporeal realms.

Viktor/Erik was leaning against the wall now, sweat running down his face. He wouldn't be able to hold much longer. Then Kim would have to defend herself.

There was a dilemma: the most effective way for self-defense would be to kill him outright, but then Kim would be denied the further knowledge she needed to progress up to the Demiurge. It was roughly so that Viktor dead would equal mission failure. Fuck.

More power was needed. Kim had the Disintegrator ready now, back to the reactor, eyeing him while twisting the dial further.

The glow of the reactor was becoming red-orange, and already cast shadows on the wall. Kim hazarded a quick look to the power display. It read 75%. And rising.

Suddenly Viktor/Erik retched violently. Kim took aim, expecting him to lunge at her or summon black tentacles, fully prepared to fire despite the potential for dooming herself to failure.

But for now, he did none of those.

Instead he fell to his knees, making terrible guttural noises that echoed in the control room. They sounded

as if being demonically pitch-shifted down. Black vomit began to flow from his mouth to the floor. It came in great heaving pulses, roughly one per each second. The vomit quickly took on a life of its own, flowing toward Kim. She shook on instinct from revulsion and understood it had to originate from Tacgnol. It was definitely evil. She fired up the Disintegrator.

The beam hit some of the vomit, but then it rose up and started dancing in the air, making it nigh impossible to hit. And meanwhile more was still flowing to the floor, as if the man's stomach had endless capacity or Tacgnol itself was transporting more viscous matter inside to replenish the supply constantly. Finally Viktor/Erik began to just convulse, apparently empty now, while still making gagging and vomiting noises.

All the while Kim fired wildly, only careful to not hit him as he wasn't the immediate threat. Or any of the control equipment. She thought she managed to fry perhaps one fourth of the total amount. Wasting the charge was also a concern.

Then the flying vomit got so close Kim was afraid she would breathe it in. She had to duck out of the way. In horror she watched as it began to flow right through the protective glass. She turned her head to the radiation counters, ready to bail out of the room and into the elevator the instant they started to show dangerous readings. No matter if it would be mission failure, she wasn't going to sacrifice herself uselessly, if she only could get away before a fatal exposure.

But it appeared the vomit was paranormal also in how it penetrated the glass. As the black matter was going through, the glass re-sealed itself practically instantly, preventing any radiation from leaking. It was as if the vomit wanted to protect Viktor. It certainly could not be protecting her, Kim thought.

Now all of the remaining vomit was on the other side of the glass, still dancing in an odd rhythmical pattern. It began to slowly rise higher.

Viktor/Erik coughed phlegm on the floor and spoke, Viktor's voice cracking at first.

"The black vomit... It's part of the essence of Tacgnol itself. Seems some of it remained in me even after I broke free. Now it's rising to where the reactor's teleportative effect is greatest. It will spread to the other realms of this dimension, speeding up the corruption. My apologies."

"So are you clean now? No more vomit?"

"Feels different. Possibly. But don't take anything for granted."

"Be assured I won't. I'll have this pointed to you the whole time from this point on," Kim said with added harshness.

"Wise choice. Now, we'll just need to work faster. Get the reactor to full power. Once this dimension is corrupted, the rest will go faster. Or it's possible the vomit may reach the control realm directly. Summon abominations on its path. The dark possibilities are endless. After all, Tacgnol is a master of plagues and filth, when it chooses to be."

The power display was at 100%. The glow was near yellow, and Kim could see the rotating parts of the reactor. It was not an entirely conventional design, owing to the parts not required for the power generation, but only for the teleportation.

Viktor was back at the teleport control station and the large LCD's. His voice sounded religious.

“Yes. The dimensions are opening before my eyes. Those tentacles.. Those layers of eternal bone dust.. Those sentient fungi.. These entirely non-conventional intelligences and lifeforms. I could give my left testicle to watch this forever.”

Kim almost made an audible snort for the disgusting image, but managed to keep silent. It was not worth giving attention to.

“Which one is the best route to the Demiurge?” she shouted over the almost intolerable high whine.

“I must think. There are considerations. Of this world and not of this world. There will be various prices to pay, depending on what you choose.”

“Don't take forever.”

Kim could not hide being anxious. The vomit had been the second mistake. It had sort of followed from the first. She could not see or sense the spreading and accelerating corruption herself, and there were no actual monitor displays for it in the facility, but she had

no reason to disbelieve Viktor in this matter. She just imagined a digital time bomb countdown clock, relentlessly ticking toward zero. How much time remained, was unknown. But the sooner they got on their way, the sooner they would reach the Demiurge.

And yet that would not even be the end! The Demiurge would only tell them how they could help to defeat the infection. If they even could. It could also just swat them dead with its giant white paws.

The stage was silent now; it had been silent for unusually long. A moderate crowd had gathered in anticipation. Stagehands and roadies were moving equipment around, building a wall of speaker cabinets; a drum riser with long bones and horns was already there. There were also skulls impaled on pikes at the front. Seemed it would be something truer than usual.

Ian thought he had the answers now. It wasn't anything that he hadn't already known. He had just lost them for a while, maybe because of this place.

His mind was unusually calm as he thought of it. If to move on from this place was to move on from Jo, then it had to happen. He had already been prepared for that before.

He thought, that in a way this place was fair, or even more than that. It seemed that if someone was important to you in life, you would find them also here. So it was not just completely random. And from that it followed, that what would come next could not be unnecessarily cruel either, like being reincarnated as a worm. Or as an imperial attack space turtle. That one he could actually accept, though.

There was a sudden, rough yell of excitement from the crowd. Ian looked up. A large "Mayhem" stage backdrop had been revealed. Ian's pulse quickened. They would see Euronymous and Dead.

Though immediately after, he also thought it wouldn't be right. They'd be using a session drummer and bassist? Hellhammer and the new members were still making new records in the land of the living, continuing the legacy.

Jo turned to him, mostly expressionless.

"What do you think?" she asked.

"I'm torn. They're legends, but.. The true times will never return. The magic happened once and was recorded in history. This is not the same."

"Yeah. It isn't."

Still, Ian wanted to see how the deceased original members would play. How well they could summon the evil spirit of the old times.

The soundcheck began now, the kick drum's sound being adjusted first. Sweeping the EQ for the most optimal high mid-range boost, it was eerily just like in life. For a moment the drummer settled into a steady rhythm with the kick. The crowd understood and responded almost immediately. "Mayhem.. Mayhem.. Mayhem.. Mayhem!"

Then the rhythm died off, as the other drums, guitars and microphones needed to be adjusted as well.

For a moment there was silence again.

"Jo? Would you be ready to let go? Of this place?" Ian asked.

She looked somewhere far away for a moment.

"Why do you ask now? Maybe. But I'm not in a hurry. I'm still enjoying myself here. I've been trying to think what being ready means exactly. If there's like some entity watching us, judging us if we're there yet. I don't like that idea. So it's probably all about yourself, when you think you are."

For some reason Ian flashed back to René. The answer could also be: never.

“Or maybe we'll spend, like, decades here. Experience here what we didn't experience while we lived. You can't really know what will happen. Maybe we grow apart after enough time. Like how Bruce Hall began to feel like he was only a cover singer in his own band and took a hike. Or if there's a finite amount of love and we're ready to go once we've exchanged it all. I mean, I wouldn't want that to happen, but things happen.”

Ian could have been swept away by Jo's words, which seemed to tie into the chord progression he had composed earlier, that appeared to describe her mindset almost perfectly. Instead, he flashed back to when he had been forced to examine the program code for SCEPTRE's virtual reality system, as well as the code for his own metal heart. It had counted his every heartbeat. He imagined their existence here, even their feelings, being also represented as a set of variables, numbers that increased or decreased.

Fuck! That felt wrong.

“That makes sense,” Ian replied slowly as the unwanted image dissipated from his mind.

“You don't feel bad for what I said?”

“No.”

“Is there something you're not telling me? You have a plan of some kind?”

“Nothing like that. It's just that you're my light in this place, we think alike of many things, and when you were out cold I sat next to you and composed a song that predicted everything you just expressed. Sadness, hope, joy. Jo's Theme.”

Jo punched his shoulder in mock disgust.

“Not fair. Now you don't get to headbang to Mayhem but you just have to hold me through the set while I go all emo against your shoulder.”

Ian chuckled. It didn't quite work as a punishment.

The soundcheck still went on, and they stood close as more crowd began to gather. Finally the intro tape began to play, and red stage lights came on, illuminating the morbid drum kit and the skulls from below. The intro sounded like it was from an old horror movie, the sound quality extremely bad. The principles of the old school were being fully respected.

A sudden deep rumble sounded.

It did not seem to be part of the intro tape, and Ian was certain he had not heard it in this place before.

"I believe I have the answer," Viktor shouted.

Kim walked over to the teleport control station displays. On the screens, there were pathways floating in space, twisting higher up to infinity.

"This dimension, the tenth one, resembles the control realm the most. It's practically a void of space. But the laws are not exactly the same. It's a semi-physical dimension. Which means that when you enter, you're both your physical self, and a spirit-form. And this means you will not suffocate or freeze, as long as your willpower can sustain the idea that you're able to stay alive. As a downside, there will be hostile entities, so being armed is necessary."

Kim imagined a cold bucket of water thrown on her face. The idea was not pleasant in the slightest. Entering sounded like potential suicide.

But like many times before in her life, or at least in all her Purexo-related encounters, what choice there was?

"Now, to make the jump, and so that the transition is stable – you don't want it to be interrupted resulting in your body and soul being mutilated or recombined in unpredictable ways – I also believe you must boost the reactor over one hundred percent."

From the manuals Kim knew what that meant.

"Unsafe level leading to eventual meltdown."

"Yes. But it doesn't make much of a difference. This

will be a one-way trip. If things go well, and the Demiurge approves of our presence, I'd imagine it transporting us elsewhere as necessary. It's practically omnipotent, just like the Creator-God should be."

"If it's omnipotent, why doesn't it just erase the infection in the blink of an eye?"

"Let me rephrase that. It's omnipotent in the sense that it can recombine matter at will. But there are rules to be observed. The conservation of souls and life force and such. It has a responsibility toward the totality of the multiuniverse. Interfering with the infection in a drastic manner could have side-effects. Think of a construction worker who can use any tool he needs. But he can't just decide to level the whole site on a whim, or there'd be punishment."

"Punishment? From whom? A god... above god? If the Demiurge is already the supreme creator, what could be above it?"

"It's only been rumored in the most obscure grimoires. An off-hand remark in an unintelligible scrawl in the corner of some page, that most disciples would miss. There should be an even higher entity or presence, but I don't know what it is. Mostly, it doesn't concern us."

The voice changed lower.

"Let's stop talking of that mystical stuff. The reactor will transfer us and that's that. If we die, then we die. But at least we tried. Now we need to talk about guns and tactics. I also suggest, that I be in command of this body once we're through."

"Not so fast," Viktor's voice came back. "A deep understanding is vital to surviving on the other side. I'm much more experienced. You only recited the formulae after me. Maybe I let you take over the physical side in combat, while my willpower keeps us alive."

Shit. It sounded like one needed constant mental attention. Kim wished she also had another soul to help in the survival. But no such thing.

But now it was time to stop wasting time. Again, Kim imagined the time bomb's counter ticking down. There was a reactor to overload, so she'd do it.

"I'll begin the overloading now. Just hold a second."

She submerged herself briefly into the manuals again to confirm the procedure. There were four safety switches under a cover panel that had to be thrown in the correct order to unlock the full motion range of the control rods. After this the master dial could be turned over full power. The same could be done from the computers, but it looked even more complex, so she preferred the traditional way.

She flipped open the security cover, and the switches became exposed.

Just for a moment an odd idea possessed her mind. There was a certain trope, in certain video games that Viktor had played (she had also attempted, but the laptop was too old and weak), that before making the final potentially suicidal jump into the unknown at the point of no return, the commander would have sex with their most beloved squad mate. Kim snorted audibly. She was certainly the commander here, and Viktor wasn't entirely unappealing, but now that he was in an unfamiliar body, Erik was present also, and furthermore the soul corruption was spreading each second they wasted, the idea could be very safely disregarded.

She hit the prescribed sequence – 2 1 4 3, heard the satisfying sound of a mechanical lock disengaging inside, and turned the dial over the 100% threshold.

The crowd cheered wildly as a figure came on stage with a black Les Paul guitar.

Jo couldn't fully believe what she was seeing. But that had to be Euronymous. The guitarist turned up the volume knob and the wall of amplifiers started to feed back chaotically.

A figure appeared behind the horned drum kit, and a bassist with a disfigured looking instrument – possibly a BC Rich – also took the stage.

Finally, wearing ragged dark gray clothes and sporting white corpsepaint, the vocalist also appeared.

Dead. Jo's heart skipped a beat.

“We are Mayhem. Fuck you!” Dead shouted to the microphone, the drummer counted to four, and an evil medium-tempo blastbeat began, the guitar repeating a simple tremolo power chord riff.

This was more than Jo could ever have wished for. Though she had been skeptical, and strictly speaking it wasn't an authorized use of the Mayhem name, all of that was forgotten in an instant.

The song was “Funeral Fog.”

It went through a few tempo changes, until Dead finally started shrieking the lyrics.

“Every time this year..”

Attila Csihar's recorded interpretation had practically burned itself into Jo's mind, so this version

took some getting used to. But it was cold, brutal, harsh and otherworldly, just like how black metal should be sung. Jo headbanged in a wide motion. She thought that whiplash injury couldn't occur in the afterlife, or at least it would heal unnaturally fast, so she didn't have to hold anything back.

