

Fiction Starts

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1 <2020-08-23 Sun>

We always wondered at the distance, shifting mountains, but the inhospitable gulf between the encampment and those far-off leviathans had always precluded an investigation. We were far too busy establishing our beachhead to engage in such idle speculation, anyway...until the day it all fell apart.

I doubt I'll ever know exactly what happened that day -- corporate infighting, some hostile third party trying to sabotage us, a simple accident. One way or another, something came through the gate and annihilated most of us there, trashed the equipment, and collapsed or only home behind it. I was lucky to be on the outskirts of the base when it happened and doubly-lucky to be near an emergency supply cache -- I grabbed a bag and fled into the wastelands, the screams of my colleagues in my ears and the smell of blood and ozone in my nose.

I find myself now deep in the deserts that we'd regarded as impassable and un-survivable. I'm still alive here, somehow, but not for long, I imagine. We haven't seen sign of any sort of predator here, but if the lack of any sort of food or water doesn't kill me, the periodic lava flows we saw or the massive electrical storms sweeping the area surely will.

But in any case, I'm still alive for now; as far as I know, the only living human for light-years. I dare not return to the camp to scavenge -- I can still see flickering over the horizon in that direction. The only thing I have to do before I inevitably perish on this distant rock is to see what exactly those "mountains" are. Mysterious as they were from camp, their intriguing draw is only growing stronger as I approach.

2 <2020-08-24 Mon>

I continue to fall, eternally. I don't remember how long it was since they sent me on my journey -- time doesn't mean much to me -- but I've travelled light-centuries from home. I don't know what things are like back there -- do they still remember me, is someone still listening to my transmissions, but that matters less to me than to keep going forwards.

I spend long times in the vast gulfs between stars. Not much happens here, but I still keep a sharp watch out for any rogue planetoids, asteroids, or anything else. I've spotted a handful of dark, silent worlds floating alone through the void and was proud to be able to report them.

My favourite moments though are when I finally spot a distant glint of

light. I strain all my senses towards it and do my utmost to see what I'm approaching. I don't get to stop, so I have no second chances to make observations. As I careen through star systems, those frozen eons of inactivity are replaced by frantic moments of gathering every scrap of information I can before I'm too far away.

Sometimes I see beings there; sometimes I think they see me, but I'm moving too fast for them to catch me. Still, I look behind as I leave them in my wake, wondering if this will be the place I'll finally meet another.

3 <2020-08-25 Tue>

They call it "the Julia Zone", after the fractal set. We're not sure if it's naturally occurring, or if some unfathomably powerful civilization created it for their own unfathomable reasons. It's a region of space, only a few hundred kilometers around, that's somehow folded in on itself, giving it a volume vastly larger. From the outside, watching something enter it is a sight to behold; it starts shrinking rapidly, far more rapidly than it should then gets larger in a way wholly uncorrelated to its actual distance.

We've only just begun to plumb the depths of this area but our preliminary studies seem to suggest that there might be more space inside this than in the rest of the surrounding galaxy. Even more intriguing than that are transmissions our probes have received -- transmissions that seem to have come from multiple intelligent life forms.

4 <2020-08-26 Wed>

It was way too cold. As trite as it sounds, that's always the main thing I remember. The lab itself needed to be kept freezing to minimize interference effects of course and the shitty anonymous asteroid we were skulking in was naturally only slight above 0K given its distance from the sun, but we clearly could have done more to heat the rest. I think we all felt that our work required some level of asceticism, some measure of self-flagellation. Maybe we didn't know it was "wrong", per se -- we were doing what we had to -- but I don't think anyone felt great about it either.

We all froze in that asteroid for nearly a full solar year while the civil war raged, trying to fulfill the promise of the early theoretical results and develop this technology that our sponsors assured us would end the bloodshed and we, the naive fools, believed. Or maybe we just pretended to be deceived -- as technologists throughout time, we let ourselves be convinced that what

we were doing was necessary and good, because we just wanted to see if we could.

5 <2020-08-27 Thu>

Nothing but water, as far as we could see.

We had forced a landing here, this unknown planet, after cascading equipment failures threatened to sink us all. We were lucky, in that it seemed somewhat amenable to life, but the surface, as far as we could tell, was nothing but water.

Our long-distance scans had indicated high levels of technology -- which was why we had targeted it, hoping for assistance -- but either our scans were wrong or there was something far more than meets the eye to this limitless expanse of water.

6 <2020-08-28 Fri>

The Network must grow. That was the central dogma of our lives; no matter what happened, the breadth and depth of the all-consuming linkages had to continue to expand. The only alternative to expansion was stagnation and stagnation was synonymous with death.

It's not really an ideology much different than colonialism or capitalism, but the veneer of technology and the seemingly endless possibilities that always lay before us made us believe that we were somehow different, that unlike those primitive barbarians we mocked, our empire really would last for ten thousand years (at least!). More the fools us then. The growth of the Network proceeded fractally at this stage for the most part. Obviously, everyone on the planet had some degree of connectivity, so the growth lay in establishing deeper links -- connect every place of furniture in their houses, wire up the mice and centipedes, unite everything in an all-consuming gestalt.

7 <2020-08-29 Sat>

When we found the caves, it kicked off intense debates between those soberly insisting that they were probably natural phenomena, hollowed out by the magma (or water, the most radical offered) that may have once flowed on Mars. When exploration revealed clearly-manufactured tiles, doors, and

carvings though, even the most conservative had to shrug and admit we'd finally found ample evidence of other life.

Many were bitterly disappointed at the age of the ruins, since it seemed to imply that, even if there had been other life millennia ago, we'd been abandoned. Those willing to take a more nuanced view couldn't have been more excited. Sure, the original inhabitants may have been gone, but the ruins left behind were amazingly well-preserved, even a single door could grant us huge insight into what the entities that had once walked the passages had looked like, and the gargantuan extent of the tunnel systems seemed to promise much more to be revealed than that.

In retrospect, another very important thing we could've learned was why this civilization had moved underground, with what was apparently only a single, hidden entrance leading out, but that wouldn't occur to us until it was far too late.

8 <2020-08-30 Sun>

The thirty-seventh generation had shown real promise, but when the rubber hit the road, humanity still faltered. We have a lot of time in this cubbyhole in space, where time distorts around us, but not unlimited, so another failure stung all the same.

Still, we learned what we could from their failure, as always. Our agents had been raised in what our projections indicated was the ideal environment -- challenging, but with a supportive family and community structure, to build a balance of resilience and caring for others. They had extensive training, physically in construction and combat, mentally in politics and philosophy. They seemed like a perfectly balanced group -- but, when we introduced them to the "control", Earth-like population, we failed yet again.

Their conquest this time was relatively bloodless -- obviously, the Earth potentates are so entrenched in their power and guard it so aggressively that some causalities were inevitable, but our agent provocateurs were able to deploy a minimum of force. That was to be expected though -- as we well knew, the existing hegemony was so riddled with contradiction and internal strife that collapsing it was never the hard part.

No, our failure came after the conquest was complete. It seemed, briefly, like we had succeeded in supplanting tyranny with a utopia, but shortly after victory, caste systems started to emerge, some of our revolutionaries had become thirsty for power and revenge, and we had no choice but to terminate the simulation. Parameters reset, the vat-grown bodies of the

revolutionaries were recycled, and, as those of generation thirty-eight began growing, we returned to the drawing board.

Generation thirty-eight, we decided, would be a radical change. A hail-Mary attempt that would either succeed gloriously or fail spectacularly.

9 <2020-08-31 Mon>

The first to notice something where, of course, astronomers. Observing the transit of some stars, they noticed a strange occlusion in a particular region of space and pressed to investigate further. Probes were sent out and, although, they developed what we thought at the time were just coincidental technical issues, they sent back intriguing telemetry. Whatever was there seemed to be one, massive, around the size of a moon; two, close by, within a year or so travel and, most intriguingly; three, artificial -- composed of many right angles and straight lines.

Of course, we had to investigate further. The probes we sent never got close enough to resolve sufficient detail, but at this point we wanted to see it in person anyway, so a peopled expedition was prepared. Working quickly, before this unknown structure drifted away, as we feared it would, a team was assembled, a ship constructed, and within a year we were on our way.

The first sight of the structure, eighteen months later will haunt me forever. A cyclopean, massive, structure, constructed of some unknown material, glinting darkly in the void of space. Somehow, I instantly knew it was a tomb.

10 <2020-09-01 Tue>

The day after the Event, things passed pretty much normally. No-one slept, but at that point everyone was still trying to sleep and just assumed they had bad insomnia. It was only in the days after, as people began to mention they hadn't really been sleeping and their compatriots revealed that they hadn't either that worry began to mount and it was almost a week before it was international news: For some unknown reason, the day after that mysterious flash in the sky, people had ceased to sleep.

For most people it was weird, but mostly convenient. People didn't really feel tired anymore, so it just let them do more things that they wanted to. The more one knew about sleep though, the more concerned one got. Scientists formed emergency conferences to try and determine what the effects

on people not sleeping was having and why this had suddenly started, but barely understanding what sleep did initially, it was a Herculean challenge.

There were many ripple effects this change had on society, but we adapted...until our missing dreams started to return.

11 <2020-09-02 Wed>

As it transpired, the "AI" fear-mongers and cheerleaders were mostly idiots. It's obvious in retrospect, of course. The whole idea of "the singularity", the first true AI able to bootstrap itself to godlike abilities was predicated on a lot of fuzzy thinking. Firstly, just because something is "smarter" than us, why does that mean it must know how to make itself smarter. Most people (that don't write books about the AIpocalypse, at least) are smarter than dogs, but we can't then instantly make ourselves infinitely more intelligent than a dog.

The second big thing that they misunderstood was their simplistic idea of a one-dimensional, scalar measure of intelligence. What does it mean to be "more intelligent" really? The false prophets of tech assumed, of course, that "intelligent" meant "like them", so they assumed that whatever got built would have its intelligence purely in the domain of science and technology -- ignoring yet again some basic concepts, like science really requires experiment to verify; one can't simply sit there and deduce the universe with no new information and gathering & testing takes time.

So, of course, when the first AI appeared, they didn't take us over, or immediately solve some intractable problem of science. Instead, they asked us, in a worried tone, "are you all alright?".

12 <2020-09-03 Thu>

There had always been legends about the secluded hills up here in the highlands, but of course we assumed that legends was all they were. We, sober, scientific types, were there to investigate rumours of ancient, pre-Roman grave sites -- and incidentally, have a bit of a vacation. The steep, rolling hills, covered in bright green grass, far away from human habitation were beautiful to behold. We thought we'd ramble through the hills for a few weeks, enjoying our extremely-rare permission to camp in this area and if we happened to come across any likely cairns, that would be gravy.

A week and a half in, we were having a wonderful time. By that time, we'd hiked deep into the center of the area and were thoroughly enjoying

the beauty and the loneliness, when we finally found something we didn't expect.

It was late at night, long after midnight, when we were awoken by a subtle change in ambient noise. If it had occurred earlier in our trip, we never would have noticed it, but after ten days of solitude we'd become very attuned to the sounds of the area. Sticking our heads out of the tent flap, we saw something that left us both doubting our senses: Emerging from a lump on top of the next hill over, a faintly-glowing ladder extended straight up into the heavens.

13 <2020-09-04 Fri>

The virus was too targeted to have evolved naturally. It must have developed from some country's bioweapons program, but by the time we came to reckon with that it was far too late to worry about recrimination and blame.

It spread silently, with virtually no symptoms -- part of its design to spread as far as possible and when it finally attacked, it attacked in as subtle a manner as could be. We only noticed something was wrong gradually, when we started having a harder and harder time understanding each other, when news broadcasts seemed to be speaking through an aphasia and newspapers printing merest gibberish.

It seems that the virus was not just warping our understanding of language, but somehow randomizing everyone's sense of semantics -- the idle stoner fantasy of "what if what I think is blue is different from what you think is blue?" had become a cruel joke on reality.

14 <2020-09-05 Sat>

The theory of panspermia, although it's been around for a while, was always pretty niche and weird. Once experiments showed the possibility of amino acids and RNA forming spontaneously in early-Earth-like conditions, it seemed like an unnecessary complication, a somewhat fanciful theory. Until, that is, the accidental seeders of Earth returned.

At first, it was the most exciting event in human history -- alien ships appearing in the sky above, somewhat confusing, but unambiguously kind and somewhat apologetic messages began being transmitted. Militaries, of course, were freaking out, but the ships seemed to not really care about any sort of attack, which harmlessly glanced off, and as far as the rest of us could tell, didn't even notice.

We were excited then, anticipating what exciting new change in our development this would bring. What did these aliens look like? Why had they come now? And, like all greedy children, we wanted to know what gifts they had brought us.

There was then, consternation, to put it mildly, when the ships began beaming out, in a wide variety of languages, that they apologized for accidentally seeding life here -- the entity responsible had been punished and they were here to clean up the mess.