A mosh pit broke out, and Jo knew she had to join. She took Ian firmly by the hand and began to run toward the commotion.

They collided against other metalheads in throes of manic fury. Fists were flying wild in the air. Jo got her breath knocked out by an impact with a huge guy who could have been a medieval executioner, but she was quickly back on her feet, running along the circle. All the while the blastbeat and Dead's chilling vocals went on.

When "Funeral Fog" was over, she was profoundly exhausted, the adrenaline still flowing.

"That was the very definition of true," she breathed to Ian as they stood outside the pit. There was a semi-realistic soreness all over her body. She thought in reality it would have been much worse. But she couldn't remember the last time she had been as exhilarated. It had been a complete rush.

Jo recognized also the next song as it began. "Freezing Moon." What else? Euronymous was riding on the fame of their most classic album, which could be interpreted as cynical, but it was still likely the right – the only – choice to make.

Suddenly she was alerted by a loud rumble that shook the stage. A few of the skulls fell from their pikes. It lasted about five seconds, then subsided.

"That was the second one," Ian said in a low voice that predicted danger. "It isn't normal. We may not be safe here. Let's go take a look."

They walked away from the stage, until the crowd

thinned out. Jo looked to the distance. It looked as if the fog was dissipating. But in its place, a wave of blackness was sweeping and rolling in.

Was the afterlife being destroyed?

Ian saw it too, and answered with a single word.

“Tacgnol.”

The double doors of the teleportation chamber opened before Kim's eyes. It was circular, much smaller than the control room. There was a small control panel to the side. Apparently that would fire off the sequence, and whoever was in the chamber would be transferred to the destination dimension.

Kim had to admit that she felt trepidation or outright fear. It would be a significant leap to the unknown. She gripped the Disintegrator hard. Viktor/Erik also carried the same weapon, plus an automatic shotgun slung on the back that he had found from a closet on the reactor level. Bandoleers of extra buckshot ammunition hung from him in an X-shaped formation, but he didn't carry the Disintegrator backpack. That was Erik's tactical choice. It could be a mistake, or then it was actually good that they had different load-outs, to prepare for different enemies.

The reactor sublevel trembled rhythmically, and the reactor's glow was almost white now. There was a repeating synthetic voice and a warning siren.

“Reactor power level unsafe. Coolant system overloading. Estimated meltdown in ten minutes.”

In normal cases another team would always stay behind to restore safe power level. Kim thought the computer could have easily handled that automatically too. But maybe the government bean-counters had just

exceeded the budget, and that critical feature had been left outside the specification.

So the facility would become burning nuclear waste once they were out of here. Well, if they weren't to ever return, no big loss.

Jo ran fast, with Ian close behind. Though she knew it would be useless to try to outrun the black wave. There was nowhere to escape, no higher ground to get to, so it would inevitably catch them in the end. Mayhem's set had been cut short, the crowd dispersed and most of them were also running for their lives.

Jo tried to think, but came up with little.

What could they possibly do? And what happened once the wave caught them? Would it be the same as if they had been caught and mauled by the horde? Would they be trapped in the blackness, floating inside it forever? Ian seemed to be just as out of ideas, he just ran as fast as his feet allowed.

Then Jo thought of something completely crazy. If one could summon a guitar, then why not –

She stopped running.

“Jo! What are you doing?” Ian shouted.

“It's no use to run! Stand clear!”

“Stand clear of what?”

She concentrated her mind on the object she knew best, that she could imagine most thoroughly. And which also was sufficiently simple.

She thought of her father's first car, which had been sitting behind the studio building, mostly unused and definitely not street-legal any more. She had learned to “drive” when she had been eight or nine.

She concentrated, like when she had changed the guitar's color on the fly. But even harder. Much harder. She was almost afraid that a blood vessel would rupture on her forehead. Though that was probably not an actual risk here.

She visualized a Datsun F10. Also known as Datsun 100A in Europe. Two doors, orange color. Thoroughly eaten by rust.

There was no sound, no rush of air. But suddenly the car just stood there.

"Whoa!" Ian blurted out. "You did that?"

Without wasting time to answer, Jo went to the driver's door and jerked it open violently. The key was there in the ignition slot.

She turned it, but nothing happened.

Cold fear threatened to overwhelm her. She had gotten this far, but not far enough. The foggy ground shook violently under her feet. She glanced behind and the black wave was not far away. Soon it would eat the stage, and the feast hall's tables would be next, followed by them.

Think. Concentrate.

The car needed to be fixed to working condition. Jo imagined a toolbox, which dropped next to the car.

"Ian! We need to fix the car!"

"In a few seconds? It's not going to happen."

"It's all in the mind. You need to believe that you can fix it. But we need to start now! Concentrate on the electric system! Tighten everything that you find!"

Jo popped open the hood, and they set out to work frantically, using correctly sized spanners. Ian made sure the battery terminals were securely in place, while Jo checked the spark plugs and the distributor. She reached back to the driver's seat momentarily and pumped the gas pedal. The thin cable on the carburetor

moved at same pace. The important thing was that you believed it was working.

Finally there was nothing more to tighten. The wave was almost onto them, the stage being swallowed now with a disgusting sound of splintering wood and rending metal.

Jo shut the hood.

They practically had only one shot at this.

The computer warning voice still echoed, this time estimating meltdown only five minutes away. There was one last but very important detail to consider. The fine-adjusted position of their destination. It was better to fall on the path in the void, than into the void.

There was a smaller display on the teleport chamber control panel, which showed the destination dimension. Kim used an industrial joystick next to it to zero in the fine position.

Viktor/Erik stood next to her. They both wore protective goggles, as the sequence was going to get very bright according to the manuals. The hazmat suits would hopefully protect their bodies enough.

The target position was now roughly in the center of a path. Good enough.

She hit the large red button to begin, and steeled her mind to accept the prospect of being separated into atoms or even subatomic particles if things were to go wrong.

The chamber shook profusely. There was a crunch of metal and a hiss of air and a harsher repeating klaxon joined the cacophony.

The floor and ceiling panels began to open, exposing them to a high-frequency modulated magnetic field emanating from the reactor's added components. There was a glass floor beneath them so that they wouldn't

fall. The magnetic field would be joined by an electric field as the sequence progressed, a full-spectrum photon stream, and finally by an insanely energetic fermion / boson stream.

Kim thought it was good she didn't understand most of the science. Otherwise she could have chickened out, certain that the process would just cause total disintegration instead of transportation.

"I believe," Ian muttered and climbed to the passenger seat. Jo followed and turned the ignition key. The lights on the dashboard came on. The fuel gauge was at the halfway. Good enough.

She turned the key further, and the starter began to turn. But the engine didn't yet start.

Jo pumped the gas pedal furiously, willing herself to believe even harder. Momentarily she thought of having flooded the engine with too much gas, but she just forced the thought away.

Finally there was a sputter, then the engine was running.

Ian shouted at the victory.

Jo shut the door, put the car into gear and floored the accelerator, just as the wave was coming from behind them, already swallowing the tables.

The car shot into motion through the fog, though the acceleration was not great. The motor was only 1 liter, about 58 horsepower. From experience she knew the maximum speed could be about 100 miles per hour downhill, but it would be all horror already at 50.

Hopefully it would be just enough to outrun the wave. Though, the same question remained. To where? The car was faster than their feet, but Jo guessed the black wave would in the end overwhelm and swallow the whole fog-realm, leaving them nowhere to go. Still,

the car picked up speed, as she worked through the gears, and for a moment it seemed the wave was being left behind.

"Jo? I believe there's no reason to stop here," Ian said suddenly.

"What do you mean?"

"If you can imagine a car, then why couldn't it fly?"

Of course. Jo squeezed Ian's shoulder.

"Perfect. Concentrate on it."

Jo also concentrated on the thought of the car becoming airborne. She felt as if the car was trying to take off, but their will wasn't strong enough. They needed to try harder.

Jo imagined the car shooting upward like a jet airplane. She imagined holding a control stick instead of the steering wheel.

Something happened.

There wasn't any sudden change in trajectory, but slowly the car began to levitate, rising above the fog. Now it was most important to not be overjoyed too early, but to keep the concentration.

The car began to rise higher. And not a moment too soon, for the spreading blackness below also gained velocity. It appeared to be consuming all of the ground below, until they were flying above a sea of pure black. As Jo looked below, it seemed some others were also escaping in various imagined flying contraptions, wing suits or vehicles, or simply in Superman style.

"We did it," Ian said.

Jo let out a deep breath. What was the next step now? It seemed they would eventually need to leave this realm altogether, since there would be nowhere to land. As the car couldn't fly without their imagination, eventually they would get tired, and the sea would consume them.

“Do we just wish ourselves away from here?” Jo thought aloud.

“I don't think there's any other way. We bought a little time, but even flying isn't going to help forever.”

So this would probably be the moment. When they would move on to whatever the universe had in mind for them next.

Jo closed her eyes, and thought back to some of their earliest moments. Like how the then-cocky Ian had interrupted her and René in the music shop, and practically demanded to become their second guitarist. She suspected it had been an act, a moment of bravado that didn't actually have anything to back it up.

But there it had started.

Considering all of their Agent adventures, their history together felt like a lifetime of highs and lows compressed to roughly one year. It was almost impossible to think it had not actually been longer.

She also understood something, that there was no need to specifically wish for them to be apart. The point was just that your strongest wish had to be away from here, no matter the consequences.

Jo took Ian's hand. They looked at each other. Ian made a thumbs up sign with his free hand.

This was the moment.

Whatever would come next.

Jo felt a single tear form in the corner of her eye. It could not be avoided and there was no point trying. She blinked, and suddenly there was a stomach-turning lurch and she was no longer there.

Kim screamed as loud as she could. Though she could barely hear it over the maddening full-spectrum white noise. Even through shut eyelids and protective glasses the light was barely tolerable, like several suns.

Judging from the vomit-inducing motion, that constantly changed direction, they flew forward in a twisting dimensional tunnel.

Kim was sure she would be completely disorientated and incapable of any combat or sensible brain activity even if she would reach the tenth dimension alive. She thought she would suffer nausea for hours, if not days.

But that much time they wouldn't have. The control realm and the Demiurge waited. There were so much unknowns, and so many steps in between, like raising their vibration frequency high enough, that Kim didn't even want to think of them.

Part Four – A Journey Through Cosmic Infinity

A desert plain stretched out to infinity at night. An unnaturally strong wind blew tumbleweeds around. Inside an abandoned, wooden garage building, a red third-generation Opel Corsa hatchback sputtered to life.

It performed some self-diagnostics and concluded that its timing belt would need replacing soon. Not critical yet, but preferable before any longer journey.

It drove out of the garage. Some odd, small spherical creatures of every color scurried to hiding. These creatures were not to be underestimated; some of them were in fact fierce combatants and could use various weapons or had innate offensive abilities, while others were friendly to the car and could act as mechanics, as long as they were paid in various alcoholic beverages or other hallucinogens.

The Corsa was vaguely aware of the purpose of its mission. Far off in the horizon was the mountain of Tacgnol, the insanely long black cat. Before vanishing, the Producer, its driver, had told the Corsa that they would need to reach the mountain to free the Lead Coder. Tacgnol had abducted him to make him work against his will on some kind of multiuniverse-affecting corruption. The Lead Coder could stop or even reverse the damage, if he was released from Tacgnol's grip. Killing Tacgnol would be in theory optional, but most likely absolutely necessary.

But now the Corsa didn't know where to find the Producer. There was also one more piece to the puzzle. To enter the mountain, the Producer would need to fly on a Pillow. But before that was even possible, the Pillow would also need to be found, and a disruptive field deactivated. As long as the field was active, the Pillow wouldn't be able to fly.

There were also other Coders that could be found to aid them in the overall mission, but they were likely optional.

The Pillow jolted awake. It sensed danger. It was hiding in a dark basement, but there were noises coming from above. Rogues. Rascals. Marauders. Gremlins. Whatever they called themselves, they were all the same. Scum. Despite the small size and outwardly cute appearance, they were vicious. They would like nothing better than to rip the Pillow open and spread its stuffing material to the wind.

Fortunately it was not completely defenseless. It could move, roughly one step or jump at a time. Or it could use telekinesis. Hurling objects could be surprisingly effective weapons. Once it had also taken control of a semi-auto pistol and managed to kill several of the critters with it. It was rather hard to control the gun that way, levitating it, keeping the sights aligned, and pulling the trigger. And especially reloading. Once the ammunition ran out, the Pillow had just discarded the gun instead of trying to barter for extra magazines.

It was a hostile land that it inhabited. But with cunning it had survived so far. It knew that the place would be much better without Tacgnol and its influence; the creatures had been much friendlier before its arrival. But now they would kill over practically anything. And most of them were addicted to various substances to better tolerate the dreary existence of serving under the giant black cat.

The Pillow knew it was too much of an ambition, but it really wanted to kill Tacgnol. Then it would be hailed as a hero and it could retire to some peaceful corner of the land. Maybe it would find more sentient pillows that it could have philosophical discussions with.

The noise of the transportation ended with a colossal bang which Kim thought to rupture her eardrums. At the same moment she felt herself being slammed into a hard floor of some kind. The impact knocked all the air from her lungs.

Immediately after came the freezing cold, like the worst winter imaginable. As well as the feeling of suffocation. There was no air at all when Kim tried to draw in a breath. Combined by the total blackness before her eyes just amplified the panic that threatened to take control of her completely.

Of course! The protective goggles. They weren't letting enough light through.

Kim ripped the goggles from her eyes and saw the vastness of space, with stars and nebulae and cold-blue twin suns and ominous black monoliths floating in the distance. Beneath her, was a pathway built from large dark stone or marble slabs. It was better to see than not, and the panic subsided a bit, but it did not change the lack of air.

"Remember, this is a semi-physical world! Use your mind and imagine air and warmth!" Viktor's voice invaded her mind. Possibly a kind of telepathy.

It seemed childish. How could that help? But if she didn't learn how to do it in the time that she had left, learn how to believe enough, then she would die. Her

consciousness was already fading, the vision blackening from the sides.

Fuck this dimension!

Fuck Viktor and the Demiurge!

Fuck everything!

Thrown into a sudden rage, Kim imagined her wrath giving her body heat, and she imagined breathing in the sulphur air of Hell itself, that would be unpleasant but yet life-sustaining.

That didn't quite work. She perhaps felt warmer now, but the feeling of suffocation persisted.

"Correction! Imagine yourself as a god, able to create an atmosphere around you with oxygen and nitrogen in the correct relation!"

Fuck, once more! That didn't help at all. What were the correct relations?

"21 percent oxygen and 78 percent nitrogen!"

Even that didn't help. The task seemed too monumental. Would she even have to imagine the correct shapes of the molecules, and the billions of them around her? If being a god meant being able to create or visualize every infinitely small building block of the universe there was, then it was a task Kim simply wasn't capable of.

So she would die then, the mission failed. No meeting the Demiurge. Instead just becoming part of the void forever. Kim's lungs began to burn and the blackness deepened.

Completely unexpectedly, as she was almost on the verge of blacking out, Kim felt air being forced into her mouth. She sucked it in greedily, though it wasn't much, but there came another mouthful, and then yet another.

Viktor's voice invaded her thoughts again.

"Erik is feeding your air, which I am generating! But this can not go on forever! You must learn to become a god and generate your own! Concentrate!"

Kim felt her consciousness mostly returned. She would have a bit more time to try again. She saw Viktor/Erik's face move away, a stale taste from the mouth-to-mouth still lingering.

So, 21 percent oxygen.

And 78 percent nitrogen.

Concentrating harder, and momentarily forcing the doubts and the all-consuming panic to the back of her head, she began to imagine the molecules being created, radiating away from her body like an aura and surrounding her, until she would have enough to breathe on her own.

Damn it, she was in fact a god!

Fuck the Demiurge! She was the better creator!

She sucked in a huge gulp of air. It tasted stale as well, but did its job. She was no longer suffocating. She imagined more and more air as the process became easier. Once she was sure she had the hang of it, she

rose warily to a crouch, taking in the alien landscape with more concentration now.

"The beginning is never easy," Viktor remarked.

"Thanks," Kim thought back.

Viktor/Erik offered his hand, but Kim refused and stood up on her own. She checked that the Disintegrator was still on its sling.

Viktor/Erik appeared to have his weapons too, the ammunition bandoleers still hanging from him.

Once free of the immediate risk of death, only now Kim understood that the transportation had in fact succeeded. Here they were in the tenth dimension, instead of being squashed into nothingness or being torn apart and spread as particles into the void.

She let her gaze scan ahead. Like the monitors had shown, it was a maze of stone walkways suspended in the void. The walkways spiraled and climbed ever upward, which was potentially the direction to go to.

Viktor's voice came in once more.

"Yes, up is the proper direction. There is an energy field which will raise our vibration frequency as we approach the top. It's possible we may transfer directly into the control realm once we're high enough."

For just a moment Kim thought of consuming enough drugs. She almost laughed.

"However, it's not without its problems. Raising your vibration level also means that your mind must be prepared for it, being pure enough, otherwise the field will resist or even damage you. For you, your negativity and misanthropy can well prove insurmountable. For me, it's obviously the infection, which still persists in my soul. I would also be concerned of the form Erik's infection will take, once the field becomes stronger. I only see a black void in his soul, but cannot peer into it to know in detail."

Bad news stacked on each other. Just great. Only thing that was lacking...

As if summoned by Kim's negative thoughts, she saw multiple oblong objects moving closer through the space, eclipsing the stars behind them. It was hard to estimate size and distance.

There were maybe four or five of them. Large floating brain creatures, black-gray but pulsing with occasional sinister faint red glow. Their eyes were dark slits, seemingly sucking the light away from their vicinity, as if they were miniature black holes.

First enemy contact in the tenth dimension.

Kim took the Disintegrator and gripped it hard. She almost welcomed combat.

The Pillow heard them descending the basement stairs now. The bastards tried to be stealthy, but weren't quite succeeding. Fortunately it had already decided what weapons it would use. The basement was full of circular, rusty saw blades. Though not maximally sharp, they would rip through the attackers like hot knives, sending bright red blood and internal organs flying.

It waited for the perfect moment of surprise, trying to stimulate its vision to see better in the darkness. Yes, there was the first one, practically a sphere with stubby arms and legs and large eyes. In the darkness the Pillow could not deduce the exact color, but it mattered little, except that red ones would usually be able to breathe fire. Others, the chameleons, could even copy the abilities of others they had killed and eaten. Still the most of them would just use blunt or sharp striking weapons, or firearms.

Trying to be as quiet as possible, the Pillow levitated up the first saw blade. It waited for the first spherical creature to come fully into view as it reached the lowest steps –

The Pillow launched the blade. The whoosh it made as it sliced the air was beautiful, as was the spray of gore that resulted. The creature's stomach was cut open, the intestines and organs pouring out. It was dead immediately.

There were high, short panicked sounds coming from higher up, until silence fell for just a second, and the sounds turned into low angry grunts. The burning need for revenge and the absolute desire to slaughter the Pillow.

They came as a mass, and the basement turned into a chaotic battlefield. There was one fire-breather, while the rest were just using rusty knives, cleavers or other sharp objects. The Pillow almost imagined time slowing down as it launched more blades methodically. It targeted the fire-breathing red one first, and ducked to the side as the tongue of flame came dangerously close.

Actually, it didn't duck far enough. It was on fire!

Alternating between hopping madly to put out the flame and launching the rest of the blades, the Pillow worked itself into a mixture of fear and rage. The acrid smell of burning fabric reached its senses. Due to the intense combat, it could no longer concentrate on the delightful red sprays, but just surviving took its full attention.

Just one sphere-critter remained now, growling animalistically while coming toward the Pillow with a meat cleaver held high. All the saw blades were too far away to levitate, except one that was embedded in the wall. The Pillow strained its abilities maximally, until it got the blade loose just in time. It flew from the wall with such force that the top of the attacker's head just got sliced open, brains oozing out like porridge, as it too fell to the floor, dead.

Finally it became deathly still. None of the attackers breathed any more, and the fire was out too.

The Pillow inspected its damage. The burn was smaller than expected, just a bit of a black patch on one of its corners. Nothing life-threatening. But it was likely this hiding place was compromised. More could be

coming, if not immediately, then in the morning. The Pillow needed to get on the move.

The Disintegrator beam scythed through the void, chasing the closest of the brain creatures. The charge display started to deplete immediately, and Kim wasn't even hitting anything yet, as the creature was more agile than its appearance initially gave away.

She wondered if she could keep the battery pack filled by just imagining that she was a god who could create also more electric charge in addition to oxygen and nitrogen!

Then she had to stop as the creature turned to her and fired beams of deepest black from its eyes. Kim dived to the side at the last moment and barely avoided falling to the void, as the dive was almost too long.

The beams disintegrated a part of the walkway, sending large stone fragments tumbling into the abyss.

Gathering more rage, Kim aimed again and this time scored a hit, and the brain creature emitted roaring agony telepathically.

Fuck you! Die in pain! Kim thought back to it.

Next to her, Viktor/Erik also aimed the Disintegrator, fired and ducked away to safety. If the only enemies would be these, then choosing the shotgun and extra ammo for it seemed thoroughly useless.

The brain creatures fired once more, and more of the walkway crumbled. Kim understood that they could very well trap the two onto a small island.

But if they were truly gods, couldn't they just imagine jumping as long as they wanted?

Kim couldn't try yet, as the creatures were still on to them. So she just aimed and fired again, the charge depleting more. But the creatures were getting hurt. The psychic screams almost overwhelmed her, but then she turned that around and used that to fuel her hatred that currently extended to all known and unknown lifeforms.

Momentarily she remembered Viktor's point about the difficulty raising one's vibrational level, if one was consumed by hate. So when she also had to fight, these would be supremely conflicting goals.

Finally all of the creatures were floating in the space, dead.

"I'm out," Erik's declaration cut through Kim's mind. Fucker. He had wasted all the ammunition and chosen the wrong load-out. Well, too late to change that. Kim's ammo counter wasn't good either, but she had reloads in the backpack. She could perhaps give Erik one extra, if absolutely needed. Preferably not.

Due to the brain creatures' attacks, there was a gap three meters wide on the path leading upward now. So they would need to test their godhood as the next thing.

The Corsa drove along the desert road as the sun began to rise. It had enough fuel for now. There was a potentially friendly settlement about a half day's drive ahead, where it could stop to resupply, and to have the timing belt changed.

It was still searching for the Producer. Maybe the dwellers in the settlement would have answers. It just needed to be ready for the possibility that any hints offered would in fact be carefully planned traps, if the "helpful" informant would be a Tacgnol's servant in disguise. Then the Corsa would be led to some deserted location where it would be ambushed and destroyed.

The Corsa had wanted to arm itself for long. If it was in luck, there would be a gunsmith there. It wanted to install a six-barreled Gatling gun on a swivel mount. That would just be rather expensive. In its boot, the Corsa had about a hundred liters of triple-distilled moonshine. Buying fuel, oil and the timing belt change would be worth about fifty. The Gatling gun would be much more expensive, but the Corsa thought about doing low-level courier tasks, or even pest control (using itself as a weapon) until it had enough to pay.

Suddenly the Corsa noticed an unusual object hopping along the ditch to the right. Apparently it was trying to stay unnoticed.

A red, sentient pillow with a pentagram on it.

Had to be the one that the Producer had mentioned.
The Corsa braked to a halt.

“Hey, little pillow. Want a ride?”

The pillow stopped its hopping motion, apparently eyeing the vehicle closely.

“No. My path is my own. And yours is yours. They don't coincide.”

“Don't be so sure. Do you know the Producer?”

“Never heard. Some higher lackey of Tacgnol?”

The Corsa felt disappointment. Had there been a misunderstanding? Or perhaps just temporary amnesia brought by mind-altering substances? In any case, sentient, moving pillows were not common. But they were intelligent and often resourceful, though at times driven by grandiose and even delusional aspirations to heroism, that could lead to a quick and fatal end. Though when harnessed correctly, those were just the qualities that being a flying assault pillow required. And even if this wasn't the right one, perhaps it could be trained.

“Certainly not. Instead, the Producer wants to assault its mountain. You'd be eventually needed to fly up there. Basically, the adventure of a lifetime that a little pillow like you couldn't even imagine. I'm not lying, it's of course extremely dangerous and results in your likely death. But if we succeed –”

“Will Tacgnol be killed?”

“If we succeed, yes, it's the likely outcome.”

The pillow seemed to think for a moment. It probably judged the immediate safety offered by riding inside the Corsa, compared to the almost suicidal quest that would await in the future. And the potential glory it offered.

“I'm in.”

Kim sprinted as if performing a long jump, because she wasn't sure she could control gravity. Three meters wouldn't be impossible yet. Though she wasn't in shape really.

Just before the gap, she jumped.

She was surprised to be thrown on a long curving trajectory through the space. The gravity was lower than she had assumed. The path extended far below her now. Suddenly she had the opposite problem, to land before she would overshoot and fall into the void at the next walkway intersection.

She tried to mentally brake her velocity. It helped a bit, and she landed just before the drop.

Viktor/Erik followed, applying a more judicious amount of force. He cleared the gap without danger of flying off to space.

They jogged upward the path. So far it was clear to choose the road leading up at each intersection. Far in the distance, Kim saw more of the brain creatures floating, apparently concentrated on worshipping a black monolith, and thus they didn't notice the two. Better that way.

Kim lost track of time, as the path wound itself ever higher. Just as she was lulled into almost complete complacency, she heard blood-curling high-pitched noises almost in the ultrasonic frequency.

Some kind of monstrous bats, or even small dragons. They were black, bony and spiky. A horde of them had had set up an ambush, coming from the direction of a large planet's shadow that was blocking the cold light. Their sharpened claws shone as they came out of the shadow.

This was clearly the job for Erik and the shotgun.

Without wasting a moment, he (or Kim assumed it had to be him, since Viktor had practically no combat experience) took the shotgun from his back, racked the charging handle and fired at the closest approaching winged creature, then yet again.

Meanwhile Kim was hounded by at least three of them, so she decided to sweep the Disintegrator beam through them, until it shut itself off.

Fortunately, two of them were burned to ashes. Erik turned around and finished the last with a blast of buckshot.

Kim crouched to reload, taking an extra battery from the backpack, while Erik still continued to fire. The horde was being thinned down, but still many remained. Kim slammed the battery pack in and resumed firing.

Finally silence descended again, all of the bats killed, and they could continue.

Ever upward they went, killing a brain creature or two along the way, until Kim began to feel something resisting her progress.

"Do you start to feel it? That's the field. Now you must find it within yourself to transform the misanthropy into something else. What it is, I can't decide for you. Seek your mind until you find it easier to progress. But if you don't, then I suspect the journey ends here," Viktor thought at her.