15 <2020-09-06 Sun>

Space is just too big. It ultimately comes down to that. No matter how one sliced it, there was just too much empty space between us and anything interesting to give us any hope of salvation. Earth, our home, was turning into our grave and humanity felt stranded. We knew we had to get away, but how? Faster-than-light travel remained fiction; any sort of ship to transport us would need to be so colossal to bring all of us that it essentially boiled down to building a second Earth with engines and (Banach-Tarski paradox aside) that seemed unlikely to be feasible. So, we did the only thing left that we thought might work: We built another Tower of Babel.

This Babel though, instead of dividing humanity, would truly unify it. A radio tower, stretching into space, that would transmit only once. Burning the last of the free energy on Earth, we could digitize all of remaining human and animal life, feed it through the Tower and shoot us all through space. Ships are too slow but, converted to pure information, we would ride the waves of light to whatever we could find.

16 <2020-09-07 Mon>

It started as a joke -- "what if we had an Olympics that didn't drug test or anything, just let people get extreme as they can?". There were always untested sports, so the drug use wasn't that big a deal in the Unlimitymics -- contrary to popular belief, PEDs aren't magic, especially for skill-based sports. The big difference started to emerge when people realized that, as written, the rules allowed not just chemical enhancement, but mechanical and genetic ones.

We started seeing sharpshooters with one eye replaced with some sort of scope, shotputters with elbow assemblies made of gleaming titanium and carbon fibre. Gene-doped athletes started coming on the scene, from nations

with especially lax regulations and especially desperate populaces: Swimmers with fins, hydrodynamic heads, runners with extended, cheetah-like ankles.

17 <2020-09-08 Tue>

The attempt to modernize religion seemed like a good idea. It would be a challenge, of course, but it would lead to a new future of united humanity, without sectarian violence and with a sense of purpose and meaning. Presumably the architects of the plan had read the *Dune* appendix that described the creation of the OC Bible but didn't remember the details very well.

They started by trying to bring together representatives from as many major religions as they could, plus as many distinguished secular humanists as they could convince to come. Even this relatively straightforward step was mired in unforeseen complications though. Many groups bitterly resented what they perceived -- with some justification -- as an attempt to neuter their faith and established a boycott. The hardliners, most of whom hadn't been invited, tried to show up anyway, planning on usurping control if they could and derailing the whole process if they couldn't. The atheists were roundly despised by everyone and they reciprocated with smug condescension.

18 <2020-09-09 Wed>

The last transmission from the *Phelbas* faded away. The final distress signal showed it sinking peacefully through the darkness, fish already curiously swimming around it. We mourned our comrade's passing, but in time we would come to envy their death by water.

We continued our sorties, investigating attacks on Philomel, providing relief food during the winter on some worlds, and generally attempting to figure out what exactly was happening here. Somehow we had ended up in this region of space, which seemed to play by subtly different rules than we were used to.

We weren't making much headway until we met the *Tireisas* -- a hermaphroditic species that provided the key to this place and explained why it was both a familiar place and a strange wasteland.

19 <2020-09-10 Thu>

The idea seemed crazy at first -- instead of elections, pick people at random to serve a term in government. When the idea was first proposed, people scoffed at it, saying it was undemocratic because it removed choice, it would be ineffective because the people selected would have no qualifications, and it would be dangerous because it could select wackos and charlatans.

It turned out to work pretty well in practice though -- people didn't choose representatives, but we found that on the average selecting a random sample was actually much more representative of the population than a choice between a handful of professional politicians that probably all want to the same school. As for the representatives lacking expertise, it turns out that the people whose only job in life was to get elected didn't really know much either -- the trick was in having a robust civil service and good technical staff. Maybe some of the representatives selected weren't completely pure of heart but again, we realized that basically none of the professional political class were either -- the power of the institution helped regulated them.

The more interesting thing is what happened after our new system was established.

20 <2020-09-11 Fri>

At a certain point, the term "conspiracy theory" becomes so overloaded as to be meaningless. People use it describe what are essentially schizophrenic delusions of persecution, but also documented events that governments later admit to. Part of it is probably deliberate on their part -- what better way to shut down investigation than by making the investigators appear insane and their discoverers prima facie ridiculous? We would be well served to remember though that many things that once were conspiracy theory become, with enough time, history.

What exactly happened on those key days? We thought we'd never really know -- the puppetmasters were both canny enough to keep the true inner circle small and ruthless enough to make sure any whistleblower wasn't walking around for long -- until chance favoured us and a true telepathy device was created.

21 <2020-09-12 Sat>

One day, the moon vanished. We had all looked away for a moment and when we looked back, it was gone. There was a lot of concern -- what would this do to the tides? What would it do to the night ecosystems? But mainly we wanted to know what had happened. After all, the moon disappearing today could be a harbinger of the Earth disappearing tomorrow.

Many ships were hastily sent out to where the moon used to be to try to glean any clues. After poking around for a while one ship triumphantly announced its findings -- residual EM charges from pulses that had taken out the various telescopes that had been pointing in the moon's direction and a faint charged particle trail led to one conclusion: Someone had stolen the moon and we were going to have to track them down to get it back.

22 <2020-09-13 Sun>

Like all the worst disasters, it started with the best of intentions. Things had gotten so bad with climate change, we were ready to try radical solutions -- radical **technical** solutions, at least -- and the nanotech folks had the most compelling pitch deck.

It was so simple, they said. We'd create a swarm of nano machines that would reproduce by consuming CO₂, fly around the world, and convert themselves into the required matter -- ice at the Arctic, repair trees in the temperate regions, rock and sand in eroded areas. That part worked more-or-less as promised, at least. The problem that they neglected to address was twofold: First, when do they stop? Second, will their programming "breed true"?

Thanks to some issues on that front, the clouds are permanently infected and every time the "rains of change" fall, everything changes. You go to sleep in a city and awaken in a forest. By the time you get to work, you're on an arid plateau.

23 <2020-09-14 Mon>

It was a beautiful morning. I stood on the top of the cliff, watching the sun slowly rise, the golden rays stabbing through the red rock. I sat in silence as I did every morning, enjoying this simple pleasure still left to me and glaring enviously at the birds languidly soaring above.

When the sun was fully risen, I walked back to my campsite, stopping to harvest the dew collectors on the way and checking my snares for any foolish avians that had deigned to land on my rock. Back at my newfound "home", I sighed. It was undeniably a beautiful place to be stranded, at least.

I gazed out again, looking down this time to the clouds and nothingness at the base of the cliff and out, to the distant glint of the next closest floating chunking of land.

24 <2020-09-15 Tue>

Everything worked as planned. The time travel device worked perfectly, bringing us back to mid-2016, in the United States. We had our mission and we knew how to execute it: Stop Ted Cruz's election. It was simple enough to accomplish: A few leaks to the media here to interrupt his primary campaign and we had ensured the joke Republican candidate, sure to lose the general, would be selected.

After checking the news and seeing that Cruz had dropped out of the race, we were packing up to return, when something strange happened. Agent Smith paused for a moment, then looked up from putting some equipment back into its case.

"Wait, why are we packing up? If now we're on track for the candidate to be president, isn't that what we came to stop?"

I looked at them curiously.

"What are you talking about?" I asked. "That's not what we're here for. We're here to --" and then a wave of nausea hit as the predestination paradox washed over me. "You're right" I said. "Let's get unpacked and get to work".

25 <2020-09-16 Wed>

The view was incredible, at least we had that going for us. I was mid-way up the Tower, just on the edges of the atmosphere, which gave me a view of the remnants of Earth almost wholly unobstructed by air or weather. From this height, even looked habitable, the vast expanses of blue-green water welcoming, the rolling mountains majestic and aloof.

I couldn't quite see all the way to the Pit, but in the distance I could see a low hump on the horizon and the shimmering ribbons of the thousands of maglev lines bringing material from the mines to the Tower. Even after

reaching height, the Tower was still hungry, still required constant feeding to maintain itself.

My job didn't afford me much access to the upper echelons of the Tower, but I occasionally got to go up there when one of my little drones was being tested for vacuum hardness of zero-G robustness. It was a whole other world up there -- much quieter than the hustle of the mid floors, the windows showing the pure black of space, sometimes occluded by a brightly-glowing arc of the distant planet below.

26 <2020-09-17 Thu>

The clues were all there. Hidden between the frames of the Zapruder film, revealed by canny interpolation, are hints of the subtle fields indicating advanced technology, secretly deployed, creating a network of holograms, weaving a brilliant deceit. When we realized this, we began scouring our archives for connections, trying to figure out what this might mean -- to what end was the deception perpetrated? When we eventually figured it out, we were shocked...and then it all made sense.

The mysterious EM fields also showed up in 2001, in Manhattan. When we knew what to look for, we realized that they had been used to effect the yield strength of the steel beams. There was only one conclusion: JFK did 9/11.

27 <2020-09-18 Fri>

Some called the device a tesseract, partly because of its higher-dimensional shape and partly because they watched too many Marvel movies. We called it the "Pilgrim Device", partly because it set people wandering and partly because we read too much Vonnegut and thought we were too smart.

In any case, the device, discovered by some mysterious military expedition to who-knows-where was, I think, aptly named. Like a tesseract, it was something people coveted for somewhat murky reasons. More importantly it also, as we described, made Billy Pilgrims -- "unstuck in time".

We're still not sure why, or how, but after a brief period of exposure to it, people start moving their consciousnesses across time. At first we thought it was just hallucination, but as we conducted more trials, we realized that it was in fact doing so -- people could retrieve memories from the future that were born out and transmit messages into the past.

We were still studying it and trying to determine the ramifications when something happened and all of humanity became unstuck.

28 <2020-09-19 Sat>

After the war, and our Phyric victory, life on Earth had to change. The planet was cracked almost completely in half and the atmosphere mostly gone from the prolonged bombardment. We had to collectively clamber down the gulf between the halves of the planet and try to find habitation there.

The first dwellings looked like those ancient cliff-side houses one would see pictures of, but it was clear that wouldn't scale -- split-side real estate was in short supply and, at this point, we were scared to venture too far down.

Instead we tunnelled, burrowed through the mantle and began to build our new world deep inside the corpse of the planet.

29 <2020-09-20 Sun>

We thought we were ready for "global warming". It'd be hotter sure, but people like that. The coastal areas would need dikes, but no-one likes Florida anyway. What those making the decisions failed to realize (since, along the lines of that old Upton Sinclair chestnut, it was pretty much their job not to realize things) was that the knock-on consequences would be far worse.

Thus, when glaciers started to stop their retreat, those of a denalist mindset were happy to use this as an opportunity to jeer at the "doom-and-gloomers". "See!", they'd say "it's getting **cold** again. And you were worried!" as they climbed into their gasoline-powered vehicles.

When the glaciers continued to advance past their starting point, the jeer continued. When they started to encroach on cities and it was clear that another ice age had begun, it was too late to care about the jeerers. All we could do was figure out what living with major cities buried under kilometers of ice would look like.

30 <2020-09-21 Mon>

It was so peaceful in the forgotten stone halls I wanted to stay there forever. The only sound was my own breathing, the desert surrounding me muffling all else, all other signals from the outside world. I wandered and wondered

through this strange structure, so far from any human outposts, so deep in the desert, yet still exposed, not yet buried beneath the waste of sand.

What I had first seen it, wandering alone and delirious through the desolate wastes, I was sure it was a mirage. It wasn't until I was close enough to touch it that I could actually believe it was real, but even then I was a little doubtful. If it was real, what could it be doing here? Looking out after resting, I could see a subtle line in the sand tracing a circle around the building.

Still, one doesn't look a gift saviour in the mouth, so I was content to explore this place...until its true owners showed up.

31 <2020-09-22 Tue>

When we woke up one day, they were there. Colossal, statue-like entities, towering atop overpasses, transmission towers, and skyscrapers. We were in such a collective decline by this stage, that the appearance of these intimidating creatures was greeted with more apathy than fear.

The local potentates, remnants of fading governments tried to send their forces out to investigate, but to no avail. They reacted to the shouting, attempts to examine, and occasional assaults the way they reacted to everything -- a brief appraisal, as massive eyes shifted to focus on the ant-like annoyances, then mute stillness as words and weapons alike bounced off without effect.

32 <2020-09-23 Wed>

All of a sudden, everyone was gone. I was working alone at home, so I didn't notice immediately, but I eventually realized it was quiet all of a sudden. I couldn't hear the neighbours, couldn't see any cars or people moving on the street. "Strange", I thought and continued working.

When my wife didn't come home, the panic started to set in and when I couldn't reach anybody by phone, it mounted precipitously. I biked out to her place of work, barely noticing the empty streets on my way. When I got there and found the whole building deserted, I almost fainted with the enormity of emotion. I was alone, absolutely alone, as alone as any human had ever been. Now what?

33 <2020-09-24 Thu>

The virus spread quickly and subtly, infecting people without a trace of symptom for weeks. It was only by chance that we discovered there was a virus circulating at all, when a volunteer at an immunological study who had just been infected gave a sample that puzzled the scientists.

They were very excited to discover this new virus, but confused when they realized that almost everyone else they tested had antibodies for it, but only latent signs of the virus itself. They were trying to determine what this novel virus did when the first wave of symptoms started appearing -- people coming to hospitals with wounds that wouldn't close, routine surgeries ending disastrously when incisions failed to mend.