"What about you? Or Erik?"

“I feel the infection now. It’s starting to emerge. It gathers power, but I don’t know yet how exactly it will manifest itself. We must be prepared.”

Again, Kim felt the unfairness of the situation. To be forced to rid herself of the force that defined her thought processes the most and had given her an edge as long as she could remember. Now she had to force herself to appear all saintly (or whatever) which felt fake and disgusting.

So she just tried to walk on, force herself to progress through the ever-amplifying field.

It was a mistake.

She started to feel as if her body was on fire. It was intolerable, and if she went on, likely also actually dangerous. She had to turn back and return to safety.

“Do you understand now? There isn’t much of a choice.”

What could she do? She couldn’t just drive away what she truly felt, how she truly thought.

So she just imagined a righteous hate.

Hate that was so strong that it uplifted and purified her. She was a Templar crusader, a complete zealot, who would exterminate everything that wasn’t pure.

She began to walk through the field again. Still it resisted and burned her, but it was manageable.

For a few meters.

Then it again became intolerable. So she adjusted, got rid of the wrong kind of hate, focusing on how infallible she was. After all, she was a god! But could this be the true path to higher vibration and enlightenment? After all, she was just pretending.

Immediately as she thought of this, the burning worsened. She felt as if her insides were on fire too. This far into the field it could even get fatal. She was not sure if she could back off in time now.

Or... she would have to believe that the pretending was true, her real identity. That she in fact was a pure crusader, climbing the ladder of vibrational frequency even as her hate purified and narrowed further.

Yes! That had to be the key. Usually she just hated indiscriminately. Now she would focus on her ultimate enemy.

Of course. In hindsight it was so clear and once she understood this, the burning subsided again. She would only hate Tacgnol. That would be acceptable.

“Viktor, I’ve got it!” she thought aloud.

“Good. Now we’ll just go on until the infection manifests.”

Kim set out to walking forward again. Honestly, it still was like struggling uphill against a strong wind, even if the pain was now minimal. Kim imagined the field giving her more power, like difficulties in life had always strengthened her. What doesn't kill you, makes you stronger. Nietzsche. That tied in with Erik's over-man ideology.

Viktor/Erik followed. He also appeared to have trouble advancing, a little at first, then more all the time, until finally he dropped to his knees.

Kim went to full alert.

The infection in Erik's soul would manifest now.

Kim heard a mind-rending scream invade her thoughts. She hoped she could just tune out, but there was no such chance.

The Renditioner's body started to bulge obscenely in places where it shouldn't bulge. Chest, stomach, even the head was changing shape.

Then came an eruption, like a blast of black light, as he vomited and excreted a ten-meter long black dragon into existence. It was just as bony and spiky as the bats, but even more horribly disfigured, with skin just missing in several places, and black internal organs showing. Kim didn't even want to think how it was possible, how a human body could even withstand such horror without imploding. For the moment Kim just

concentrated herself to prepare for the dragon's inevitable first attack.

She didn't have to wait long. It breathed black fire at her, and Kim tried to roll to safety. But the flame tracked her mercilessly, and she would be engulfed in the next instant.

Finally Kim understood to fire the Disintegrator at the pillar of blackness. The bright white light and the soul-sucking blackness collided and negated themselves; the flame was extinguished for a moment. Kim heard the dragon's murderous screams in her thoughts, just a little less intense than its birthing howls.

She had just a second or two to glance at Viktor/Erik again. He was still on the ground, vomiting the disgusting black remains of the dragon birth onto the stone slabs. But just at the moment it looked like he would survive.

Still, he was out of action. Kim had to deal with the dragon herself. With almost a fresh Disintegrator battery pack, she just fired it up, aimed at the dragon's head.

The beam was just deflected by the scales! Again, Kim was wasting ammunition.

So she switched aim toward the exposed internal organs. She knew it was the right thing to do, as the dragon started to howl in pain into her mind. The intensity of the howling almost threatened to knock her to unconsciousness, but she fought through, as the delight of knowing she was hurting the monster was just too great.

But she had been overjoyed too early, as then the dragon struck her with its large black wing and sent her careening off to the void. She tumbled in the air, quickly becoming disoriented. The stone pathways and the dragon floated back into view just for a second,

immediately followed just by the vista of the nebulae, stars and the cold twin suns.

Now she was certain she would float into the void and die. No imagined godhood could save her now. For a moment she even forgot how to create air and started to suffocate again.

Her vision began to blacken. She tumbled one more time and saw the Renditioner's body, under control of Erik, unload buckshot into the dragon, empty the whole ten-round magazine, then slam in another and pull the charging handle and resume firing in almost one continuous motion.

And that gave her strength. If Erik was still fighting, then so would she.

She imagined being a god.

She imagined being a Nietzschean over-woman.

And she forced the rotation to stop, forced oxygen and nitrogen into existence around her again, and drew a deep breath and aimed the Disintegrator at the dragon again.

The dragon raised its head to breathe fire at her again, but that exposed its belly, where organs were in clear view due to the ragged holes in the black skin.

Filled with a focused hate for Tacgnol and all its minions, like this dragon no doubt also was, Kim pulled the trigger. The beam lanced into the dragon's stomach, and it howled again, louder than before, tried to dodge, but Kim just adjusted the aim without mercy. She kept the trigger depressed until the weapon ran dry; the dragon's insides were now on fire and it started to disintegrate before Kim's eyes. For good measure, Erik still kept pumping more buckshot into any exposed parts as the dragon writhed on the walkway. In its death throes its claws struck him, sending him tumbling off to space similarly, but Kim was already a god so she would

just freeze his motion, and as the dragon finally died, she guided them both back to the stone slabs.

“Thanks. I would have been a goner,” Erik thought.

“You’re welcome.”

No further words were exchanged as they began to advance higher once more, struggling against the yet stronger field. Kim imagined that the fight with the dragon had purified and focused her even more, and in fact had raised her vibration frequency almost high enough to meet the Demiurge.

With the Pillow on its front passenger seat, the Corsa drove through the settlement gates. There was a circular main street; it drove one round around it to familiarize itself with the place.

First of all it headed to the fuel pumps. A few bottles of moonshine were exchanged with a yellow critter in command of the gas station, and once it was satisfied with the payment, another partially translucent minion would open the Corsa's fuel cap and pump the gas in.

The Corsa noted with pleasure that the fuel meter now showed full. Next step would be the timing belt.

The Corsa headed to the service garage. There appeared to be a queue. Before the Corsa, there was a large pickup truck, as well as a tiny three-wheeled car. Well, since much unknowns were ahead, including finding the Producer and getting the Gatling gun installed, it could well wait now, and meditate on the tremendous tasks that waited ahead.

The timing belt change was in fact a somewhat risky operation, comparable to a surgery on organic lifeforms. If the crankshaft and camshaft were not aligned properly after the new belt was fitted, or if it didn't have the right tension, serious engine damage would result. So the Corsa hoped the mechanic would either not be too high on substances, or would be a hardened user so that being high made no difference.

The Corsa waited. The sun was already beginning to set, but the service garage had no specific opening times. It was possible at some point all the mechanics would be too drunk or tired to continue, but then they would just continue on the next day. In Tacgnol's realm time did not have a large significance, as everything continued in one endless cycle anyway. Supplies came from unknown places, new weapons and vehicles were possibly being manufactured in just as foreign corners of the land, the spherical critters would be born and eventually die (sometimes naturally but most often violently), and crops were grown to feed them.

Finally, as it was already late evening, was the Corsa's turn.

"Why don't they manufacture a belt that lasts a car's lifetime?" the Pillow asked as they drove in.

"Good question. Maybe it's a limit of the process, or those who initially designed the belts and other parts also wanted to make sure that mechanics would also have a job. So that they would get booze to drink in compensation."

"I see."

Explaining this, now that the Corsa actually thought of it, was depressive. This whole land was depressive. Possibly it would be better in case they would manage to vanquish Tacgnol. Though the Corsa was suspicious that even its death might not shake the various creatures and vehicles from their addictions and other destructive behavior patterns. Possibly very little would change. In the worst case an even worse tyrant than the black cat would rise to power.

The service procedure started. First of all the payment in moonshine was removed from the Corsa's boot by the manager critter. Then, two technicians began to work in tandem. They removed the covers

until the belt was exposed. The water pump would also be replaced at the same time. They locked the two shafts in place before removing the old belt.

Finally, roughly two hours later, the process was complete. The oil and oil filter had also been changed.

“Now start your engine,” the junior technician said.

The Corsa did as told. The engine started and appeared to run properly without extra noises, but the yellow engine indicator light stayed on.

“It’s probably nothing serious,” the senior said. “Inspecting that carries an extra charge.”

The Corsa was a bit torn. It should be maximally prepared for the adventure, yet the gun still needed to be installed.

“Screw it. It’s good enough.” It could return for inspection once the gun had been paid.

The Corsa rolled out of the garage, with another 40000 miles or 4 years on the belt, whichever came sooner. It seemed utopistic to imagine living for that long.

Next step would be finding some odd job to have enough currency for the Gatling gun and its installation. The fueling and the service had taken slightly less moonshine than expected, but still the gun would be hugely, prohibitively expensive.

However, as it was night, most intelligent beings would be drunk or sleeping. The Corsa and Pillow would need to wait.

As Kim climbed ever upward, with Viktor/Erik close behind, she felt herself becoming less corporeal.

“Will we reach the control realm soon?”

“Possibly, yes.”

A couple more steps forward, and Kim felt an irresistible force grab her. She started to float upward. She felt herself becoming even less corporeal. Suddenly she was yanked with a huge speed through the void. She heard hissing and crackling noises, and electricity flashed before her eyes, but did not hurt her.

For a moment she felt extreme satisfaction. They had survived the tenth dimension. All the challenges and hostile entities. Was it that easy? That they were now actually being whisked away to meet the Demiurge?

Suddenly the motion stopped.

The view had changed, but not that much.

It was still a black space. Beneath them was a floor made of ... steel?

All around them, huge server racks and display screens towered. Amorphous shapes were moving around, apparently tending to the servers. Lightning flashed in the distance, black clouds hanging in the void.

Somewhat oddly Kim understood to look directly ahead last. And then she saw it.

A huge white cat that stretched up to infinity.

The Demiurge, also known as Longcat.

The Demiurge's piercing gaze turned at the two humans at its feet. Its expression was at first impossible to read. Then some degree of negativity or even hatred and disgust seemed to take over.

Kim felt a mortifying fear creep to the back of her mind. It could of course be possible that the Demiurge would not approve of them at all. And the results could be unquestionably fatal. Though, wouldn't that be unfair? They had come to do good, to help in stopping the infection. What objection the creator-god would have to that?

Finally the Demiurge spoke and it was like distilled lightning, pure energy that penetrated Kim's whole consciousness. Nothing like the pleasant, melodious voice Kim had heard it use on Earth the last time it had been sighted.

"YOU HAVE BROUGHT IMPURE MATTER INTO THE SANCTUM OF THE CONTROL REALM. BEHOLD THE CONSEQUENCES."

In the next instant Kim was locked in place. She couldn't move a limb, even her eyelids remained open. Was she being forced to see something?

The Renditioner's body, with Erik's and Victor's souls inside, was plucked from the floor and levitated in between Kim and the Demiurge in a swift, violent motion.

Then several most horrible things happened.

First the clothes were simply torn off from the body and disintegrated into black ash that quickly dissipated. This was not yet horrible, though the Renditioner's naked body was not very pleasing to look at.

A deep subsonic noise reverberated through the space, and the body started to slowly turn inside out, the skin disappearing and muscles and organs and bone and sinew becoming visible. All throughout the

procedure the body screamed. Both Erik's and Victor's voices screamed in tandem. Blood and other fluids poured out, dancing around the body as repulsive spirals. The body began to twist and mutilate itself, roughly like when it had excreted the black dragon, but even worse. Finally the scream stopped, as the vocal cords had no doubt been torn. Still it appeared to be alive, as it writhed at least semi-consciously.

At last the body exploded into large and small chunks of meat and bone. The chunks began to burn in the air, while Erik's and Viktor's souls remained as pitiful visible translucent-black entities roughly half a meter long each, trapped in a force field made of lightning that seemed to cause them extreme pain, judging from the way they trembled and rippled.

"THESE SOULS ARE NOW BEING FORCEFULLY PURIFIED OF TACGNOL'S INFECTION, SO THAT THEY MAY RE-ENTER THE CYCLE OF REINCARNATION. TAKE HEED AND UNDERSTAND THAT THIS PROCEDURE, OR WORSE, AWAITS ANYONE TRYING TO CIRCUMVENT THE INVIOLEATE RULES."

The souls disappeared into two spirals, as if being spun in two separate invisible washing machines, spinning infinitely fast. Compared to everything that had happened before, this was comparatively mild.

Still shocked of what she had seen, Kim tried to understand the ramifications. Viktor and Erik had helped her to reach the control realm. But now they were dead, forced to go through the Demiurge's cycle again, not likely allowed to take part at all in fighting the infection. Would she need to fight it alone, now? Would the Demiurge even explain what would be needed? Or would it just toss her out?

"ONE OF THESE SOULS IS NEEDED FOR A CRITICAL ROLE IN A BATTLE THAT TAKES PLACE IN THE

ELEVENTH DIMENSION. ONLY THIS CAN REVERSE THE CORRUPTION INITIATED BY TACGNOL, THAT HAS INFECTED THESE SERVERS AND THE LIFESTREAM PROTOCOL. THE ORIGINAL UNINFECTED SOURCE CODE MUST BE RESTORED.”