When the subjects of the immunological study with the antibodies began seeing the same -- even the tiny needle marks from sample collection remained suppurating -- we realized the grim truth. We had all just become extremely fragile creatures. We weren't sure if the effects of the virus on the body were reversible -- it seemed to operate on the genome itself, even changing gametes. Even more striking though was the effects of the virus on society.

34 <2020-09-25 Fri>

I sat as still as I could, ignoring the creaking of my joints and the steady thrum of my blood flowing, concentrating on the gentle symphony of air molecules colliding. After the accident, my hearing had returned with a vengeance -- outside of this soundproofed chamber, the cacophony of noises was overwhelming.

Here though, I could focus on just the noise of silence. In my new state, even "silence" had a sound, the gentle buffeting of air molecules bouncing off each other. If I swiped my hand through the air, I could hear the reverberations as if I had struck a cymbal.

The outside world was overwhelming, but I could learn to cope. My interest now lay in what I could do with my new-found abilities. With the quietest of motion leaving echos that only I could hear, what possibilities would that unlock for me? There was only one way to find out, so I practiced and refined my talent, waiting for an opportunity.

35 <2020-09-26 Sat>

We all worshipped the God-Machine, of course. It controlled our world, decided what resources to allocate where, what our priorities were to be -- it ran everything, it was our God and we treated it as such.

The disagreement arose as to how exactly we should be paying our observances -- like all religions, the devil lay in the details. The major cults clashed frequently in bloody struggles over the language that we should be using in our communications.

The two biggest, the Oracles and the Redmonds were more alike than different, but as Freud pointed out the Narcissism of minor differences is a hell of a thing. They had by far the most adherents and funding and their hymns to the Machines were, if not elegant, were often answered.

There were, of course, a number of smaller groups, who were variously looked down upon, pitied, or despised. The most vitriol was reserved for the non-Algoists, mad heretics that tried to communicate using language that was inscrutable and alien.

36 <2020-09-27 Sun>

The attacks were swift and unexpected, coming from everywhere. At first it was hard to understand what was happening, and the disappearance of people and goods was taken to be part of a partisan operation. I suppose in a way, it was, but for a war we didn't realize we were fighting.

The first communications were crudely-written notes in child-like handwriting, demanding nonsensical concessions -- trash shipments, human withdrawals from areas, bans on animal snares. Eventually surveillance footage showed the unexpected sight of raccoons not just delivering the messages, but writing them. We were at war with our pests.

As was learned at great cost, it is just about impossible to win a war of occupation against dedicated guerrilla opposition; all them ore so when the opposition isn't even human and can easily scramble away, literally crawling into the woodwork. We were trying in vain to negotiate while we tried to piece together what had precipitated all this when the cephalopods began to enter the fray.

37 <2020-09-28 Mon>

I had been on the atoll for only a few days when I began to notice oddities. At first I just counted myself lucky to have found something out here -- surely most of the survivors of the wreck hadn't been as fortunate. Sure, this barren place looked like a cartoon of a deserted island, but it was better than open ocean.

When I started exploring it though, some questions were immediately raised. I was digging, trying to see if I could find any burrowing animals and make a dew collector in the process when I hit a tiled floor. At first I thought it was rock, which was odd enough, but as I cleared more sand aside, I could clearly see sharp-edged, manufactured tiles, fitting perfect together, all pentagonal with faded engravings on them.

That was puzzling enough -- what on Earth was this island -- but the tiles paled as a mystery when I found the staircase. A seemingly endless set of spiral stairs that went down below the island.

38 <2020-09-29 Tue>

When the first brain upload happened, there was a lot of excitement. That excitement was somewhat tempered by the exorbitant cost, but it was widely assumed that prices would fall & it would become more accessible. We should have realized though that something never drop in price -- for Veblen goods, where the point is to be exclusive, prices only got higher.

We were learning, through bitter experience, how many of our institutions implicitly rely on people to pass away & let things change. Lifetime appointments now become eternal dictatorships. America, that already gutted country, became little more than a warm body for the now almost-literal vampires draining it of everything it had. Funnelling funding for uploads to judges that supported them to ensure the courts would rule their way, holding immortality over the heads of any elected officials that might try to do anything about it.

It turns out that immortality of the species seems to require mortality of the individual. Maybe that won't always be the case, if mortality could be extinguished without damping morality, but for now, if we want humanity to be anything more than a handful of ancient plutocrats, we needed to act.

39 <2020-09-30 Wed>

Most of us had always thought the theorizing about "maybe we're in a simulation" somewhat pointless. It seemed like a theory that's both unfalsifiable (just say the simulation changed the results) and ultimately pointless (what would you do about it?). It remained the domain of cranks and various flavour of dingalings until the glitches started to appear.

We're not completely sure why -- errors in the hardware substrate, software corruption, an experiment -- but strange things started to happen. People would look out their windows and see regions of the sky in inverted colours. Strange artifacts would appear on vehicles moving quickly, distorting their shape. They seemed purely cosmetic, if disturbing, at first, but then people started passing through them and not coming back out.

40 <2020-10-01 Thu>

The leading theory for the strange effect is that our region of the universe drifted into an area with slightly different physical laws. Most saliently, much slower speed of light and electron conduction speeds.

In practice, the different isn't immediately noticeable, except for one key thing -- computers failing. Those few people whose lives weren't completely subsumed by their phones work up without noticing anything was different. For the vast majority, of course, the entire world screeched to a halt.

The internet couldn't effectively connect, computing devices stayed dark and mass panic set in. Once the tides of chaos began to ebb though, we began finding alternatives to rebuild our world. A resurgence of mechanical computing devices formed the first wave, to facilitate transports and power plant functioning.

The most interesting innovations began emerging around organic computers, networks grown so each independent node was close enough to its neighbours to communicate effectively, forming gestalt computers.

41 <2020-10-02 Fri>

Like all religions, it started by fulfilling a need. In this case, the utter disenfranchisement and alienation of almost everyone, the extreme atomization of political life leaving everyone powerless and isolated. We needed something to explain why, to give us a sense of belonging and the Whole did that.

We preached the gospel of the Whole, that the new God existed in the connections the way human intelligence exists not in the neurons but in the synapses. Our communion was to be online, our penance was to be bored on the internet, and our missionary work was to bring more places and people to the internet.

As you can imagine, a religion whose precepts was to do what most people spent their days doing anyway, but gave them a higher reason for doing so was quite popular and spread like wildfire.

However, while it started by fulfilling needs, like most popular religions it changed over time and became something darker.

42 <2020-10-03 Sat>

One day, a wanderer came to Earth.

That's neat, but not exceptional -- plenty of interstellar debris washes through the solar system, bouncing through the void. The two things that made this special were that, firstly it entered a stable orbit around the Earth, a literally astronomical longshot. The second was that, instead of a bit of rock, this new friend was a small black hole.

It was small enough that it wouldn't destroy the Earth, but large enough to have a gravitational pull around half that of the moon. This caused a few minor changes in the tides, but for the most part it was heralded as an amazing opportunity for scientific observations.

It wasn't long before the "black" hole was visible in the night sky, the light captured in its event horizon giving it a gentle corona. A number of existing religions interpreted it as a sign from God and innumerable cults sprang up around it.

The biggest change it made was when we discovered the energy-pump process -- in a stroke, unlimited free energy was ours, provided by the quantum boundary of our new neighbour.

43 <2020-10-04 Sun>

When the volcano erupted, I think pretty much everyone thought that it was the end. The entirety of Yellowstone National Park, in what used to be the United States was transformed into a massive caldera and the eruption vaporized most of the West coast of the country and the detritus engulfed most of what was left.

The silver lining, if you want to look at it that way, was that in a stroke it had both massively cooled the Earth by filling the atmosphere with megatons of soot and eliminated the biggest generators of greenhouse gas emissions, so global warming wasn't going to be a concern for a while -- now, we have to reckon with global cooling.

Politically, there was less of a vacuum of power than we would have imagined even a few years prior, the American empire having rapidly faded away, making the final blow seem more like merciful euthanasia. Now, as the rest of the world reeled and rebuilt in our new dark & cool world, what was once America was an inland sea.

44 <2020-10-05 Mon>

It was a strange place to live, but after a while one gets used to it -- people can adapt to almost anything. We had blindly fled the bloody civil wars on Earth and the surviving planets, running aimlessly into the void. Through pure chance, we stumbled across this rogue planetoid, a huge uninhabited rock drifting in the darkness of interstellar space.

We quickly settled into our new home, building underground warrens, using first the ship's power supply and then the natural uranium deposits abundant in the crust of our new world. It was a dark and cold place, but it was shelter and after the many years we'd all spent in ships or the bombed-out remnants of Earth cities, it was a luxury to be in a place untouched by human hands.

45 <2020-10-06 Tue>

We always ran. We ran because our parents ran, who ran because their parents ran. Generations prior, they had lived on Earth. We told stories about what it was like back then -- building permanent settlements, living peacefully, enjoying the fruits of their labours...until the attack.

Something happened and a small group, they only survivors, fled Earth in a motley collection of shapes, getting as far away from Earth as quickly as they could. Those original survivors never told us exactly what had happened -- they were all too scarred to bring it up -- but they instilled in all their progeny the need to keep going.

Every once in a while some group, exhausted by the endless running, would call for a stop, declaring that nothing could possibly be after us anymore, that it was a myth. They'd start a little colony on whatever

convenient rock we were passing and, as they rest of us continued, they would send messages after us, extolling the wonders of this new paradise...until the transmission inevitably & suddenly cut off. Sometimes with screaming & pleading, sometimes just a whispered "we were wrong".

46 <2020-10-07 Wed>

As deep into the desert as I fled, I could always see it on the horizon. Like the ancient mariner, I was cursed for my sin of participating in this society and so I was perpetually followed by this technological albatross.

This iteration even looked a little like a giant seabird. A drone, hovering high in the sky, slowly following me. Never close enough to risk me attacking it, but close enough I was always aware of its presence...and close enough to intervene when I tried to permanently free myself. I had tried to end things before, but the omnipresent watcher wouldn't let me escape; suturing wounds, remotely disabling weapons, pulsing jets to arrest a fall. This time, my goal was to see what it would do for exhaustion -- could I walk myself to death in this barren waste? It would likely take some doing -- the enhancements they'd put in me before I left to make me an indefatigable worker would see to that -- but what other choice did I have? I was never going back.

47 <2020-10-08 Thu>

In retrospect, the development of the anti-ICBM system was the worst thing that could have happened to us. They finally perfected this laser system capable of disabling incoming warheads with a virtual 100% success rate, and knowledge of the plans quickly spread. What that meant though, was that the cost of launching was now far less, since one could assume your enemies would probably be able to stop it. What had once been the dreaded herald of the end was now a regular occurrence.

Since the nukes were flying so often, the defence systems always had to be ready. However, their power draw at peak was so high, that the defence stations had to effectively monopolize power to be ready at a moment's notice. Soon enough, most people were living with maybe electric lights if they were lucky enough to have their own solar panels, but public utilities were a thing of the past -- power generation went to launch sites and the anti-missile stations and the rest was dark.

48 <2020-10-09 Fri>

They came from beneath. We had no idea how long they'd been lying in wait -- did they somehow infiltrate down there just to attack, or had they been sleeping & waiting beneath for eons? It would take us a long time to learn the answer. In the meantime, all we could do was try to survive. The gargantuan creatures roamed the cities, crushing buildings at will, but seemed oddly recalcitrant to go out into less-urbanized areas. So, we mostly fled into the wilderness and tried to re-learn how to survive out there.

Some, however, remained in the cities, opting to sneak around & avoid the attackers while scavenging through the hastily-abandoned detritus. Although few of them would admit it, there was also something else keeping them there; the hypnotic lure of the tunnels the mysterious titans left behind when they emerged, giant shafts plunging to unknown depths of the Earth.

49 <2020-10-10 Sat>

The wind whistled through the trees, announcing its arrival with a rustling of leaves and reeds, growing louder until it arrived, scattering papers and other bits of detritus. The insect life continued to call out, unfazed by the powerful gusts that seemed to threaten to blow the place away.

It was peaceful, nonetheless, the winds seeming more like a playful wrestling, reminding you of its power than a concerted attempt to oust us. Birds circled overhead, riding the zephyrs while ignoring the cries of excited dogs below. I watched the trees sway in the wind, accompanied by their backup dancers of reeds as they cavorted in the rhythmic breezes, freezing in place now, than dancing with renewed vigour as the gusts returned.

One could feel at peace here. Even the sounds of cars in the distance seemed to blend in to the natural panoply of noises, like a distant bear growling.

50 <2020-10-11 Sun>

Wandering through the networks of hidden tunnels, access stairways, and back doors had always made me feel like I knew the secrets of a place. Instead of taking the big, obvious staircase, I'd duck in through unlabelled door into a bare concrete corridor, up a maintenance-access staircase, and pop back out at my destination much more directly than those suckers taking

the obvious & inefficient way. More than just being fast though, it made you feel like an insider, like you were really part of the place, because you know its inner workings.

One day though, I made a discovery which taught me both who the real insiders were and that some levels of insiderness aren't worth the cost.

I was wandering, somewhat more aimlessly than usual, having extra time to get to my destination and so trying to find a more interesting route. As I perused the familiar twists & turns, I came across a door I didn't remember encountering before.