Kim’s first thought was total contempt. For all its might, the Demiurge did not keep backup copies well enough. And it didn't see fit to take part in the battle this time. But berating it would do little good, or even be fatal. Kim made a note to try to shield her mocking thoughts from it, though it probably was of little use.

“YES. I IN FACT KNOW WHAT YOU THINK, BUT YOUR THOUGHTS ARE INSIGNIFICANT. I CANNOT LEAVE THIS REALM UNATTENDED, AS TACGNOL MIGHT ATTACK IT DIRECTLY NOW.”

That sure felt reassuring. But then, who would be chosen? Viktor or Erik? Kim had to admit she felt lost now. She had been deemed insignificant, lacking of purpose. Though she had acted as a soul courier of sorts, so it wasn't all worthless.

Would she ever get back to the first dimension? Likely, if the battle would be lost, she would have no hope. The entire multiuniverse might have no hope.

But now it seemed she could only wait and see.

On monitors suspended in space, she saw a desert landscape. Was that the eleventh dimension? She had not kept track of them when Viktor had been examining them to find the best destination.

Only now some degree of sorrow entered her mind. Erik and Viktor were both gone again and she would not hear their voices ever.

The Corsa noticed the wind to pick up. Suddenly, it was almost if electricity rippled through the air too. But the effect was over as soon as it began, the wind back to normal.

Its job was to venture into a tunnel system near the settlement to clear it of the hostile rogues. They had tried to place the village under a protection racket, which could not be accepted.

Since the Corsa was not yet armed, the task was not going to be pleasant. But the reward would be well needed.

“We can use various improvised weapons,” the Pillow remarked. “If there are gas tanks, we can open them and hurl them at the enemies. If there are fire-breathers, they may set them off.”

“Won’t we bring down the tunnel ceiling?”

“We’ll see once we try.”

The Corsa thought that it wasn’t very reassuring.

The entrance to the tunnels was in front of them. It would be useless to waste time; the proper adventure couldn’t begin before this job was done, and the Corsa was properly armed.

The Corsa gathered force and rage for a few seconds, the engine on idle. Then it pressed down the clutch while revving the engine madly, put in the first gear, released the clutch and shot down the tunnel.

“What are you doing? At that speed you won’t be able to see where you’re going! You’re going to crash!” the Pillow protested.

“I’ll use myself as a total weapon.”

The darkness of the tunnel enveloped the Corsa. Thankfully the headlights were still in good condition, and it could see ahead good enough. At least for now. Only a minor doubt of the sanity of this plan entered its thoughts. Simply running over the creatures was going to be a lot safer than igniting gas bottles, so the Pillow’s plan was much more insane in comparison.

The Pillow was just along for the ride, it thought. The Corsa sped madly deeper into the tunnel system. The Pillow heard the squishing and crunching noises and the angry shouts and it knew the critters were being efficiently killed. Any using striking weapons would have little fighting chance. Only those using firearms, or possibly being able to breath fire, summon electricity, or such, would pose an actual danger.

The mad ride went on for several minutes, as the Corsa was still killing efficiently and without mercy.

“How do the settlers know we’ve killed them all?” the Pillow shouted over the engine noise.

“They won’t, precisely. But we should try to be honorable. As we may need to return here several times. It doesn’t pay to get a poor reputation.”

They entered a larger room in the tunnel system, with various wooden catwalks constructed high above. The Pillow caught a glimpse of a red-black critter wielding a bazooka. It was tracking the Corsa mercilessly.

Then it fired. Just two seconds later came an explosion from underneath. The Pillow’s vision tilted wildly, and the smoke of burning rubber caught its senses.

Finally motion came to a stop, and the Pillow understood to its panic that the Corsa had been

disabled. And multiple hostiles were closing in. The Pillow understood that it had to finish the fight on its own, or die trying.

First, it scanned around to see all of the enemies. Multiple blade-wielders. These could be disregarded for now. One fire-breather at the back. A couple with small arms. And finally, a pink sphere the Pillow had never seen before.

Honestly, there were too many enemies to consider individually. So the Pillow just wanted to reach the maximum amount of rage in the minimum amount of time, so that it could start killing with maximum efficiency. For now its own survival didn't even concern it maximally, but the well-being of the Corsa. As it had been disabled, a further hit from the red-black's bazooka would annihilate it totally.

For just a moment, the Pillow considered some very odd thoughts. Did it actually know the Corsa from somewhere? Seeing it get hurt somehow felt worse than it should have, considering they had only just met. But those thoughts needed to be pushed back for now.

Killing would be the urgent task.

The Pillow needed weapons, so first of all it levitated one of the catwalk planks loose. While hopping around, it swung it wildly, knocking the first two blade-wielders unconscious. But that wasn't enough, so it beat them over repeatedly until they didn't move and something started oozing out from their ear holes. One gunbearer was next, so it swung once more –

Just as the gun-wielding critter fired. The bullet went right through. The Pillow felt a burning pain; stuffing could start leaking out and that could even be fatal if left untreated.

But the swing connected, the gun-wielding one was knocked off its feet and the gun fell away. It possibly was

still alive or even conscious, but that didn't matter for the next few seconds.

Now the Pillow had a gun, for the second time in its life. It was a semi-auto pistol, possibly a Glock. Perfect. They were light and had a large magazine.

The Pillow acquired the bazooka-wielder next. It aligned the sights and fired twice, just as the bazooka fired too. It had just time to hop to the side as the second tremendous explosion rocked the room.

Still there were too many enemies remaining, so the Pillow aimed and killed whoever was coming closest. A purple one swinging an ax possibly got a hit through; though by now the Pillow was in such state of rage that it could not feel any pain. That could actually be dangerous, it knew.

The fire-breather was next. It could never be allowed to attack, so the Pillow emptied the rest of the magazine. It died. The Pillow discarded the now useless Glock. Now only the pink sphere remained.

And the Pillow felt fear enter its consciousness as it understood that it was the highest form of chameleon. It could swallow air to expand to twice its size, fly around, and imitate any weapon or ability.

It flew to the platform where the red-black was lying dead and ate the bazooka lying next to it.

Instantly, a rapid-fire barrage of rockets started. Explosion after another shook the ground, sending mud and rock raining in the air. The Pillow did its best to avoid getting hit. Rocks pelted it, and the red fabric got severely dirtied. But yet it lived on.

The Pillow understood its only hope was to reach another firearm before the chameleon launched its next attack. It came to the corpse of a yellow creature, which the Pillow hadn't even noticed before. It had been carrying an old-school pump-action Remington.

Without wasting further time the Pillow levitated it up. But before it had time to take aim and fire, it heard a great whoosh and felt the air warm up around it. So the pink chameleon had eaten a fire-breather now. The Pillow had barely time to dodge and turn around as the pink beast was closing in, resembling a hateful and fearful dragon in its behavior if not appearance.

Finally the Pillow could fire. It fired once, twice, racking the pump between each shot. It understood that this shotgun was not loaded with buckshot, but with heavy slugs. And that was perfect. It scored perfect hits on the pink skin, and bright-red blood began to leak out. The pink bastard tried to breathe fire once more, but it was staggering under the hits and couldn't get the flame to ignite properly. So the Pillow seized the advantage and fired until the shotgun was completely empty.

Finally silence fell again, the battle over, all enemies dead, even the pink chameleon.

The Pillow took a moment to inspect its wounds. The leak was the worrying one, it had to be patched up. The ax had not been a hit after all. Dirt and burns were insignificant and could be ignored.

So it returned to the Corsa.

"That was expert killing. I'd have been dead otherwise," it remarked.

It was good to note that it was conscious. Though all the tires were busted from the bazooka explosion, and the axles possibly twisted; it wasn't going to drive out of here.

"You're welcome. Can you open the boot?"

The Corsa did so, and the Pillow peered in. The moonshine had been left at the settlement's bank, so it was mostly empty. But on the side there was a first-aid kit, which was the most important tool the Pillow currently needed.

The Pillow levitated some bandage out of the kit and taped it over the leak. It should be good enough now, at least for some time.

The next problem was getting the Corsa out of here. The Pillow considered hard. How the hell? Trying to push the car was likely to cause only more damage. It would have to be transported on a truck's bed. So the Pillow would need to venture out and try to get hold of a friendly and large enough truck. This would eat into the reward from the mop-up. So the preferable option would be to do it all by themselves. But how?

Then the Pillow thought of the chameleon, which could inflate itself. So, if the Pillow ate it and gained its abilities...

The Pillow wasn't sure. It normally didn't eat anything. But maybe this could be an exception.

It would be about forcing foreign matter through the fabric, among the stuffing. Shit. The Pillow felt a deep disgust. It felt pride in the purity of the stuffing, and interfering with it could even interfere with its thought processes, the ability to hop around and levitate objects.

Still, there probably was no choice but to try.

The Pillow hopped back to the pink corpse. Methodically and using telekinesis, it started prying loose the skin and whatever was behind, until there were pink-red chunks lying on the floor. Then, just as telekinetically it started forcing them through the red fabric. Yuck! The chunks even smelled bad.

After a few of them, the Pillow felt a surge of energy. It seemed like it was seeing everything sharper, and felt much more in command of its thoughts. It thought of...

Inflating.

There came a sound of hissing air, and the Pillow began to grow. Excellent! It had eaten enough. The rest of the pink corpse could be left there. The Pillow

deflated itself again, and returned to the Corsa.

“I’m going to get you out of here.”

“How? I don’t understand –”

“Just watch.”

The Pillow positioned itself underneath the car, squarely in the center. Then it began to inflate itself again, until it was roughly ten times its original size. The bandage stretched and expanded along with the fabric, though the Pillow had feared it wouldn't. Finally the Corsa with its busted wheels was resting on top of it. To be honest, the Pillow felt like bursting, and the weight of the Corsa, which was nearly a ton, did not exactly help.

Still, it felt good to be doing something useful and friendly and heroic.

It attempted to rise in the air, like the pink chameleon had done. This took an even more extreme effort, but finally it was airborne. Just a few inches, but that was enough. It began to float slowly forward, out of the chamber and toward the tunnel system exit, with the Corsa on top.

The Producer was shocked to alertness by an absinthe glass almost tipping. The drink was valuable, almost holy, and shouldn't be wasted.

While drinking, she had been analyzing the essence of main characters and side characters with two Coders, a Senior Network and Graphics Coder, and a Junior Network Coder. Curiously she did not remember the exact steps that had led to this situation.

She only remembered an age long time ago, when there were still offices and computers and unnecessary virtual world projects. Now there was just the endless desert, various low-technology settlements, and Tacgnol's endless iron-fist rule.

The Producer knew that if she was to find the Lead Coder, who was held captive inside Tacgnol's mountain, the former world could possibly be restored. In addition, a fatal inter-dimensional infection could be thwarted. And Tacgnol would be killed if at all possible, bringing possibly much happiness to the land. Or alternatively, an age of unprecedented chaos and anarchy.

To do this, the Producer would need the Corsa and Pillow. While thinking of this, and the possible extreme difficulty re-finding them would include, she happened to gaze out of the saloon's window.

The Corsa was moving past it in an odd slow motion.

Its engine wasn't on. Suddenly this felt severely perverse. The Producer left the table and hurried to take a proper look, and saw that the Corsa was being floated by the Pillow, which was now ten times its normal size.

This was both good and bad.

Good: the Pillow appeared to be learning abilities that surpassed what it had originally possessed. When entering Tacgnol's mountain and its extreme lethal hazards, one could not be overqualified.

Bad: the Corsa would need extensive repairs. The Producer wasn't even sure if it could be repaired.

As the Producer, the Corsa, the Pillow and the two Coders were now all reunited, preparations for the adventure kicked into high gear. The Coders would hack into the settlement's bank, gaining them the sufficient funds for the Gatling gun, the Corsa's repairs, and any supplies they would need. After the Coders were done, they would scout for the transmitter towers for Tacgnol's disruptive field. Several of these were contained in hostile regions, where the rogues would be more militant than usual, receiving training and supplies directly from Tacgnol.

Finally the Corsa was in good condition again, the weapon installed. It was now even armor-plated, and the engine error codes had been cleared; the warning light had not come on again. Everything was ready for them to begin the adventure, leave the settlement, and possibly never return again, irrespective of whether they would be victorious or not.

The Producer put the Corsa into gear and they left a huge cloud of dust behind them, as the settlement was left behind.

Long days of travel and infiltration deeper into Tacgnol-controlled territory blended into each other, until the ragtag team finally stood before a valley that housed the installation for the first transmitter tower.

The enemies guarding it, both multicolored critters and sentient vehicles, were too numerous to be fought directly.

The Pillow counted about a hundred of them, armed with weapons of every kind. Even with the Pillow's new-found ability to copy abilities, it would be too much.

Then the Junior Network Coder came up with a hazardous, potentially suicidal idea.

"I propose to hack one of the transmitter towers, to make it transmit a payload that will disable all of them at once. I need the Corsa."

"I don't want to risk the Corsa. And I don't want you dying. All of you are needed," the Producer said. "But there's eleven of these tower installations in total. Most of them guarded just as well as this. If we don't use cunning or treachery of some kind, we will be whittled down while trying to take them one by one."

Finally it was agreed that the plan was the best available, though extremely risky. The Senior and Junior Coders began to work on the necessary UDP protocol dissection using the WireShark protocol analyzer

program. By tapping into an unprotected wireless network used by the enemies, they could eavesdrop the traffic and formulate a vector of attack.