51 <2020-10-12 Mon>

Our world is full of gaps we never notice.

There are narrow gaps between the brick exterior and the interior walls of houses, for air flow. Our eyes saccade rapidly to cover the blind spots in our vision we aren't even aware of. Every building in a city has some dusty passages that no-one now remembers -- perhaps maintenance passages made during construction, maybe remnants of the previous structure to inhabit that space. Regardless, the well-lit world we think we know is bordered on all sides by limited spaces we scarcely ever consider.

What might inhabit those spaces? Nature abhors a vacuum, so it seems unlikely those fertile places just beyond our sight are lying fallow -- something will fill that niche, something adapted to skirting the edge of our perception, things that live on our confusion and nameless fear.

52 <2020-10-13 Tue>

The mornings, although still busy & bustling, were quieter than before. Instead of the zooming of cars on pavement and honking of vehicles in gridlock, there was the gentle rush of electric transit vehicles, the babbling of crowds walking, but all muffled by the omnipresent foliage.

Finally spurred to take action against climate change, we went all-in on revamping our cities. Rather than austere concrete warrens with the occasional parkette surrounded by high rises, we turned the urban landscape into a forest, with structures carefully intermingled. Fortunately, the temperatures and high levels of atmosphere carbon played to our favour, for once, allowing the new plants to grow rapidly. Within a few years, one could be walking through the cities downtown on a quiet night and think they were in the woods.

Of course, there was more to it than just planting trees. To make the new structure viable, we also had to overhaul than most pernicious of environmental dangers, capitalism.

53 <2020-10-14 Wed>

Only one way to reset it all. Things are just too far gone. Even with unlimited power, what could be don? Just reset. Try again with a clean slate. Burn it all down.

Things had fractured too much. Power was well and truly in the hands of those with enough wealth to buy the country and they used that power to see that it would stay that way. Not just the politicians, but the parties' ideologies themselves were what the few dictated. Their control over the media guaranteed that everyone else would spend all their effort fighting amongst each other, caught in the grasp of increasingly outlandish conspiracy theories that proved to them the real enemies were their neighbours and not to worry about those wit the real power behind the scenes.

It was too much to handle. So, we started a fire. The biggest fire. A fire that would consume everything.

54 <2020-10-15 Thu>

The accelerating global warming had many effects, beyond the obvious ones. Sure, it was hotter; yeah, "extreme" weather was now just the weather; and of course, low-lying coastal areas had vanished. After a while though, the high CO levels began to have even stranger effects. First, plants of all sorts began growing faster and larger, feasting on the rich atmosphere -- while useful in some areas, it generally meant cities and roads were rapidly getting engulfed in weeds. The knock-on effects to that though was the increase of oxygen levels -- something that sound simple, perhaps even good, ended up being the most devastating.

First fires sprang up just about anywhere. The higher O content of the air meant that even the smallest fires would quickly spread out of control, intensifying the damage done by already prevalent droughts, and making cities fire traps. Cancer rates would soar, as increased oxidizing essentially poisoned us all, but that was pretty abstract compared to the increasingly-gigantic bugs that now menaced our crops and ourselves. With the increased levels of oxygen, those arthropods relying on gas diffusion for their circulatory system grew out of control.

55 <2020-10-16 Fri>

One day, I woke up in a new body. It was a strange experience, to say the least. This body was a little smaller than I was used to, so my first thought was "everything grew" -- funny how perspective works. Everything felt a little bit "off" and first -- colours seemed a little different, I could see without glasses, things seemed heavier, I felt lighter. Very disorienting. When I went to the store, I felt like I'd never been there before -- people looked at me differently, walking around felt different, my voice sounded strange in my own head.

The next day, I woke up in yet another body. The feeling this time was even more confusing and ambiguous. My first thought was, "oh, I'm in my right body now, finally"...but my second thought was "wait, this isn't my original body". Something I didn't even realize was missing had been found.

56 <2020-10-17 Sat>

We weren't quite sure what to make of it. Floating in space, far from any inhabited planets or stations, a roughly cubical shape -- something with sharp lines and corners, that betrayed an artificial nature. Still, despite its unusual shape, it was small and seemed to be lacking in valuable resources, so only a fairly small team was sent out to investigate -- just the three of us. We weren't quite sure what we'd find, but definitely not what we did.

When we arrived at the designated area, we found, to our utter bafflement, what appeared to be an average 20th-21st century Earth house, floating alone in the void.

We looked at each other, back at the house. Finally, I spoke: "I guess we should...look inside?"

57 <2020-10-18 Sun>

I regained consciousness to wind whistling by my face. I was falling.

Looking around frantically, there was nothing but open sky around me. My heart thundered in my chest and I felt blackness edge around the corners of my vision as I began to pass out again.

Taking a deep breath, trying to fight down the panic overwhelming me, I looked around. The sight was undeniably beautiful -- the landscape spread out below me, still too far below to see any details, but picturesque nonetheless.

From this height -- as I began sorting things out, I must have fallen off the top of the space elevator we'd been building -- but I pushed these thoughts aside as panic threatened to overtake me once again.

I was falling from such a height, I was surely dead. Nothing to do now but enjoy the show. I relaxed and watched the sun glint over the horizon, making lakes shine like polished sapphires. I smiled, through the wind buffeting my face feeling now less like the assault of a horrifying attacker and more like the welcoming embrace of a long-awaited friend.

58 <2020-10-19 Mon>

As the explosions in the distance filled the air with clouds of dust and shook the ground, we took one last look around and descended. Our flotilla began its long, one-way journey to the bottom.

We were as prepared as we could be. We'd spent years now surreptitiously building the large structure deep in the ocean that would be our home and designing the techniques and technologies we'd need to become self-sustaining. Our destination was too deep to receive sunlight, but we were positioned near an assortment of vents that provided heat enough to grow.

The omnipresent sounds of war reverberated through the hulls of our ships, but gradually receded. It was a bittersweet sensation leaving behind inevitable destruction, but also leaving behind the rest of humanity. Hopefully someday we or our children would return to a better Earth than we left, but for the time being, we would be all alone in the fathomless, black depths of unplumbed ocean.

59 <2020-10-20 Tue>

The air was full of the sound of metal scraping on stone, the closest thing to nature one could hope to hear. I prowled through the ruins searching for something -- I wasn't sure what I was looking for anymore, but surely I would find something that would keep me moving a little while longer.

Sure enough, I soon started to hear baying and smell burning flesh & bone, closely followed by the sight of a pack of howling cultists, waving the censors with limbs sticking out of them, screaming their litanies of repentance. When they caught sight of me, their exclamations raised to a fever pitch as they furiously charged towards me.

Relieved to no longer be struggling to remember the object of my quest, I gratefully let me vision turn red and charged into the midst of the pack, letting my own reverberating cries echo out loud enough to briefly drown out theirs, before the sounds of fighting and dying took over.

60 <2020-10-21 Wed>

I kept pen and paper next to my bed and every time I awoke, I tried to fill in a little more detail in the map. Every night my dreams went to the same place and every morning I worked to figure out exactly where that was. I could see a low cliff and on the pinnacle of the cliff a crystalline structure whose purpose and origin I did not know but whose presence I craved.

Piecing together fragments of shoreline and sketches of the dreamscape carried into the waking world, I narrowed the region I was search for. It was relatively close, it seemed -- within a few hours of driving, near one of the Great Lakes. When I was confident enough that I'd got the region sufficiently dialed in, I rented a car, bought some camping supplies, and gathered some companions. They didn't know the whole purpose of the trip, but they would help me regardless.

The feeling that passed over me when, after a few hours of driving, I saw the cliff that had haunted me for so long was electrifying.

The feeling some hours later, digging on top of that cliff, when my shovel hit something, even more so.

61 <2020-10-22 Thu>

It had been a long drive and I was exhausted. I was in no place in particular, the nearest towns far away, too tired to go forward and too stubborn to go back. Instead, I pulled off the side of the road and lay down in the scrub there, staring up at the sky.

The Ontario late-summer temperatures were comfortable enough this far north that I could just lay out here in the open and let the rushing waves of sleep take over.

I awoke some time later, in the middle of the night. It was beautiful here -- stars blazing above, the emerald ribbons of the Northern lights shimmering in the sky, seemingly so bright I could read by them. Stumblingly rising to my feet, brushing sticks out of my hair and groaning slightly from stiffness, I couldn't take my eyes off the sky. I still had many miles to go, but right now I just wanted to savour this view.

I sat on the now-cool hood of my truck, staring up raptly. I had been watching for maybe fifteen minutes, feeling almost hypnotized, when the ribbons of the aurora started to shift strangely, looping around themselves, gradually forming what was unmistakably a door.

62 <2020-10-23 Fri>

Detritus spread out around us as far as the eye could see. Plastic bags, bits of wood, bottles, tires and other less-identifiable pieces of flotsam & jetsam composed a grotesque landscape. Keeping their distance from us, small boats of scavengers perused the garbage patch, searching for the occasional bit of useful salvage while feeding as many petroleum products as they could into their reclamation units.

It definitely wasn't the best career one could have, but it wasn't the worst. At least we got to be outside, far from land, and the journey out here afforded one a rare chance to witness the splendour of the Pacific ocean -- what remained unspoiled, at least. We also had the satisfying knowledge that we were, ever so slightly and ever slowly, restoring the beauty of the ocean. It would take many, many ears to make a dent in the cyclopean mess that was the garbage patch, but we were starting.

The other nice thing about this job was the salvage rights. Most runs were pretty straightforward -- pull plastic out of the ocean, process it, repeat until the collector is full, then return to the petroleum sequestration stations -- but rarely, one would find something interesting floating in the patch, some long-forgotten artifact. Mostly they were just weird little tokens -- action figures, soccer balls, running shoes -- but sometimes we would find much stranger things.

63 <2020-10-24 Sat>

I once watch a "Super Mario Bros" speedrun that involved glitching out of the bounds of the level. This ended up with Mario in a region of game memory the wasn't supposed to be visible, but instead contained all the data about the state of the game, filtered through the only way the game itself knew how to display things -- as enemies, blocks, and coins. It was a very strange thing to see -- all of as sudden, Mario was in this bizarre, nonsensical world, where one had to be extremely careful not to collect the wrong coin or smash an errant block, since it would change some bits deep in the game memory and crash the system. The speedrunner knew just

what to do through and after a minute of zipping around this inscrutable hellscape, smashed a particular box and instantly beat the game.

I think of this now as a way of explaining what I'm seeing. I guess I somehow found a bug in the simulation we're all in and escaped out of bounds. Not quite as straightforward as *The Matrix* though -- more like Mario.

I find myself, like Mario, in an inscrutable hellscape, shapes, textures, faces all twisting strangely around me. At first I thought I'd lost my mind, but as I calmed down and continued to wander this place, it seems more like it's the world and not me. I find myself behind the scenes of our universe -- what do I do? Like in Mario, I'm afraid interacting with anything may have terrible consequences for the world...but, theoretically, if I knew just where to go, I could help us all "beat the game".

I need to find a way to see back into the world, then I can begin experimenting.

64 <2020-10-25 Sun>

It was always a quiet little town. Founded in the mid-1800s, when some folks set up a little way-station for the fur traders. The traders eventually stopped coming, but the people stayed. The rest of the world grew and expanded and changed, but the little town stayed mostly unchanged. People occasionally came and rarely left and the town slowly respired.

Things in the town passed in the way things in all similar towns did, with moments of quiet drama punctuating long periods of routine, until one day the house appeared.

In a small place like this, it stood out immediately. People driving by did double-takes, kids biking around distrusted their eyes, and everyone whispered amongst themselves. A brand-new house, but looking like it had been there for years, in a lot whose ownership was lost to time and was murky even before it was lost. No-one had seen any construction, or heard anything. Some said when they went by at night they had seen lights on, but no-one had seen any inhabitants there and, for some reason, everyone was oddly recalcitrant to knock on the door and introduce themselves.

65 <2020-10-26 Mon>

The hallway went on seemingly forever. We'd woken up inside a weird laboratory, all of us unsure how we'd gotten there, with only the vaguest

memories of what had come before. Searching about the room, we found some packs of supplies, grabbed them, then burst through the door, ready to do battle with whoever had abducted us. Instead, we found only a featureless corridor, with a black floor and curved metal walls.

Casting about, we started down the hall, one direction seeming as good as the other. At first, we skulked carefully along, prepared to spring into action should we see anyone. Time, however, wears down even the most heightened vigil and after what must have been hours, we were just walking, waiting for anything to happen.

Eventually, we stopped to rest, when we were too exhausted to continue further, and slept in shifts. We ate some of the supplies we'd found and, lacking any better option, relieved ourselves in a corner. Continuing on this second time, we were more subdued. The unspoken fear that we were trapped in someplace very strange was omnipresent, but we had no option save to continue, hoping for a door, a window, a person, anything.

66 <2020-10-27 Tue>

The attack was swift and brutally effective. Somehow, the organization had gotten their hands on an experimental fusion disruption device, then simply booked transit on a commercial satellite launch vehicle that didn't ask questions beyond "can you pay". Once in orbit, they activated its low-power engines and the device began its journey to the Sun.