Once the protocol dissection was complete, The Senior Coder wrote a distributed client that would spread itself and overload systems in all of the tower installations. Cybersecurity seemed low-grade; it seemed Tacgnol's forces relied on everyone being unfamiliar with technology in this world.

It was just that the initial payload insertion needed to be physical, like the Junior Coder had envisioned in his plan.

The Junior Coder drove the Corsa like hell, the USB stick with the payload in his pocket. On the passenger seat he had a Mini-Uzi with two magazines taped together jungle style for a total of 64 rounds, but those wouldn't last long. Mostly he hoped to use the Gatling gun. Or actually the Corsa could handle firing by itself.

The Coder would have preferred a .50 caliber anti-aircraft gun, that would have blown the enemies into bloody chunks almost instantaneously. But the Corsa's weapon was still good enough.

It didn't take long for gunfire to begin from every direction around him. He had been noticed. He was headed straight to the heart of the installation, where the terminal waited. It wouldn't hopefully take long.

The Gatling gun turned on its swivel mount and auto-targeted the enemies, which were organic for the most part. As bullets ate into them, bright gore sprayed in great arcs and pools of it would be left glinting in the sun.

"Take out the gate lock!" the Junior Coder shouted.

The Corsa appeared to hesitate, as if it didn't like to take orders from humans. But finally the gun turned and blasted the installation gate open just before they drove inside the compound.

Yet more enemies streamed in from every direction. The Junior Coder knew the most hazardous part would

be when he had to leave the protection of the car to upload the payload. He couldn't smash inside the building with it, since it would be seriously damaged and be useless for the drive to Tacgnol's mountain.

He would have the Uzi for that part. It brought him a little comfort, but could not extinguish the fear completely. As long as he completed the upload, and destroyed or took the stick so that the payload could not be easily reverse-engineered, whatever came next would be optional. If he would become a legend, so be it. He wasn't suicidal, but had studied the lives of several rock stars who had expired at the same seemingly-magical age, as his was now.

The bullets pinged off the Corsa. Fortunately it had been armor-plated back at the settlement.

Finally the target building was right in front of him. It was only a short sprint to the terminal. But several of the critters were in pursuit.

There was no other course of action but to scoop up the Uzi, rush out of the door, and imagine himself as John Matrix and John Rambo simultaneously while spraying on full auto.

And then he was in.

Apparently not hit yet.

An oblong-shaped critter in a military uniform appeared from behind a doorway. Without mercy or hesitation, the Coder pointed the Uzi at it and fired. The creature fell; the way to the terminal was clear.

Hurriedly, he dug out the USB stick, fumbling a bit and almost dropping it to the floor, until he successfully inserted it.

A progress bar appeared. Enemies might be extremely close by, so he turned to face the way he had come, the Uzi ready.

None so far. It was possible they were lying in wait.

As the progress was over halfway, the inevitable happened. There was a concussive detonation (though the door was open already) and the enemies rushed the terminal building with force, appearing in every color and variety.

And the Coder fired. Fired like he was Death itself, his scythe taking instead the form of a submachine gun, while he weaved defensively to minimize the chances of getting hit. He would need to wait for the upload to reach full progress, then take the stick and break it.

The first magazine went empty and he released it, flipped it upside down, reinserted and pulled the handle almost in the same motion. He resumed firing, while ducking behind a table.

Just as the gun clicked dry for the second time, the terminal beeped. Full progress. He snatched the stick and jumped out of the nearest window, his combat boots first and trying to shield his face.

He grimaced as the breaking glass inevitably lacerated his skin. He landed roughly, then gazed around to see enemies closing in on his position. The Corsa was nowhere to be seen.

He could only wait for the end.

He would be killed, the still intact stick be taken from him, and the distributed client would be reverse-engineered and countered.

As the disruptive field went off, the Pillow felt a surge of pure energy pass through it. It was like eating the chameleon creature, but taken to a completely new degree.

It felt like it could do anything. It felt like it had almost infinite time to plan its tactics, as everything else seemed to move slow.

And most importantly, it could fly. Practically, as fast as it could imagine.

But now the Junior Coder was in serious trouble. The Producer hopped on the Pillow and they went for a quick rescue flight.

The valley opened before the Pillow, as it swooped down from the sky. The Coder was in the middle of the compound, exposed and about to be killed in a matter of seconds.

The Pillow closed the distance in almost infinitely short time. The Producer snatched the Coder up on the Pillow (it was now about triple size) and they were away, just as the bullets flew past them. The Coder still had the USB stick, but not gripped firmly enough.

It fell.

But that did not matter, as the Pillow launched itself into a downward spiral. It knew that the Coder or the Producer would not have the necessary reflexes to catch the stick even now, so the Pillow ate it.

It appeared eating could now happen telekinetically, right through the fabric.

Eating the stick gave the Pillow complete understanding of the enemy's data traffic. For a moment it saw the world in green and black, the flow of data as bright pulses. Then normal vision resumed.

Out of immediate harm's way now, the Pillow noticed something. Both the Producer and the Junior Coder had a half of another personality or soul inside them now, in addition to their own. One that the Pillow also faintly thought that it knew. One that could only be described as a full-bloodied combat soldier, though he had never served in the military. The reason was to give them the edge they needed for this fight, to give them abilities they did not possess on their own.

The Pillow suspected the soul had entered this world during the electrical ripple it had sensed before it had entered the tunnels with the Corsa. However, it couldn't confirm this fully.

In any case, this knowledge lifted the Pillow's spirits even higher. Though it remembered to warn itself of too much optimism, for the dangers ahead were still many, and Tacgnol was the worst adversary imaginable.

It did not take long after the breakdown of the disruptive field for Tacgnol to send its full army against them.

The Corsa drove valiantly forward, Producer at the wheel, the Pillow on the front seat and the Coders in the back, ready to fire with assault rifles the Pillow had snatched on a second flight through the transmitter compound. The Pillow had eaten one of the rifles, so in theory it could fire bullets, too.

But such weaponry still seemed puny, for the whole horizon was a dust cloud of approaching vehicles. In the air, assault helicopters and jet fighters were in a holding pattern, ready to attack once the Corsa got closer.

And far behind the approaching front, was the mountain itself.

“We’ll need to create chaos and slip through!” the Corsa remarked.

This was agreed on. They drove closer.

Then the gun and artillery fire started. Shells tore craters to the ground, forcing them to weave left and right. It was only by miracle that they avoided getting hit, or driving into one of the craters. Tracer fire scythed close to them, a few rounds even eating into the Corsa's armor. But it held for now.

As the column of enemies got yet closer, the Corsa took control on its own. It started spinning in circles,

creating clouds of dust that blocked the enemies' visibility. By following the data traffic the Pillow knew the enemies were indeed being confused.

Then they would momentarily strike out of the cloud, the Gatling gun and the assault rifles firing on the nearest targets.

The Pillow wanted to take flight and deal death on its own, to further confuse the enemies. It wanted to not only test the ability to shoot rifle bullets, but to eat some heavier weapon.

"Let me out!" it shouted. "I'll be back!"

So the Corsa opened the passenger window, and the Pillow was on its way.

Immediately it knew that in the air it would be a visible and vulnerable target. But it still had superior speed. It could almost appear to be in many places at once.

It unleashed a hailstorm of assault rifle fire on the closest helicopter.

But that had little effect. Indeed, it needed more firepower. And now the helicopter had noticed the Pillow and would begin a deadly game of cat and mouse.

The Pillow banked left, then right, and had to use all of its speed to avoid the vicious 20mm cannon that seemed to track its every move. Finally it was in a blind spot. But it only had a moment. Summoning maximum speed, it flew to the underside of the helicopter.

And ate the cannon.

The Hellfire air-to-ground missiles.

The rocket pods.

And finally the air-to-air missiles on the wingtips.

It flew some distance away, launched twin missiles, and two seconds later the helicopter exploded in a bright fireball, followed by its blackened carcass falling to the ground.

The Pillow had never felt like this. This was real ultimate power. But it knew that the Corsa and those inside might be in trouble.

It forced itself into a maximum speed dive. Indeed, the dust cloud was dissipating and several enemy vehicles were onto them. A look behind and analysis of the enemy net traffic indicated that the air forces were also being commanded to break the holding pattern and attack the Corsa and the Pillow in full force.

The Pillow unloaded all of its firepower to the ground, to keep the Corsa safe. Several vehicles were blown apart and upturned in chaotic explosions. But the Corsa lived on, spinning again to create another dust cloud.

The Pillow became aware of tracer fire coming from behind, as one of Tacgnol's jet fighters had it in its sights. For now, it had no more missiles, no more rounds. It just had to summon maximum flight speed to survive until they would regenerate.

The dust cloud was only a few seconds away. But the scything fire was much closer. It was also clear the enemy had some tracking mechanisms, so that the Pillow would not be entirely safe inside.

Suddenly the Corsa came out of the dust and unleashed a concentrated barrage of Gatling gun and assault rifle fire on the jet. Flames erupted from its engines and it veered away, failing to correct course in time, so it too crashed to the ground and blew up.

"Thanks!" the Pillow shouted.

Then came a moment of tactical decision. It seemed the amount of enemies on the ground was greater, than the amount of those in the air. Perhaps, the way of least resistance to Tacgnol's mountain was still to fly there. The entrance would have to be navigated through air in any case.

“Guys, please kick up one more hell of a dust cloud. I'll inflate, and we'll fly to the mountain, bypassing all these assholes on the ground!”

The Corsa protested. “We're too heavy. Are you forgetting how slow going it was?”

“I couldn't actually fly back then.”

To be honest, it was a risk. The Pillow wasn't exactly sure if it could fly as fast in its inflated form, and when carrying over one ton of load.

It was true it was somewhat slower going. Not much. And entirely worth it. The Pillow could now store more of the missiles and rockets and 20mm rounds inside, so that it could unleash longer salvos. It was even larger now, perhaps 15 times its original size, so that the Corsa wasn't in danger of falling.

Practically, now they were a fearsomely armed combat airship.

The Pillow knew they couldn't climb very high, for then the Producer and the Coders would freeze and suffocate.

Endless minutes stretched on as a game of air combat chess was being played in the sky, the Pillow estimating safe passageways to get ever closer to Tacgnol's mountain, while engaging the minimum amount of enemies.

The Corsa's Gatling gun tracked the airborne enemies mostly without fail, while the Pillow joined the chorus whenever it had missiles or rounds available. Constantly regenerating the ammunition and flying at the same time was getting exhausting, though. It could not keep doing this endlessly.

Fortunately, the mountain was closer now. It was like a huge inverted black icicle, towering up to almost infinity. At the very top, clouds spun in an endless, evil spiral.

The Pillow saw a large horned gate at the top. It was possibly that they should be targeting; that would be the entrance to Tacgnol itself.

But now the gate opened, and an absolutely gigantic helicopter gunship came out. It had to be one of Tacgnol's highest-ranked servants. It flew slow and ponderously, but the amount of weaponry it carried had to be beyond comprehension.

And it wasn't the only enemy. Behind them several of the ordinary jets and helicopters were in pursuit.

The large gunship was headed straight at them. The network data showed it had been commanded to kill with maximum force available. The Pillow prepared to take evasive action.

From its wings, the gunship launched a whole column of missiles, which started to home in without mercy. The Pillow wished for countermeasures, wished it had eaten flares or such, but they had none. The only defense was to maneuver fast out of their reach.

The Pillow banked hard and went into another dive, but still the missiles followed.

Just before multiple fatal impacts it understood. The missiles were also wirelessly networked. What should have been sophisticated targeting help would turn into their greatest weakness instead.

Gathering all mental strength, the Pillow transmitted garbled, illegal data wirelessly, targeted into the missiles' MAC addresses. It hoped that the missiles would even turn back and target the gunship –

It didn't quite work that way. But they flew harmlessly past, descending and crashing into the ground.

Now the Pillow found itself very exhausted. It could not launch another similar attack. It could not even properly fly. It had to land right now.

The Pillow touched down behind a small rocky hill. They were out of sight of the enemies just for some seconds.

“Pillow! It's clear you're too heavily loaded! Deflate yourself and take just the Producer!” the Corsa shouted.

It didn't like the idea at all. The Corsa and the Coders would be rather defenseless without the Pillow's weapons. Though, with all the exhaustion, regenerating the ammunition had become slower and slower.

Maybe it would still have enough strength in it to just fly at top speed, past all the enemies through the horned gate and into the mountain.

Then, there would still be Tacgnol waiting inside, with yet unforeseen but surely massive powers of dealing death. All tactics seemed to be leading to a potential destruction. But choosing the path of least resistance, the Pillow deflated itself to roughly double size, just enough for the Producer to sit on top without risk of falling.

“Look! There's an opening in the middle! We can go in there!” the Producer shouted.

The Pillow confirmed this visually. It looked natural, an uninviting hole into darkness. But at least it would be open. The gate, in fact, would be certain to not let them in. And flying up there would be exhausting.

They flew at near top speed, swerving wildly to avoid enemy fire. The big gunship was still hovering behind.

There was a serpentine path along the mountain's face to the gate. In theory the Corsa could use it. But hounded by all the enemies, how could it possibly make it? They had just the Gatling gun and one assault rifle. The Producer held the other. It was down to its last magazine.

The Pillow could not deny being worried for the Corsa. Maybe also for the Coders, but less so. Still the mission, getting inside the mountain and freeing the Lead Coder, would take top priority. Such were the choices that would always need to be made in warfare. At least the Pillow took comfort from the presence of the soul half within the Producer, his strength and determination. Them together in battle again, flying into an impenetrable fortress, was a most formidable thought. Even if they were to die today.

The Pillow adjusted its flight path upward, toward the opening.

A blasphemous sight opened before the Pillow and the Producer as they flew in. Inside, the mountain was dimly lit, with pathways snaking upward on the inside walls, and occasional rope bridges crossing the central void.

And of course, towering in the middle, was Tacgnol. It was huge and black. Like the mountain itself it appeared to tower to unlimited heights. It seemed to be listening to a worship ceremony being performed. Critters dressed in black priest or monk robes had gathered on the floor below, on the walkways and bridges.

They sung in a low monotone voice and nodded rhythmically.

“Tacgnol. Tacgnol. Tacgnol. Doooooomm...”

Suddenly there was a single loud shout. Someone had noticed.

Almost as one, the rest of the worshippers noticed the two intruders too. Weapons were picked up. Tacgnol roared subsonically, turning its shining eyes radiating pure evil toward the Pillow. The whole mountain shook as the final battle began.

Bullets, jets of flames and bazooka rockets whizzed past the Pillow and the Producer from all around the vast chamber. Tacgnol's cultists shrieked incomprehensibly, worked into a state of murderous rage as they fired their weapons. The mountain was being desecrated, and the desecrators would have to die one thousand deaths.

The Producer fired single shots and took out several of the cultists. This was good tactics; the rifle rounds, though devastating against the flesh of the critters, would likely do nothing against Tacgnol's hairy, matted black hide, that the Pillow now saw from close.

The Pillow flew higher, dizzyingly high, until it had a line of sight to Tacgnol's open mouth.

As Tacgnol roared, the Pillow launched a seemingly endless stream of rockets. All that it had. These were meant for "soft" targets, which meant lightly armored vehicles. Tacgnol would be close enough.

The rockets exploded inside Tacgnol's mouth. It should have been a killing or majorly damaging blow.

Instead, the giant cat only started to laugh.

"Hm, hm, hm, hm, ha ha ha ha!!!"

The Pillow knew that something unpleasant was coming.

In the next instant, there came a shrill whine and eye lasers that alternated between the light of several suns, and the deepest light-sucking pure blackness, shot out

from Tacgnol's eyes. They hunted the Pillow without any mercy, and came within a hair's length of hitting, as it ducked and weaved to every direction, summoning maximum flight speed again. Even when the Pillow tried to summon its maximum reflexes, Tacgnol didn't appear slowed down like the lesser enemies. Its reflexes were just as fast.

The Pillow was sure its luck was going to run out. At some point it was going to guess wrong and fly straight to the laser beams, getting itself and the Producer incinerated in an instant.

But finally Tacgnol's first attack was over.

The Pillow sighed in relief.

But it shouldn't have, for the next attack began in an instant. Tacgnol opened its mouth again, and the Pillow quickly launched twin air-to-air missiles, but it did not have time to look for the result, as the cat began vomiting out large spiky black balls next. They pulsed in a menacing dark red-bright orange sequence.

Air mines. They were slow, homing in only at a snail's pace, but there were more of them than the Pillow could count.

And the Pillow understood that next Tacgnol would fire its eye lasers again, and this time avoiding them would be next to impossible, with the inside of the mountain now full of the mines. They spread all around, even to the bottom.

But the Pillow couldn't let hopelessness take over now. They had come too far. This battle had to be won.

It still had the Hellfire missiles. They were meant for air-to-ground targets, but a little improvisation and misuse should be acceptable now.

The pulsing whine started again, as Tacgnol's laser gaze set on the Pillow yet again. This time the Pillow sensed a pattern and could almost anticipate into which

direction the beams would turn next. At the same time, it started launching the Hellfire missiles to clear a path in the direction it was going to go next.

Several of the mines detonated harmlessly, hit by the missiles.

But the payload was only eight missiles. The Pillow felt its stomach empty now, as all missiles and rockets had been used. It would need to regenerate them, but this would tire it further. Either it would have to divert energy and risk its flight getting slowed down, or the regeneration would be slow.

So it just started firing the 20mm cannon rounds at the mines, hoping that a lucky shot would detonate them. A couple more did, but many more remained. Even the Producer managed to explode one of the mines with a well-placed assault rifle bullet.

Finally the second laser attack was over.

But now, what did the Pillow have? It was empty. Or to tell the truth, it still had some cannon rounds remaining, but how could they hurt Tacgnol, if missiles and rockets did not hurt either?

"Pillow! I may have an idea. This reality is not quite like reality. Maybe you can glitch the collision and end up inside Tacgnol if you fly close enough, at a grazing angle!"

The Pillow understood that the Producer was applying thinking from the projects she had overseen. Where the software being used was hastily constructed and poor, and physics glitches were common.

But would it be applicable? Or would a collision with the black hide just destroy the Pillow? They probably just had to try.

"Are you ready to die in case you're wrong?" the Pillow shouted to confirm.

"We'll soon be dead anyway! Your weapons aren't

doing any damage!"

So, it was decided. Before Tacgnol could attack again, the Pillow directed its flight path to skim dangerously close to the cat's skin.

It began to hit the hairs. They felt like steel spikes. The Pillow thought they were going to rip the fabric open any second; it should have eaten an armored critter.

But too late for that now.

The Pillow adjusted its angle slightly.

Just as it was about to hit a large patch of spiky hair that would have ripped it open or at least sent it tumbling away, the Pillow hit the skin at an odd, mathematically wrong angle and something happened.

It was transported inside Tacgnol.

The insides were mostly hollow. The Pillow saw the internal organs, and a long digestive tract and intestines that went all the way to the bottom. At the very top it saw something that was of an ultimately black and light-sucking color, a sphere potentially a few meters across, inside Tacgnol's huge translucent brain.

Tacgnol's soul.

Sure that the soul was the final vulnerable target to hit, the Pillow accelerated its flight upward. The Producer held on to dear life as the world tilted, as they zoomed upward inside Tacgnol's huge figure.

Here, they were out of reach of the cat's attacks.

Finally the brain was in front of them. It pulsed in all colors of the visible spectrum, but remained mostly translucent. Beyond the surface, the black sphere of the soul waited.

The Pillow fired off a few of the cannon rounds. The brain deflected them easily. They were going to need heavier firepower.

"I need to regenerate!" the Pillow shouted.

It started regenerating rockets and missiles, and immediately exhaustion began to take over. It began to lose altitude, the brain left far above.

It also understood that Tacgnol's insides weren't actually defenseless; smaller versions of the spiky mines launched out of disgusting pores on the organs and the inside surface of the skin.

The Pillow weaved chaotically, as if it was drunk. Once or twice, it almost hit the small mines. The Producer expended the last of the assault rifle ammo to blow up a few of them.

The Pillow was almost at the bottom, when its ammo payload had finally been replenished.

It would have to fly up, launch the attack, and hope that the brain would be penetrated now, and the soul would be exposed and then, destroyed.

But it felt that its powers were fading for real this time. That would be the last burst of energy it could expend.

“Producer! Once I fly up, I may not be able to fly any more. We’ll fall all the way to the bottom.”

“If we kill Tacgnol, the Lead Coder may be able to free himself. It may not strictly matter what happens to us.”

So again, it was decided. Potential self-sacrifice for the greater good. For the last time, the Pillow ascended. It tried to save its energy and fly slow, while avoiding the rest of the small mines.

Finally the brain was in front of the Pillow again. And the Pillow almost felt like unconsciousness ready to claim it.

With maybe seconds to spare, it began launching its arsenal, starting with the rockets again.

The first few explosions did nothing, and an abject lack of hope began to creep on the Pillow's mind. Just for the moment, that actually helped to fight the threatening blackout.

But the next explosion ripped open the brain membrane. Tacgnol started to howl, both in their thoughts and audibly. It was a terrible piercing full-spectrum shriek that again made the mountain and even their insides shake.

The Pillow launched more rockets, until they ran out.

And it saw the soul, radiating pure black now with nothing in between. The pathway to it was open. The howl stopped and now it was almost eerily silent.

The Pillow unleashed all it had left at this point in sequence, starting with the Hellfire missiles.

The soul ate each of the missiles with a resounding

gulp, growing briefly larger. The Pillow couldn't know for sure if it was doing damage. Again, had it come this far to fail? The possible disappointment gave it strength to stay conscious.

Finally it fired the air-to-air missiles. Just like with the Hellfires, the black sphere just ate them, growing even larger and pulsing for a moment. The rhythmic pulsing disgusted the Pillow especially.

A second or a two passed with nothing happening.

Then cracks began to appear on the soul's surface, and it exploded with an all-encompassing burst of blackness. The Pillow was afraid it was going to be sucked inside.

But the wave of blackness passed them harmlessly, and the unnaturally high whine of a storm wind started. Tacgnol's howl returned too, but it was already fading away. The huge black cat's body began to unravel and break into small patches of black skin that were picked up by the wind.

The Pillow couldn't at first believe it.

But they had done the impossible.

They had killed Tacgnol.

But now the Pillow had no strength remaining any more, no more disappointment to fuel it, and it began to fall, with the Producer on its back.

The Pillow fell.

As Tacgnol disintegrated around it, it began to see the gloomy insides of the mountain again. The cultists were scurrying around in confusion. Maybe the Lead Coder would now free himself and save the day. But it would be too late for the Pillow; it would just get crushed and ripped open from the impact with the ground.

Suddenly the Pillow saw something it could not have believed either. On a high walkway, it saw the Corsa. It was dented and blackened and belching smoke, but it was still alive. Somehow it had managed to survive the enemies on the outside and climb its way up here.

As the Pillow still fell, the Corsa revved madly, then launched itself to accelerate along the walkway, toward the falling Pillow.

Then it just steered into the nothingness and launched itself into a jump.

The Pillow could barely understand that this was a last-ditch rescue attempt. But it would end badly. The Corsa would fall to its death too.

Because of how completely exhausted the Pillow was, it did not understand that the trajectory was in fact exactly as it should be. The Corsa was slightly sideways, its passenger door opened, and in the next instant the

Pillow and the Producer were thrown violently inside. Next the car rocked once more as it landed roughly on a rope bridge that barely held.

The Producer seemed to be unharmed enough to shout. It was either excitement, or a delayed fear reaction. But the Pillow deflated and finally lost consciousness.

The Producer drove somewhat erratically down the walkway, still dazed from the impact. The Corsa also wasn't in the best condition any more. Now the aim was to get down to the dungeons as fast as possible, where the Lead Coder should be held.

The Corsa knew the Pillow was at least alive. It was lying on the passenger seat now. The Corsa wanted to do something to its condition, but as a car, it really couldn't.

Instead it concentrated on what it could do; mopping up the cultists with the Gatling gun. The Coders sat in the rear with nothing to do now as all their ammunition had been spent.

Finally they reached the dungeons.

The dungeon guard-critters were lying in pools of blood and gore, thoroughly ventilated by the Gatling gun.

The Corsa drove slowly, scanning to each direction with the gun as the Producer and the Coders advanced warily. It blew each of the cell door locks, until they reached the final cell, where the Lead Coder was shaking uncontrollably on the floor, a virtual reality helmet over his head.

The Producer rushed in and ripped the helmet away violently.

Immediately the Lead Coder stopped shaking.

“What the hell have I done? I must get to the terminal! At the top!” he shouted.

The Lead Coder climbed to the front passenger seat, holding the Pillow in his lap now. And they sped away, out of the dungeons and back into the large mountain chamber.

Ventilating more of the cultists along the way, who by now were rather defeated since their master and God was gone, the team reached the brightly lit computer room almost at the top of the mountain.

The Lead Coder rushed to the terminal on the back wall and typed in two commands. The Corsa could barely read the text on the command prompt.

```
git reset -hard  
git push origin master
```

Almost immediately the reality around the Corsa began to ripple and distort, as the eleventh dimension started the process of rewriting itself. The Corsa felt its consciousness begin to change. It felt itself becoming just a car without sentience again, an inert object of rubber, plastic and steel.

It felt sad at this. Victory had been achieved, but the Corsa would not get to experience it. Likely, neither would the Pillow. The Producer and the Coders would also have to get back into the dreary existence of designing and implementing various projects now.

There was a violent yanking motion as the Corsa's consciousness was torn somewhere else.

Three translucent souls stood before the Demiurge's long white shape in the control realm. It spoke with a voice like thunder and lightning.

“YOU HAVE DONE WELL. THE SOURCE CODE WAS RESET IN THE ELEVENTH DIMENSION AND THE CHANGE HAS CASCADED TO ALL OTHER DIMENSIONS AND REALMS OF THE MULTIUNIVERSE. TACGNOL'S CORRUPTION HAS BEEN STOPPED. YOU MAY NOW ASK FOR ONE FAVOR, WHICH MUST BE IN ACCORDANCE OF THE INVIOLEATE RULES.”

The souls looked at each other.

Finally one of them spoke.

“Can our original bodies be restored to life in the original dimension from where we came from?”

There was a moment of silence which felt endlessly long. The Demiurge was lost in thought, until it spoke again.

“NORMALLY THE CONSEQUENCES OF YOUR ACTIONS WOULD STAY IN FULL EFFECT. BUT THIS MAY BE AN EXCEPTIONAL CIRCUMSTANCE. I MUST ASK MY MASTER.”

The souls looked up, as a hatch in the void of space began to open. A large brownish cat's head peered out. It nodded without making a sound, then the hatch closed.