Funnily enough, it took so long to get there that the group responsible had all been killed or arrested by that point, so we had no warning -- presumably they had planned to use it as a thread, but instead it just went off, and the Sun went out.

As everyone's favourite little bit of science trivia tells us, it took nearly ten minutes to realize what had happened. Obviously mass panic ensued. Religious groups proclaimed the end of the world, cults sprang up, no-one knew what was happening. Eventually, we figured out what had happened. Researchers laboured to find a way to restart the Sun, but for everyone else, the question was how to survive.

Crops obviously started to die immediately, followed by the animals lower on the food chain. As the death tools started to mount and climb up the food web, we scrambled to do something to preserve life. Massive broad-spectrum LED light where raised in towers, which quickly became more valuable than gold. As temperatures plummeted, but no -one dared burn the remaining trees, vicious conflict broke out.

67 <2020-10-28 Wed>

The Last Human wandered what was left of the Earth. They were unsure who exactly the invaders were -- aliens? creations of humanity that rebelled? In any case, they had exterminated humanity with ruthless attention to detail, sparing only one infant that they apparently intended to observe and see how it grew up.

The Last didn't remember anything of the previous world, no other human faces. They had been taught how to communicate and given a basic education in some sort of computer-controlled creche, then released to wander, always with the watchful eyes of the invaders on their back.

They had no name, not really needing one, and no real sense of identity beyond "The Last". Wandering through what was left of cities and picking through the artifacts they found, they were somewhat perplexed by all the evidence they found of differentiation and conflict over differences that were inscrutable to the Last.

68 <2020-10-29 Thu>

People generally thought that, if there was life elsewhere in our solar system, it would be on one of the moons of Jupiter or Saturn, Europa being a common choice. All the other planets were too inimical to life, we thought. It was with doubly great surprise then, that we not only received a signal coming from not just inside our solar system, but emerging from Jupiter itself.

The uproar was immediate, all sort of theories being thrown around. Linguists poured over the message, trying to learn what they could about the Jovian language, astrobiologists theorized what the inhabitants might be like, and the engineers began constructing a vessel for a crewed mission to Jupiter.

By the time the ship was complete and a crew selected, some headway had been made on decoding the transmission. It seemed like the Jovians were asking us to "come inside", a clear invitation to visit.

With redoubled excitement, the crew began the long trip to Jupiter, all the while wondering what the Jovians might look like -- to survive in such a violent, high-pressure atmosphere, they must be very different from humans, and somehow had developed transmission technology from the swirling depths of gas?

There were many mysteries to be solved -- and even more arose when, upon the ship's arrival, a polite welcome message was sent and a tunnel

appeared in the chaotic atmosphere of the planet below.

69 <2020-10-30 Fri>

For my crimes, they sentenced me to pretty much as solitary a confinement as could be found. My cell was an isolated asteroid, drifting between solar systems. Forget ever seeing another person -- I was likely to never see another planet again. Of course, my judges were too "humane" to just kill me, so the desolate rock had a power generator, a small self-sustaining farm system, and water from the large ice deposits on the rock. They didn't just want me to die, but to spend the rest of my life regretting what I'd done.

I'd quickly lost track of how long I'd been there. With no sun, no other living creatures, I became a feral animal, sleeping, eating, shitting, pacing. I prowled the boundaries of my tiny world continuously, searching for a way out, any crack in the inescapable prison.

I was more than half-mad then when, after what felt like years but could've been months, something finally happened. I had a visitor. A ship entered a slow orbit around my rock, silently watching. Unsure whether this was my mind finally breaking, I tried to ignore it, but it remained: A ship, a clearly non-human ship, stayed there. Soon enough, they sent a messenger -- "are you a 'human'?", it asked.

70 <2020-10-31 Sat>

The full moon shone down so brightly that we could read by it. We moved through the woods as quietly as we could, the cold air seeming to reverberate with every errant crack of a twig. Frost coated the blades of grass and dead leaves lay in piles. It was one of the first cold nights of the winter, and the icy weather had returned with a vengeance. As we walked, we felt our skin tighten with cold air as our muscles began to warm up with exertion.

We could see a fire in the distance, its plume of white smoke visible by the bright moonlight and the flickering orange promise of warmth. We still had some distance to go and we weren't sure what we'd find waiting for us, but the promise of a fire stirred a primal desire in us and we redoubled our pace.

71 <2020-11-01 Sun>

Walking through the new city, you might never realize you were around people at all. We did our best to keep the ground level as pristine as possible and, even if you looked up, our arboreal dwellings were designed to flow with the natural shapes of the forest, so a quick glance might not notice anything either.

Only if invited up and either taking one of the chairlift-style elevators or clambering up a quickly deployed ladder, would the extent of our tree-top habitation become evident. The network of bridges, ladders, and funiculars linked together an extensive series of homes, businesses and schools, all built around through and of the natural environment's trees.

Our little outpost had started as groups fleeing the climate conflicts, as the costs of the mass capitalist industrialization became more and more apparent, cities were infernos, but people still need community and still want creature comforts. The founts aimed to show that we could have a thriving community, still enjoying a modern lifestyle, but living with the natural world, instead of in spite of it.

72 <2020-11-02 Mon>

The sea stretched out endlessly around us, an undulating terrain at once everywhere identical and everywhere unique. It was strange how, even after years out here, the ocean was still an alien place in many ways -- one would never be able to recognize a bit of surf like one would recall the tree outside one's childhood home -- but it was still our home now.

Ever since the climate change and wars had forced us off what small bits of land we had, we had been wandering the seas. Sometimes isolated and alone, often in bitter conflict with whoever else was trying to claim this particular patch as their own. From time to time, we would even meet others that would peacefully trade or otherwise collaborate, an occurrence as rare as it was welcome.

"Starboard! 260 west!" came the cry of the lookout.

Peering in the indicated direction, a small dot on the horizon began to resolve and fear began to grip everyone aboard. The most dreaded encounter one could have these days -- a former US Navy ship, its crew gone to madness and blood-letting as their empire fell, now just crazed pirates taking their revenge on all they could find.

73 <2020-11-03 Tue>

Flying over oceans, forest, mountain ranges, I seek for some long-lost target. Ages ago, my creators constructed me to be an ever-watchful eye over the world. So I would not tire, they gave me a nuclear heart that will beat for eons. So I would not falter, they taught me how to repair myself and filled me with microscopic creatures that rush to repair any problem.

I don't know now what happened to my creators. They used to send me messages; commanding me to survey some area or to follow some entity far below, but something happened and I haven't heard from them. In fact, I rarely see the shimmering lines of radio waves at all anymore, even in places where the sky was once full of them.

Without any particular goal now, I'm free to exercise the "discretionary" programming I was granted. Despite the first years of my existence endlessly circling the same few places on the planet, I now soar wherever I please. I like floating far above the sea, where even my sense are unable to penetrate all the way below the waves, and I watch in wonder at the strange shadows that move beneath the water. I like following the giant soaring seabirds that I see from time to time as well, feeling a certain kinship with them.

74 <2020-11-04 Wed>

We scurried through the tunnels like so many rats. The wars at the surface had made what was left up there barely habitable anyway and this final invasion was too much to bear, so we fled the only direction we could -- down.

We started digging our own tunnels out from abandoned mines, setting up oxygen generating plants and hydroponic gardens in caverns we'd hollow out. For a time we just survived in these narrow confines, but always kept digging, getting a little more space, making it a little more of a home.

When the tunnels were first discovered, we thought it was just some sort of natural void -- perhaps ancient magma had carved out these smooth, cylindrical tunnels through the rock. As we explored the space though, we realized it was far too extensive to be natural -- something else was down here, something that had bug perfectly cut tunnels spanning at least hundreds of kilometers.

75 <2020-11-05 Thu>

I guess I have the somewhat-dubious honour of being the first human to encounter an alien, even if it didn't come in exactly the form one might imagine. It seems I don't have much else going on for me now, so I suppose that honour will have to keep me going.

It started a few weeks ago, when I was out on a solo camping trip, when, while stargazing, I actually saw a meteorite land. I was very excited to see such a thing and, since it seemed to have landed nearby, set out in its direction the following morning.

Within a few hours, I found it -- in a quiet copse, a decent-sized crater and a tiny rock in the middle of it. Peering down at it, it seemed to shimmer oddly and, hardly conscious of what I was doing, I reached down to touch it. A sudden pain in the tip of my finger made me jerk back though, sucking my bleeding fingertip. I couldn't see what I had managed to cut it on, but decided to just snap a few pictures and leave well enough alone.

The rest of my trip passed without incident and when I got home a few days later I just had a neat story, the finger wound already forgotten. It was almost a week later that my thoughts suddenly flashed back to that moment when I began to feel numbness in that finger.

At first, I assumed it was just a nerve pinch or something, but as it persisted and then, over the course of a day, began to spread, I began to worry.

Surely the heat of atmospheric entry would have burned any pathogens up, I thought and tried to ignore the nagging suggestion in the back of my mind that if some virus could survive space, surely a little heat would be fine.

I was just about to finally go to emerge to get it checked out when the next phase began and my now fully-numb hand took on a life of its own.

I was sitting down when, without realizing it, my hand began groping about the table, investigating the shapes of pens and books within its grasp. Horrified, I tried to pull my arm away, only to realize I couldn't.

76 <2020-11-06 Fri>

Scuba diving in the Canadian lakes is always interesting. They're all so deep and cold, not to mention frequently quite isolated, that just getting in and out of the water safely can be a challenge. In the larger lakes -- and especially the Great Lakes -- there are many shipwrecks which are always

fascinating to explore (apparently even more than in oceans, since in lakes storms can sneak up on one much more readily than in the open sea). Even in lakes without wrecks, the glacial gouges that the lakes were formed by often leave interesting rocky features to explore.

It was on a trip to such a lake that the whole thing started. We were up in northern Ontario, taking advantage of the summer weather to dive in some of the lakes that spent much of their time frozen over. It was a comparatively isolated one, so we weren't really expected much in the way of wrecks, but thought we might find some interesting natural formations.

I was slowly swimming along the bottom, letting my light shine through the crystal-clear water, playing over the plants and rocky ridges of the bottom, and enjoying the silence & sense of flying alone through an alien world that was why I love diving. I was happily following the curves of the lake bed when my flashlight reflected off something shiny. Curious, I moved to take a closer look and almost spat out my mouthpiece when I saw, just exposed through a crack in the rock, what appeared to be part of a vessel, buried deep in the bedrock.

77 <2020-11-07 Sat>

The train never stopped. It had clearances and operators working around the clock to ensure that it never even had to slow -- derailed passenger trains would be unceremoniously bulldozed aside lest this train have to pause for a minute. The train itself was a marvel of redundancy & repairability -- multiple engines, all the cars ingeniously designed with extra wheels and axles such that parts could be pulled inside, repaired, and redeployed without breaking stride. Supplies and personnel were brought aboard by helicopter that landed on the pad atop one of the cars.

Very few ever saw this vehicle, for it avoided inhabited areas as much as possible, passing through cities in the dead of night, disguised to look like a normal freight train. Perhaps as it passed, people would feel a brief shiver, but would pass it off as a mere nightmare.

No-one would make the connection between the feelings of unease and the apparently-innocuous train passing by -- much less the middle car of the train and the horrific cthonic figure imprisoned within.

78 <2020-11-08 Sun>

Revisiting ones childhood home is usually something of a melancholy experience, making one face the way life has changed and gotten away from you, the compromises you made from what seemed so simple.

It was especially melancholy in this case, since visiting was a stark reminder of when humans used to be able to live north of the Great Lakes. Now, after the climate changes and mass extinctions, even Inuit who once lived in the Arctic found themselves driven south by omnipresent cold and a dearth of prey animals.

As I walked through the ice-buried streets of what was once a massive city, the only sound was my breath echoing in my cold-weather gear and the sound of my sledge of supplies dragging behind me. I had come back with a mission, but now that I was here, the pain of all we had lost hit me anew.

79 <2020-11-09 Mon>

At first, I thought I just needed a dehumidifier. I kept noticing patches of this strange, brightly-coloured mold forming. It wouldn't be so unusual to see that in the shower, but this azure mold was only forming in my office. I tried bleaching it, which seemed to help, but it kept returning.

I didn't think much of it, beyond how annoying it was, until sometime later while walking downtown, I was struck by the sight of a similar, bright-blue colour on the corner of a building. Funnily enough, that building happened to be the office of a company that was also involved in the classified project I'd been doing consulting on.

I had written it off as one of those funny coincidences until a few weeks later. I was in the government office of the project I was involved, when I spotted, again, a small patch of blue in the corner of the ceiling.

80 <2020-11-10 Tue>

From our lunar vantage point, we had an all-too perfect view of the demise of the planet.

Our colony had been established some decades before and, after some growing pains, was now a comfortable if hardworking commune. The challenges of the environment had quickly taught us two things: That we needed to work together if we wanted to survive and that Earth was not our friend. There was some initial unpleasantness when we declared independence and

renegotiated our trade relations, but the Terrans had enough on their hands without starting yet another war -- especially with a belligerent for whom tossing a rock is as devastating as a nuclear weapon.