“DO ALL OF YOU AGREE?”

The souls vocalized in agreement.

“SO IT IS DECIDED.”

A cage of lightning enveloped the souls, and a crackling sound began. The lightning and the crackling intensified until there was a sonic boom and a flash of painfully bright light.

The souls were gone.

The Demiurge turned back to the server racks and monitors to concentrate on more pressing matters, such as finally installing a proper off-site backup system.

Kim drove the white featureless van toward the Black Fang bar. Or what remained of it. As she still wore the hazmat suit from the facility, the guards of the military checkpoint had just waved her on with little trouble. They had assumed she was carrying a torching crew doing final mop-up.

She did not exactly remember how she had returned to the underground complex. The reactor should have blown up, since they had set it beyond maximum power, but it had cooled down and shut down completely. So she had taken her time walking up the long set of stairs, then hijacked the van.

The city was in a horrible condition. The streets were full of abandoned or broken down cars, some with corpses inside, others empty. The final death toll could be a hundred thousand or more. But if it had actually not spread outside and become worldwide, that was still a victory. It would take months before the clean-up could finish. Kim was probably going to move elsewhere, as she didn't want to be constantly reminded of the stench of Purexo, and of the ultimate funeral doom band that almost came to be.

She wasn't even sure why she was driving toward the bar now. Maybe just to see the place torched, like the hazmat crew had spoken of. Or to pay respects to everyone who had died there.

Jo awoke with an unpleasant jolt. It took some seconds to understand where she was, but then she thought she got it. Inside the crashed Yaris. The deflated airbag in front of her had blood all over, which alarmed her at first. She felt for her most significant bones, but nothing appeared broken.

She fought the airbag out of the way and released the seat belt. To her surprise, she fell and bumped into Ian, who was closest to the ground on the front passenger seat. He made a sound indicating discomfort. Only now Jo understood the car was lying sideways.

The shock came only slightly later as Jo took in Ian's bloodied clothes and dried blood all over the passenger side. But he was alive. She knew that things could have gone wrong with a much higher probability, with the metal heart and everything. But whoever had restored them seemed to have managed that. Still, she was concerned. Had she hurt him just now?

Ian made a grin. "You can land on me any time. Angels don't kill and all that."

"Shut up. Or I'll show you the devil."

Jo knew the doors were a no-go, as the driver door was high above her current position. So she reached for the ignition key and turned the power on. Miraculously the battery still had juice. She hit the button to open the boot and began to climb out over the back seats.

As she finally got out, she understood that she could have cut herself on the broken rear window, or the glass lying all around the car. She helped Ian out while paying more attention to safety.

They were on the cargo train yard, with seemingly no life around them. But it was day; the sun was just coming out from behind a cloud.

Sudden understanding of the whole situation hit Jo with full force. They were back among the living. They had a second chance. She thought the world was open for her to do almost anything now. Or at least anything that had to do with > 200 BPM thrash metal.

Ian was on his feet now. Jo smiled at him, and no more words were necessary. Without further warning she threw arms around him and held him tight. She didn't remember ever doing that while feeling completely happy. Before, it had almost always been something like "It's OK, maybe we won't die on the next mission" or "Don't worry, maybe my memory will return after an experimental procedure at Area 51" or similar, trying to ease the pain. All those seemed like distant memories now.

But Jo thought Ian's heartbeat possibly felt or sounded different again. She broke off.

"Can I -" she began, unsure. What would she see?

"Anything."

She began to unbutton Ian's shirt from the top, until she saw that there was no scar. And it made sense. It was easier to restore a human to factory condition than to work around or repair a SCEPTRE-issue metal heart. Though what that meant for the future, she couldn't be sure. Quorthon of Bathory had died of heart failure at 38. In theory the artificial organ could have outlasted the rest of Ian's body. Still, she was glad he was rid of it.

The future held other unknowns too. Was the

hammer of justice just waiting to strike, concerning her and Erik's Area 51 transgressions? Some former SCEPTRE operative certainly had to remain alive too. But this was the path they had chosen, and they would see where it would lead, instead of remaining in hiding and fear. If their music would get known enough, they would at least have a bit of insurance against any sudden "disappearance."

Only then a bit of sadness entered Jo's mind as she thought of something completely else. The broken Yaris. She turned to look at its sorry state. Whoever was responsible, be it God or aliens, surely would have had the power to restore it to factory condition too. But that wasn't part of the deal. It was from the discontinued second generation, the most round and friendly looking model.

It was a bit absurd to feel sad for it. But some vehicles could be vital for mankind's survival. It was just that most people would never know, so they would remain unseen heroes.

Regarding vehicles, out of the blue Jo experienced an odd memory flash and recalled an earlier thought.

"Forget human frailty and be a hard metal shell.."

She seemed to recall an adventure somewhere else. It was just at the edge of her memory and already fading away.

"Ian, what did you say when I fell on you? Do you remember something?"

Ian looked puzzled. "What should I remember? That was just some unimportant cute stuff, imagining you as a lightweight supernatural being. No offense, but reality is a bit more painful."

Jo could believe the answer being honest. A motor vehicle could never be described as lightweight. She was both a bit disappointed and relieved.

Her thoughts drifted back to reality.

Yet the disappointment remained. Until it hit her that there was something she should say, to not abandon what she thought to have learned elsewhere.

“It's actually not. Unimportant. Sometimes you say or do things that are a bit ... much. And I might reply with something that's off. Or not at all. But remember that I love you being just like that.”

It wasn't a huge thing, yet Jo felt a weight fall off her chest. Ian looked at her a bit funny just for a second. Then the look turned into a thoughtful smile, which seemed to tell Jo that of course he knew that, but sometimes it was good to hear in person.

“Come here.”

Jo did so, a bit confused. And then it happened in a kind of blur that she was no longer on her feet. Her initial reaction was shock, until she figured that if Ian was in factory condition there was no reason why he shouldn't be allowed to compare his imagination to reality in practice. Jo let herself relax against him and wished for time to slow down so that this moment would last just a bit longer.

Erik felt as if his body had been kickstarted. The jolt still echoed inside, leaving him shaky. He saw stars, like after taking a very heavy dump.

He found himself in a completely blackened and charred room, sitting on a skeletal bar stool with only the steel remaining. It took almost a minute to orient himself properly.

Then he understood. The bar. Somehow he had been returned here in a repaired body. But any of the destruction around him had not been undone. That was not part of the deal. The corpses probably had been taken away by some government clean-up crew, and he was pleased with that. A smell of death lingered, nevertheless. He thought of Mayhem's late original vocalist Dead, who had used to sniff a dead crow from a plastic bag to get ready for a show.

He found himself able to walk and headed for the entrance. As he pushed the entrance door, it just fell open; the wood around the hinges had burned off.

Daylight burned his eyes as he walked to the deserted street. He almost thought he was inside a western, exiting a saloon after shooting everyone dead.

Kim didn't understand at first what she was seeing when she turned to the street facing the bar. A lone figure had exited. Initially, she thought of danger. A government assassin? Or a remaining infected?

She drove closer and now she recognized. The lack of understanding just got deeper. She braked to a stop, switched to neutral and got out.

Fuck. It should not have been possible, but it was Erik, alive. Kim only barely remembered what had happened in the control realm. But Erik had gone to another dimension ... to fight. As far as she understood, he had to have been victorious. Otherwise the infection would have engulfed all known dimensions and realms.

It was mostly too epic to even think about. But that made him another hero of Purexo.

Kim had no especial words for this situation. She walked closer. Erik's long hair blew in the wind. The wind brought with it a slight stench of charred flesh and bones. Kim didn't want to stay here for too long. Not only for the stench, but for the possibility of some actual military or government personnel returning and finding out her imposture.

"Want a ride?" she said at last.

Erik had a vague smile on his face. "Sure. I've had enough of this smell."

Kim got yet closer, but she had nothing more to say.

It was almost as if time had stopped. Then she thought, fuck it. She would be disgusted with herself later if she didn't take this initiative. So she leaned up and kissed him just a bit. Erik's beard abraded her face rudely, and he had only very little time to respond, but in that short moment Kim got the impression of a tremendous strength inside him. She could have allowed her heart to jump, but she didn't, instead she just thought: that's Erik, strong on his mountain.

They walked back to the van in silence.

Viktor flew over the astral realm. He saw the feast hall and stage being rebuilt. It would take the concerted effort of many souls for a long time. Well, time was all they had. For a moment Viktor considered if he should touch down and try to find Jon Nödtveidt, to ask advice from him on reaching the innermost circles of chaos.

But then he decided against it, for multiple reasons. Due to the sheer amount of people below it was no easy task, Viktor had too great respect for him, and Jon might not respond kindly to a stranger asking the most important questions in all existence.

Perhaps most importantly, Viktor knew he had to carve his own path to the heart of Azerate, like every true anti-cosmic disciple before him or after him.

So he accelerated his flight, until anyone looking up on the ground would see just a blur. On his mental command and recital of a few Enochian verses, a gate to the nether realms opened before him, and he vanished as if he had never been, returning to the black void where he belonged.

Erik observed Kim as she drove with a hard, even expression on her face. She could only be described as a valkyrie of misanthropy, combat and doom. Certainly, she was his equal. Erik thought of all their encounters so far. Neither had an easy personality, and that was unlikely to change. But the hardest things were worth fighting for the most, right?

Suddenly his cell phone beeped. It was a surprise it still worked. Erik read the short message. He made the sign of the gun in secret, barely able to contain himself.

“Kim? We’d need to make a pickup. The cargo train yard. They can ride in the back.”

Kim nodded in acknowledgment and swung the van hard left in the next intersection. The tires ran over a solitary black slimy tentacle rotting in the sun.

Bonus material

Additional epilogues

Ian dreamed. The endless fog gave way to a rising rocky slope. He began to climb it, and climbed for many hours, rising above the layer of fog, until he began to hear Viking metal singing. The voice was medium-pitch, throaty and strong, just like it should be in this genre.

He turned into the direction of the voice and saw a lone figure in rugged leather clothes singing at the top of the mountain. The clouds and the fog began to part, giving way to a brilliant Nordic sunset.

“When you gonna come full circle?”

The echoing voice and the large chunks of meat blown away by rounds from the heavy vehicle-mounted machine gun kept playing in Jo's mind. It was both profound, humorous and just a bit disturbing.

The movie that she and Ian had watched (again) had inspired them to make this detour. It would not take much time.

The late autumn air was cold, but the sun was bright, almost at its zenith for this day. He was alive, that much she knew. But now that she was actually here it seemed to make little sense that she had not taken any contact for years. She was thankful for the actor/director for inspiration.

Jo read the writing on the rusted mailbox.

ANTISOUND STUDIO

RUSS ALDER

She walked along the long driveway. Behind the recording studio building off in the distance, something orange glinted in the sun.

The Renditioner exited the firing range, which was foggy inside. As the door opened, a tank drove past him through the fog. The fog seemed to expand to everywhere he looked. He turned to the objective marker and jogged the short distance, watching some groups of soldiers doing push-ups or other exercises.

The objective was a large hangar-like building, Its large door began to slide open sideways, revealing three operatives inside. They were dressed in long black leather coats. The inside of the coat seemed to have some thin circuitry on it.

“Sarge holds the current squadron record at –”

The sand-haired, most authoritative looking operative froze in mid-sentence. To his right side was another, more relaxed looking man, and to the left a short heavy-set woman with hair dyed bright red. They all looked like they could operate any weapon and kill any enemy, human or not.

“Is this the FNG?” the woman asked.

“I’m the Renditioner,” the Renditioner introduced himself.

Alternate ending

The Demiurge's voice faded as if into a swirling vortex. The terms were clear. The rules of the multiuniverse were inviolate. Their bodies would stay dead in the first dimension forever, but they could choose to relocate themselves to any other dimension.

It was time to choose. Somehow Ian knew they could not take forever. Eleven screens and eleven options. Or ten actually, as the first was them being dead. Some of the others could be disregarded outright, like being floating brain creatures orbiting some distant gas giant. Ian didn't want to be a car either for the rest of his life.

So it was a process of elimination.

But finally they settled on just one.

Ian, Jo and Erik. They all nodded in agreement. Ian knew he was scared, and they had to be too, at least to some degree.

But they lived for war. In the end that was futile to try to change. They would always be fighting in some capacity. Whether it was as sentient vehicles, as bipedal ground forces, or as worms inside the soil. What brought comfort was that they would always meet in the feast hall, then reincarnate for another round.

The choice made, the eleven large displays faded too into the swirling fog. Then they were jerked through the

realms of existence. Absurdly Ian thought of whether he had vomited right at the point of departure and if his astral vomit would be left flying forever.

They came to under blood red skies, inside a rare remaining human outpost. Each was wearing dark camouflage pants, flak vest and a helmet, armed to the teeth with conventional and energy weapons and blades and grenades of every kind.

“For justice,” Erik growled.

“And metal,” Jo added.

Some more soldiers were scurrying around, looking somewhat out of control. It could turn into a bloodbath if they didn't know what to do. Both in the sky and on the ground, bloodthirsty machines seeking for complete annihilation of the human race were coming. Off in the distance, the all-seeing metal eye of Tacgnol loomed. While under its command, the machines had already scorched much of the planet, using nuclear arsenal indiscriminately. But the three would hold their ground.

They cocked their weapons.

A song began to play. Ta-ta-ta-ta, ta-ta-ta-ta, ta-ta-ta-ta, ta-ta-ta-ta.

It was Manowar: Die for Metal.

The credits rolled.