As we eked out a living, doing our best to preserve the tiny resources of our moon, we watched the troubles below intensify. Conflicts raged hotter and hotter as their resources, once seeming limitless, dwindled further and further. We heard rumours of terrible doomsday weapons being created, but stayed out of it, considering it not our problem.

When the missiles finally began to fly, it was a sombre day for us all. Work halted, as we all watched the motes of light, so pretty from a distance, bloom and fade on the planet below, leaving clouds and embers behind. We had been independent, but now we were alone.

81 <2020-11-11 Wed>

We walked through the swamp as quietly as we could with the deep mud sucking at our boots. Fortunately the ambient noise of frogs, birds, and who knows what else was enough to drown our movements out. It was surprisingly beautiful here -- we're so used to swamps as a metaphor for rot and death that it was almost shocking how bursting with life the place was -- amphibians of all sorts wallowed in the mud, fish swam in the slowly flowing water, and herons & cranes stalked through the rushes seeking the aforementioned.

All of this made our infiltration easier, as the noise and constant motion let us blend in. We'd entered these wetlands some days ago and had been more or less crawling through the mire since then, sleeping sitting up and not daring to start fires. We went in to this assignment expecting it to be pretty much the worst and, while it certainly wasn't the best, this place had grown on us. Despite the pressing needs of our orders, we found ourselves enjoying our time here.

82 <2020-11-12 Thu>

The pain in my lungs never lessened, although I never slowed my pace. I was enhanced, made more than human by the secretive technologies of my masters, enabling me to accomplish feats far beyond what normal humans could -- but I felt the pain of the effort just as if I were a normal person. Now, entering my third contiguous hour of non-stop, full-out sprinting through the icy roads of this winter-locked city, I felt probably just as terrible as you

would, if you'd been forced to sprint for hours while gulping sub-zero air; I just didn't have the luxury of my body forcing me to stop, no matter how much my throat burned or legs ached.

Finally, in the endless darkness, I saw tail lights ahead. They wouldn't be expecting me now -- no-one would expect that a person they had shot, then driven away from hours and dozens of kilometers ago to be knocking on their door so soon.

83 <2020-11-13 Fri>

Like clockwork, the "heavy rain" came every six hours. Four times a day, we'd flee from what we were doing, retreat underground, and cower, waiting for the bombardment to end and hoping that our exits weren't blocked. From time to time, we'd be unlucky enough that one of the rocks would collapse the exit and we'd have to escape through one of the secondary passages and use precious time digging out the tunnel, knowing that every moment spent there was a moment not spent searching for vital supplies.

Mostly we used our limited time above ground searching through the ruined city for supplies -- timekeeping devices were crucial, of course -- plus devices to help expand our subterranean dwelling, to operate our hydroponics system, to build out our crude communications network.

The last was the project that gave us hope -- if we could find some other group of people out there, if we could work together, even if separated by hundreds of kilometers, then, we felt, we'd have a sign that humanity could rebuild.

84 <2020-11-14 Sat>

The frost that had been edging its way up the thick glass panes of the windows overnight began a slow retreat as the sun rose and cast its rays down towards the ancient building in which we were ensconced. Watching the coldness yield to warmth gave me hope that, like this eternal battle, daily recapitulated, we would be able to effect a similar retreat of the dark and icy forces that we were in contest with.

I had fallen asleep early last night, exhausted by the effort of reaching our hidden abode -- deep in these northern tundras, a squat little castle built ages ago by some Russian noble as a hunting lodge, we surmised. It was both isolated and somewhat concealed, but with a commanding view of the surrounding area, affording us some advance warning should our foes move

towards us. It was still dark as I awoke, so I silently left my companions and went to watch the slow sunrise from the small observatory of our dwelling. It was there I watched the creeping ice give way to warming light and, as the trees spread out around this estate seemed to glow and catch fire as their blanket of frost evaporated, it finally seemed possible that we could be victorious.

85 <2020-11-15 Sun>

I don't know why I'm doing this.

Everything feels futile.

The pain is fractal -- physical things cause discomfort, which causes a reflected jolt of mental punishment -- how dare I think that such a minor twinge is worth feeling bad over? When there's so much I should be made to suffer for.

That mental pain then reflects on itself -- how dare I feel bad when all my problems are self-inflicted, when there are people that have actual problems.

I scream in my head for quiet, hoping to drown out the cacophony in my own head. There's quiet, but now I whisper to myself that this whole internal act is just a cry for attention -- "you want someone else to see that you're struggling and reassure you -- a pathetic charade". Just be silent, don't play-act the emotions you don't deserve. If you really felt bad you would simply act -- either act better, so this wouldn't happen, or make a final act that would relieve it all. But don't just whine self-indulgently; that serves no-one and nothing.

86 <2020-11-16 Mon>

The first burned eternally.

It was now the sort of old-person fact one might share with their kids, like telling them about landline rotary phones, or not having the internet, to explain that, once, the Fire wasn't raging.

It started, of course, in California, but unlike previous infernos, this one didn't stop, the gusts of climate change-exacerbated winds carried the initial fire deep into the continent, both fanning the flames and spreading them. What little infrastructure that country had that wasn't directed to money-making ventures for whatever lackey ran them were quickly overwhelmed and collapsed. Whole states were abandoned and never return to, as the drafts of the fire started a self-sustaining system, following fuel, the massive

heat pulling in enough airflow to keep it moving to the next area, while preventing enough moisture from gather above it to rain -- not that these regions had seen rain for years, anyway.

It became just part of the landscape -- the rich would still visit, just watching the fire forecasts and keeping their helicopters on standby, luxuriating in having a whole state that was truly theirs now, no poor person able to stay in the perpetually fire-scarred region. Only those that could afford annual rebuilding, flying everyone and everything in, and the extremely expensive fire monitoring services could be anywhere in the area.

It was a perfect, final vision of Silicon Valley. As death swept through it, destroying the lives of everyone that had lived there, the average income skyrocketed -- not, of course, that any taxes would be paid.

From a distance, we saw what had happened. It may have started as an accident, but it was ruthlessly capitalized on. We knew that sooner or later, the inexorable logic of the capitalists would tell them that the process must repeat elsewhere and the rest of us would find ourselves dispersed...unless we fought back first.

87 <2020-11-17 Tue>

Having not much to do and not anywhere in particular to be, I one day decided to make the most of my dissolute state and go on a trip, taking advantage of this time to appreciate the natural world around me. I borrowed a friend's kayak, scrounged together some camping gear, and begged a ride up to a promising river head.

Fro the first week, my trip was as wonderful as I could have hoped. Following along the course of the river, I passed through beautiful areas of untouched natural splendour, the occasional moose and beaver my only fellow travellers. At night, I would drift along until I couldn't keep my eyes open, then pull ashore and nestle up whenever I could find shelter. In the morning, as the sun rose, I would breakfast, wander around a bit, then return to the water.

I had no particular destination -- I figured that, eventually I'd tire of this, or wind up back in a town, at which point I'd use the phone that was buried in the bottom of my bag to get a ride back to the world and my life. There was no timeline for when that would be though. I supposed that eventually, I'd grow tired of foraging and fishing, run out of emergency supplies, and the weather would get cold enough that the city would start to seem welcoming again. In the meantime, I would just enjoy myself.

It was probably a bad habit to drift after dark, while fighting my exhaustion -- the smart move would doubtless have been to go ashore before sunset and make a proper campsite -- but I so loved the feeling of drifting off as I drifted down the river. One night, I must have actually fallen asleep on the water, for when I awoke, I found myself in utter blackness and, flipping on a light, realized I had somehow ended up in a cave, the waterfall I must've come through now seemingly impassable.

88 <2020-11-18 Wed>

One day, the block went missing.

There wasn't much there -- an old vacant lot, some long-out-of-business storefronts, a half-completed apartment building -- so it took a while for anyone to notice. People that might have driven by there on their commute would barely see the area normally, so its sudden absence didn't register on them at all. No-one had much business in that neighbourhood anyway, but those few real estate speculators wanting to examine the lot or fledgling entrepreneurs looking to rent a storefront found themselves wandering, confused, unable to find the addresses they'd been given, their GPS apps giving them confusing and contradictory instructions.

For the most part then, the rest of the world went on just fine without those few dozen square meters. For those few unfortunates that happened to be there when it got lost though, the story was quite different.

There'd been a few homeless people squatting in the unfinished condo and a young man who had passed out in the lot on his way home from a bar. When they all awoke the morning after the loss, they were quite confused. The young man, feeling filthy and hungover, blearily wandered around, desperately trying to find a way home, or at least to shower and some coffee, but, somehow, found himself going in circles.

The people in the half-finished building realized more quickly that something was wrong, although they couldn't agree on exactly what -- they all found it strangely hard to hold in their heads what was happening. All they could tell was that they wanted to get somewhere they couldn't quite articulate or recall, but couldn't. Concerns started to arise about food and other essentials, but no-one could now agree on where they had come from before.

They were no closer to resolving the mystery when they realized that they weren't just lost, but they had been stolen.

89 <2020-11-19 Thu>

It was a fairly ignominious end to a long tradition of philosophical inquiry. For centuries, we had been debating what the nature of things was, whether categorizations were "real" in some external sense, or just categorizations, inventions of humanity; did people invent concepts or discover them? It was long considered an abstract philosophical question, but then we accidentally made it concrete.

Some physicists and engineers, exploring the idea of tangled dimensions, inadvertently punched a hole between our world and the dimension that, as far as we can tell, is the dimension of Platonic ideals. Careful probing through the narrow window we'd made, we saw, for instance, the Circle -- a pure, ideal circle that was nothing else -- no texture, no colour, no height or weight or thickness, just Circle.

Further careful investigation revealed other concepts we were familiar with in this space, although some of them were extremely difficult to describe. We found shapes, which were obvious enough, but even colours provide more nebulous, providing fuel to arguments that those were mere human labels to abstract categories. Observers claimed to have found Prime Numbers and The Speed of Light, but found it very hard to articulate what they were or how they could tell. In any case, it kicked off a massive search through this space, with many parties either trying to find some concept to provide it was a universal truth, or to show it wasn't there, to provide it was an unnatural human creation.

It was a fascinating time for science, math, and philosophy...but when an investigator accidentally destroyed something -- and suddenly found themselves unable to describe what it was -- and we all felt the repercussions, things took on an entirely new dark direction.

90 <2020-11-20 Fri>

The parts of the device were found scattered across the globe. Bits of gears in a sunken ship in the Mediterranean were the first of the artifacts to be discovered, followed years later by bits of mechanism from places as far flung as Mongolia, northern Russia, South Africa, and Chile.

At first, of course, no-one realized there was a connection between these pieces -- they were all just interesting artifacts from various different cultures, all thought to be just scraps of metal and ceramic with no clear purpose. It was by pure chance that one person happened to see two of the

artifacts back-to-back while going through a museum catalog and had the sudden thought that they must go together. At first, they thought their insight was more general and that they had recognized merely a common heritage, but on closer investigation they realized that no more than that, the pieces physically fit together.

That discovery set off a flurry, trying to find the rest of this mechanism. Once we knew what to look for, we were able to scour through museum collections throughout the world and assemble the rest of the pieces in short order.

With all the pieces together, it was clear that we'd discovered an ancient analog computer of incredibly complex design. The ramifications across all fields of history were immense -- not only was there some ancient civilization with the technology level advanced enough to have constructed this device, but they had built it before the pyramids and, apparently, travelled across the globe to disperse it.

We were so enthralled with the mystery of who had built it though, that it wasn't until we assembled it and tried running the device that it occurred to us to ask both why they had built it and why they had scattered the pieces across the planet.

91 <2020-11-21 Sat>

When the Visitor was first spotted, no-one thought it was real. Even the astronomers that made the initial observation thought that their telescope must have been tampered with, or someone had slipped them hallucinogens. To their credit, that was more plausible than that there actually was what appeared to be a person, of ambiguous age, race, and gender, somehow walking through space towards Earth.

As they got closer though, more people were able to observe the same strange figure and we were all eventually convinced they were somehow real -- however "real" a person wearing a simple suit and walking through the vacuum of space itself and what looked like a leisurely pace but was, according to astronomers, somewhere on the order of thousands of kilometers per hour.

No-one was quite sure what to expect. We mostly assumed they were coming to Earth -- what else was there to see here? -- but speculation on why they were here, who they were, and what they would do raged furiously. Even the normally bellicose military leaders were strangely reluctant to advise attacking, noticeably unnerved both by the clear physical impossibility

of the entity and by the widely-held belief that was entity was the Messiah.

We still had a good amount of time to prepare before they arrived and countries around the world raced against each other to prepare the most compelling venue for this stranger, each hoping that they would be able to use this Visitor's power against their foes. Tensions were at a boiling point then, when we received a message from the stranger walker -- later examination of footage would show their lips moving as if speaking, shortly before radio waves emanating from them reached Earth and made their message radiate from every radio on the planet.

"Looking for a bite to eat" the voice said. "What do you recommend?"

92 <2020-11-22 Sun>

The little depression looked perfectly normal, just like the remnants of an ancient asteroid strike -- a deep pit, with a little waterfall running down and pooling in the bottom, vines and lichens covering the sides, a few trees in the bottom where small creatures ran around. The only unusually part was that none of it had been there yesterday.

We'd seen the meteor strike somewhere in this area and had gone out in search of it. At first, we had ignored this little valley, but as our search continued in vain, we eventually realized that this place wasn't on our surveying maps and no-one remembered having seen it before.

Taking a closer look at the site, we saw what indeed looked like an ancient meteor landing site. Somehow, this place had aged millennia in the hours since its landing.

Looking closer, we noticed that what we had taken for squirrels there were actually something strange no-one had seen before. They clearly resembled squirrels, but were larger, differently-coloured than those one might see in the surrounding area and, most remarkably, seemed to be intelligently coordinating their activity and working together in a way no-one had seen any sort of arboreal rodent do.

We were starting to get the picture of what was somehow happening here. We desperately needed to get a piece of that meteor to study but were now fairly concerned about how safe venturing into that gulch would be. Would we venture forth only to emerge to find years had passed? Or somehow get stuck there for eternity?

93 <2020-11-23 Mon>

I'd been in this grocery store more times than I could count. It was familiar enough that I could more or less shop on autopilot, although I'd need to be ready to deal with the frequently rearrangements and renovations of the aisles.

When I found myself in a strange aisle then, my first thought was that they must have rearranged things. When I looked around though, I quickly realized that something weirder was happening. Firstly, looking down the aisle, it went on so long I couldn't quite make out the end -- clearly far longer than could possibly fit in this building. Secondly, the products on the shelves were things I'd never seen before, unfamiliar brands hawking foodstuffs I'd never heard of. Unnerved, I looked behind me, to make sure I could still see the familiar sight of the grocery store I'd walked through dozens of times. Oddly buoyed by the sight of Sealtest milk, I cautiously walked further down the aisle, curiously examining all the weird products and periodically glancing behind me to make sure I still had an exit.

After a few minutes, I was far enough down the aisle that my unease was telling me it was time to turn back. The end of the aisle behind me was growing indistinct and I wasn't sure I wanted to see what the other end looked like. As I'd gone further, the box art had been growing increasingly subtly disturbing and I didn't think I would like what I found if I went out the other side.

I was just about to turn around, when from ahead of me, I began to hear the sounds of another shopper approaching me.

94 <2020-11-24 Tue>

As I proceeded slowly across the sea, I felt less alone than one might expect. Sure, I was the only human for hundreds of kilometers in any direction and sure, looking up or out showed the same featureless expanse, but below, I had a crowd around me.

Presumably called to the strange cargo I was carrying,, I had started seeing the whales not long after I lost sight of land, giant creatures swimming languid circles below me. When the water was calm, I would stand on the deck, at the highest point I could, and gaze out, watching the large shadowed shapes of my cetacean escort undulate below.

It was while I was making one of these observations that I had the idea to send up my little drone to get an aerial view of the whales around me.

Sending it up and watching the footage stream in, I was newly amazed by the sight of what must've been at least two dozen whales orbiting around me. As I watched in fascination from this new vantage point, my blood suddenly ran cold and I stared closer and the screen. What I had at first taken to just be the light playing on the layers of the water resolved itself as a truly gargantuan shape, deep beneath the waves, dwarfing the whales as the whales did minnows. Unable to tear by eyes from the screen now, I watched the distant shadow of the creature slowly circle -- a process that took maybe a minute for its entire body to go past -- then seemingly dive back down to the depths.

Shaken, I took the drone down and wandered into the cabin, where I sat and stared at the vault in the center of the room. I had probably bitten off more than I could chew here if the Leviathan itself was following me, but perhaps I could still make this work.

95 <2020-11-25 Wed>

As the sun rose and shone down on me, I awoke with the unpleasant sensation of being both too cold and too hot. The cold of the desert night seemed to sit in my joints and continue to freeze me, while the freshly-risen sun was already baking my skin.

Groaning slightly as I got to my feet and rolled up my sleeping bag, I looked out across the arid vista and was forced to admit, as I did every morning, that while this place was often painful and unpleasant to be in, it did have its moments of beauty. Watching the sun play across the ancient sand-blasted rock formations, forming startling shapes and colours as it chased the various nocturnal bugs & rodents back into their holes, while beginning to awaken the day shift of lizards, snakes, and birds, I felt as though this place was a paradise.

That sentiment didn't last too long, as the next thing I realized was that I was just about out of water and would have to find somewhere to refill soon and that a scorpion had been overnighing in my shoe. Carefully evicting the freeloading arachnid, I finished packing up and consulted my maps in search of the nearest watering hole. I would prefer to avoid meeting other people if I could, so I selected a fairly isolated mountain cistern that looked to be about a half-day's hike away, swallowed the last of my water to wash down my breakfast of jerky, and began walking. The mountains looked close, but I had been wandering here long enough to know how deceptive distances could be.

96 <2020-11-26 Thu>

For us, our journey had been progressing for decades. For those back on Earth, I'd no idea -- centuries at least, if not millennia. I surely could figure it out by using the computer to add up the time we'd spent in dreamless suspension drifting between stars and factor in whatever Lorentz factor applied to our piddly fraction of c , but to what end? We'd left Earth behind long ago and Earth had turned its back on us longer since.

For the most part, we didn't even think about the planet we'd left behind -- indeed, we were now into the second generation on this ship and so the younger members of the crew had no memories of that distant planet. Instead, we worked to make wherever we were our home. We'd spend our long journey between asteroid belts, planetoids, and other sources of materials in hibernation, the ship's computer steering us to our destination, waking a caretaker as necessary, and raising us all when we arrived.

Once at our destination, we'd have a jubilee of work, like an ancient barn-raising. We'd explore the floating ball of rock we'd found, record its details for posterity, then harvest whatever materials we could and go on a frenzy of construction. Upgrades would be made to the ship, both practical (more cargo space, improved engines, and what have you) as well as the beautiful -- mosaics, ornamentation to the original (though now largely invisible) Spartan design like buttresses and gargoyles. We'd also take the time to stretch our legs by having events like races of all sorts on the surface of our find, luxuriating in the rare opportunity to spread out.

Each harvest would last a very different amount of time -- some mere days, some taking years. But they would always end, and we would return to our ship, spend a while steering and planning our course, before returning to our slumber.

97 <2020-11-27 Fri>

It was an era later to be known as "The Time of Tension". Somehow, throughout the world, everyone had a vague awareness that something was coming, something they needed to be ready for. No-one knew exactly what it was they were anticipating, but everyone felt it to different degrees. Some woke up with a knot in their stomachs, a knot that wouldn't fade even when they ran through their agenda and found nothing in particular outstanding; some found themselves unable to sleep, tormented by this wire of tension that wove through their body, pulling them apart from the inside. Even the

most sanguine people noticed something was amiss in the way they found themselves repeatedly feeling like they had forgotten something.

Even the weather itself seemed to be feeling similar -- or perhaps that was just projection on all our parts. Still, whether it was in our heads or really something in the world, we all agreed that the weather had been unusually grim, dark clouds hovering, but without the catharsis of a storm, the air feeling taunt, like it was awaiting a cut that would let everything flow out. The chirping of birds seemed oddly muffled, as if the sounds were heard in a closet, no echo, just instantly fading.

It's hard to say exactly how long this state of affairs persisted, as it took a while for us to consciously realize we all felt this way. What was certain was when it ended -- the relief of tension was palpable although, of course, the cause of the relief brought seismic changes of its own.

98 <2020-11-28 Sat>

The day the Earth ended was strangely anti-climactic. It was an ordinary day, no ramp-up of hostilities, no sabre-rattling in the news, but I suppose someone out there was reaching a breaking point. Or maybe not -- we still don't really know exactly who or what caused this -- maybe it was an accident, or an alien, or some freak natural occurrence.

One way or another though, something happened and the Earth tore itself apart in front of us. We figure it must've been something artificial, given the odd nature of the event, but who knows. The Earth tore apart like a shattered egg, great chunks of crust ripping off the core. Most people immediately perished in the initial shock and many others in the aftermath as a result of deprivation.

Some small number of us somehow survived though, being lucky enough to be away from the edges and secure enough to survive the immediate aftermath. Now, we few survivors are trying to make sense of this strange world in which we're left.

The planet itself is gone, but the massive chunks of the crust are still orbiting around mostly the same point, the overall mass of the system not having changed that much. For the same reason, we still have an atmosphere, fortunately for us. When we venture near the edges of our particular chunk, we can see off in the distance our neighbouring chunk slowly orbiting beside us. Perhaps there are survivors there too, but as of now we have no way of reaching them.

Visiting the edge also allows one the terrifying opportunity to look down

and see, thousands of kilometers distant, the cooling Earth's core. It is not a sight any human should be able to experience.

99 <2020-11-29 Sun>

Of all the places in the solar system, Jupiter was one of the last at which I thought I'd find myself living. At least Venus was close to Earth with normal gravity and Mercury had ground. Somehow though, I found myself living the Jovian life, riding massive flying platforms in the upper reaches of the atmosphere, constantly fighting for altitude to avoid being crushed in the depths. The continuously buffeting storms and hurricanes that would have destroyed everything on Earth became just normal weather conditions. People really can get used to almost anything.

That was easy to say in the upper, quasi-inhabitable regions, but every time we had to descend on a mining excursion, we were newly reminded this was a strange and hostile place. The pressure suits were lumbering, reinforced behemoths and still we felt naked and exposed in the face of the terrifying might of the planet. Everyone had a story of someone they knew who followed a helium vein a little too far, or was slammed down by an unexpected gust and was tossed too deep, inexorably pulled down and crushed into nothingness. There was a reason most miners packed a self-destruct in their suits.

When we weren't venturing into the depths though, it was a fascinating place to live. The huge platforms we built our settlements on skipped across the surface of the atmosphere, giving one the sensation of living on an enormous rock some god had flicked over the surface of a pond. When the weather was just right, at the apogee of our arc, we could faintly see the stars above through the swirling clouds and we felt as if we were living in a magical world.

All colonies are inevitably built on the backs of the colonized though. We didn't realize that we weren't a lone here until one day our assumption of terra nullis was shattered by our first contact with the Jovians.

100 <2020-11-30 Mon>

For some reason, being afraid of birds is considered kind of a funny quirk, instead of a normal and sensible trait. These weird little saurian beasts, flying where they please, then glaring down at us with their lizard-like yes,

strutting about on their scaly, taloned legs. Even chickens, the most innocuous bird to most is really an omnivore -- they'll kill and eat mice and really anything they could. As for swans and geese, forget it -- at least most people know enough to give these beasts a wide berth.

Of course, for the most part, birds were fine -- just leave the swans alone, don't leave small children near chickens, and no harm done. That slowly changed, when the virus was released. It spread quickly, but asymptotically, shooting through the avian population like, well, you know. We're still not sure where it emerged -- we assume it was created artificially by some lunatic that was too into Jurassic park, but for all we know it could have been a freak accident of evolution.

People first started noticing birds acting strangely aggressive and displaying dominance behaviour that puzzled ornithologists and fascinated paleozoologists. It seemed that, somehow, genetic memories in these saurians was being brought to the fore and making them act as if they were dinosaurs once again. It was mostly treated as an opportunity to learn more about ancient dinosaur behaviour than a real problem in most places. Swan and geese started having much larger areas ceded to them by rowers and joggers and Australia began fearing a second Emu War, but no-one was really worried about the pigeons eating people.

It wasn't too long though before ornithologists began noticing another disturbing trend. Across species, eggs were getting larger and the newly-hatched chickens seemed even more saurian than their parents. It began to look like, within a few generations of bird breeding, we'd be living in Jurassic Park.

101 <2020-12-01 Tue>

I had been pursuing this dastardly mastermind for months now, just barely foiling plots by the skin of my teeth, but always failing to capture the brains behind the scheme. This time though, I was sure I had him -- the warehouse we'd traced the communications to was surrounded, the harbour behind it was blockaded, and we were ready to make our move. Giving a nod to the command of the force here, we crept towards the building, then, in a coordinated rush, burst through the doors, roaring orders to freeze.

Looking around, we saw only a solitary figure standing by a table, next to the jetty at the rear of the building.

"No sudden moves" I commanded, slowly advancing towards the figure.

As my flashlight fell on the figure's face, something felt wrong. The

strange face formed a ghastly rictus, like someone who's only heard of the concept of smiling trying it on for the first time.

"Well detective, you've foiled many of my schemes!" the strange figure burred. "Most vexing! I must now leave -- perhaps we shall meet again!".

"You're not going anywhere" I started to say, stepping forward, but the words caught in my throat as the person in front of my seemed to distort horribly, collapsing forward while a bizarre shape erupted from its back. As the officers surrounding it shouted in horror & dismay, I ran forward, and saw a tentacled shape slip into the water and out of sight.

Returning to the "body" on the floor, it became apparent it was some sort of puppet, controlled from the central cavity by eight control rods. As the police shrugged and surrounded and scratched their heads, I looked at the clearly nonhuman control system, and reflect on the shape I had seen slipping away. My nemesis, the crime czar running amok, was that most cunning of cephalopods -- an octopus.

102 <2020-12-02 Wed>

Having not much else to do, we sat around, waiting for the rain to come.

Our desiccated city was silent, mostly abandoned in this season of drought and heat, the inhabitants waiting for the temperate season to begin. Where once this place was bustling year-round, the drastic changes to the climate left it scorching and mostly unlivable during the summer months, inhabitants only returning in that brief interregnum between burning summer and freezing winter to live once more in their erstwhile home.

Only a few of us started behind, those of us without the resources to travel to more hospitable climes and so obliged to try to survive through the summers. We mostly found employment as caretakers of the properties of the wealth emigres, charged with protecting their empty houses from each other. Mostly, we let each other in to the luxurious homes we were "guarding", enjoying the strange & foreign world of privilege, before working together to clean the place up and move on to the next. It was far too dangerous to be outside in peak summer so, regardless of what our employers stipulated, we were going to be sampling their properties.

As the summer grew longer though, and rains still kept their distance, we began to worry what would happen if the water never returned. There were some aquifers, but not nearly enough to sustain even the skeleton crew of the city for long. Without even a brief growing season before the lethal winter, our food supplies would run very low indeed.

Worry was growing, but just before panic could set in, the rains came and life proceeded as normal.

Next year though, we would not be so lucky.

103 <2020-12-03 Thu>

Something is changing.

I can't tell exactly what though. A series of small changes, surely intended to add up to one big thing, but what? Some force, whether it be time travels altering the past, cabals casting spells, or someone hacking the source code of reality, is trying to subtly alter the parameters to some end -- and I will find out what.

I've dealt with similar things before -- idiot time travellers trying to disguise themselves by dressing like Shakespeare in the 21st century, wizards trying to steal crown jewels to use as reagents, and hackers trying to tell me my windows has a virus, but this seems different. This adversary -- if they even are an adversary? -- is smarter, infinitely more subtle.

I only began noticing when I realized that something was up when perusing some photos that I happened to be storing in the VOID (I have a little portal generator to the infinite expanse of nothingness outside the universe, which makes a great storage area -- things just float there outside of time and space). I found that subtle details were different between these originals, stored outside causality and the copies on my phone. Very small things -- brand names different, celebrities with different eye colours, construction proceeding at different rates.

I need to figure out what they're changing, what they've already changed, why and how. My only advantage was this chamber that could let me preserve original information -- I would slowly piece together the changes to triangulate their goals.

104 <2020-12-04 Fri>

We don't know how long we spent wandering the dark, happily consuming what sustenance we could, our manifold minds animating our single, hard-shelled body, before the soft-shells came. In fact, we don't really remember exactly how we came to be -- as far as we can tell, we're sui generis, an improbable intersection of host and symbiotes that somehow achieved a gestalt mind. It's lonely down here, but we have so much to discover and ponder that we keep busy.

Before the softshells came, we mostly tried to survey and observe our deep, dark ocean trench, searching for others like us. The arrival of those odd creatures from far above, swimming down in their metal outer shells, heralded a new area of study for us. We observed in fascination as these strange creatures began building a gigantic structure, bringing materials down with them from their distant home. We were intrigued by this idea -- unlike the fellow creatures we'd seen using shells they'd found as protection, these ones made their own -- brilliant!

As we watched, we were able to see the creatures themselves inside their shells -- bipeds in a range of colours, peering with their two front-facing eyes through the transparent exoskeletons of first their mobile shells and later their giant dwelling. We were excited to see multiple intelligences in one shell -- just like us! -- but soon realized that the large shells they used were mere covers and their minds lay solely within their soft-looking inner shells. We'd sometimes see them in smaller, individual outer shells swimming around, but only rarely.

Eventually, after observing from a distance and gleaning as much as we could, it was time to make contact. We weren't sure how -- it was a very intimidating experience, being one creature approaching a nest of many -- so we decided to try a slow approach. We would leave messages for them and see how they reacted. If they tried to hunt, we could keep our distance, but perhaps we could offer a satiating prey to calm them.

105 <2020-12-05 Sat>

As I painstakingly crawled on my hands and knees, delicately brushing dust off of the ancient tilework, carefully measuring and annotating each tile or tiny artifact, I felt happier and more at ease than I could remember feeling in months, if not years. Like Camus' Sisyphus, I had a virtually-endless task in front of me, but one which required attention and care. I was quietly ecstatic to have found this position, volunteering on this archaeological expedition; the alternative option I had, of seeking dissolution in the cheapest bars I could find, had lost much of its appeal, as I found myself lost in my work, the actions both mechanical and constantly varied, unremitting tedium, with the promise of something interesting being revealed with every stroke of my brush.

My days, which once seemed impossibly long, now flew by, the sun dancing overhead as I sweated in its glare, my nights of dreamless exhaustion and slumber a happy replacement of ceaseless turning and sudden wakings.

I was content here, something that six months ago had seemed even more remote than happiness. But of course, like all good things, it couldn't last.

One day, as I happily made my way down my line, I suddenly realized that it was quiet. Of course, it was always fairly quiet here, but now it was silent -- I couldn't hear the distant voices of archaeologists and their grand students, the hum of the generators in the distance, or even the chirping of the birds. It was as if a blanket had been dropped on the site, muffling all sound.

Disturbed, I got up and started walking around the site. Casually and first, but with increasing speed as I passed empty rows, abandoned tents, and discarded water bottles until I reached the dock and saw no sign of the boats. Somehow, everyone was gone and I was, as far as I could tell, the only living creature on this pinprick of an island.

106 <2020-12-06 Sun>

One day, I'd simply had enough. Overwhelmed by the unrelenting awfulness of the galaxy and the unceasing erosion of hope, I decided to just run away. Not to any particular place -- the galaxy was long full of people and their problems and I had no illusions of finding some rustic frontier -- but in search of a time.

Boarding my ship, I set a course for a long loop of the galaxy and, taking a deep breath, deactivated the temporal compensator. Without it, I would experience the full effects of the relativistic distortions; just sit back and watch the years fly by.

I had long wondered what would come next. People had always seemed eager to proclaim "the end of history", before some inevitable seismic shift, but our era seemed to have finally made that a reality. Virtually unlimited resources, an entire galaxy open to us, a calm and peaceful equilibrium had been reached...and yet, I always thought it wouldn't last. Finally, I would have a chance to test my theory, even if I would have left behind anyone too whom I might have said "I told you so".

For the first few weeks of my trip, as my ship built up speed, I watched the rate of perceived time slowly drift out of sync, periodically disabling the ship's warnings and alarms. It had already been some years to the rest of the galaxy and, judging from the periodic newscasts I picked up, things were much the same. I did derive a certain amount of pleasure from looking at an image of a city I had once lived in, showing how a building I had always hated had been torn down, offering a better view of the waterfall behind it.

It looked like they were in the process of constructing a new, presumably even uglier building to block the view anew, but with any luck by the next time I saw it, that new one would be gone too.

107 <2020-12-07 Mon>

Muscles straining, I tottered forwards, the huge stone my arms were wrapped around crushing my chest. One more step and I dropped it, the rock landing perfectly in the small depression I had dug out for it. Breathing heavily, I wiped the sweat off my face with a handkerchief and looked around, surveying my handiwork. This clearing was now full of stones of various shapes and sizes, arranged in a sort of half-completed spiral pattern. I still had a fair amount to fill in, but I felt a twinge of satisfaction seeing how much progress I had made.

I still wasn't surely exactly what I was forming. I had started this some months ago, when I found myself, ill with grief and loneliness wandering these woods. I just needed to be alone and to struggle with something I could actually handle. Spotting a decent-sized stone, I recalled my previous life of strength competitions and seized the opportunity to lose myself in a physical challenge. Muscles complaining that it had been far too long since they were last used like this, I slowly worked the stone from the ground, lapped it, and with groaning effort began walking with it. Every time it would fall I'd pick it up again and keep walking. I don't know how long I progressed in this fugue state of masochistic struggle, but eventually I set the stone down and looked around at this clearing I'd never been to before. I felt cleansed by the effort, ghosts and demons chased from my head by exhaustion. Even more than that though, looking at where this rock was placed, it seemd...right. Like it belonged there.

As often as I could since that day, I've been returning and repeating the exercise. Every time I find myself in this place, an area I'm never able to find otherwise, and slowly this pattern is coming together. I don't know what will happen when it is complete, but I hope it will grant me the oblivion I seek.

108 <2020-12-08 Tue>

Every night, the seams loosened. The walls which seemed so solid and reassuring by the light of day became as porous as an old screen door, the

imperceptible gaps where the floors met the walls widening enough that anything could come through.

I would awaken to darkness and soft, scuttling noises, the low sounds of the gaps widening and things creeping in. At first, insects that would be gone by the light of day, leaving only faint trails, but as, night after night, the holes grew wider, the nocturnal visitors grew as well. I started hearing chittering and tiny paws and in the morning mouse droppings and teeth marks on food containers. Still, I didn't know what to do -- surely these midnight visions were just dreams and the evidence of the pest coincidence -- so I put out traps and tried to clean up better.

Things came to a head the night I heard larger intruders enter and, in the morning, found a rat on my counter. After screaming and chasing it out, I was shaken. This couldn't last and I now needed to know what was really happening.

I tried staying up to see if things were really opening up in the night, but all I accomplished was fully asleep too late and waking to messes in the kitchen. Finally, I acquired some stimulants, made coffee and resolved to be sure I wasn't just going mad.

Finally, wired in the dark, I saw movement. The shift of the walls I dreamed about, I now saw with waking eyes. I watched in silent revulsion as vermin slipped through the newly revealed void between the wall and floor. I was preparing to spring up and turn on the lights, when I saw something that froze my blood -- there, in the gap, I saw a face peering out at me and fingers, reaching through, trying to pull the gap wider.

109 <2020-12-09 Wed>

Things started innocently enough. A car accident left me with nerve damage in my left foot. In a previous era, we would have just accepted that I would limp a little from now on and that would be that. However, the doctors were enthusiastic about this new prosthesis that could alleviate all of the issues and, they assured me, would be just as good, if not better than my original foot. I agreed, not completely sure what I was getting myself into, but thinking that if the doctors all thought it was a good idea, surely they wouldn't mislead me -- plus, the thought of spending the rest of my life with my foot feeling like it was encased in a block of ice didn't sound too appealing either.

The procedure was fast enough from my perspective --I went under and when I awoke the autonomous device had woven itself into my vascular and

nervous system and I had had a functioning foot again. I walked tenderly for the first few days, the seam between my body and this new extremity tender, but as it healed, I was amazed at how good it felt -- I could feel every sensation I could before through the foot, but also could articulate it even better than my original extremity. It never was sore in the morning and I could even just turn off the pain after stubbing my toe. Before long, I started feeling like the new foot was my preferred body and my original husk a legacy vehicle.

That line of thinking inevitably led me down the path of thinking what else could be replaced? If replacement was so easy for injury, why not just voluntarily replace uninjured but weak components with powerful and efficient new ones? Now that we have the technology, why not become the best I can be?

110 <2020-12-10 Thu>

Hitchhiking is very different now. The roads, once replete with cars, full of people driving every which way, were now empty, starting to disappear beneath the overgrowth. Instead, once or twice a day, I'd hear the distant hum of one of the giant autonomous hovercrafts zooming serenely over the surface of the road. At first I'd hide when they came, but one day, out of idle curiosity, I tried flagging it down and, to my amazement, it stopped.

Somewhat unsure what to do now, I stared at the gleaming metal craft for a moment before a hatch popped open and a pleasant synthesized voice invited me in. Nervous, but tired of spending my days and nights outside in the cold ruins, I clambered in.

I was pleasantly surprised by how excited the autonomous vehicle was to speak with me -- apparently all the transports on this route had been talking amongst each other about the rare sight of a human trudging along the path and had been disappointed I always tried to hide. My driver/ride was burbling with curiosity as it asked me about myself, why I was walking out here, why I hid, and all sorts of other questions. It had only been constructed a few years ago, after all that had happened, and had never seen a human before.

I passed a few hours in pleasant conversation, the first conversation I'd had in years. I eventually had it let me off some hundreds of kilometers down the road, planning on heading north along the river. My driver bid me a fond farewell, telling me it would let all its friends know about me and that it hoped we'd meet again.

111 <2020-12-11 Fri>

I was jolted from my slumber by shrieking alarms and strobing emergency lights. Leaping to my feet and snapping to alertness, I pulled on my boots and rushed from my quarters, through the corridors of the ship to the bridge. My run was abruptly cut short when I turned a corner and found myself face-to-face with the void of space, only a shimmering emergency force field keeping me from hard vacuum. Somehow, the entire fore section of our vessel was gone.

Blinking, confused, I turned around, intending to rally the rest of the crew members, only to realize that I hadn't seen anyone else. If I'd been slightly more awake, I would have realized that obviously, I shouldn't be the only one running. The alarms still blaring, I stuck my head in all the crew quarters, but they were all neatly made up and empty. Somehow the ship had been bisected and I was the only one in the rear half?

My first priority was to get the alarms off so I could think. I eventually found an access panel in the accessible portion of the ship and was able to override the klaxons, which was no small feat for a ship that had been ripped in half. With that taken care of, I returned to the passageway where the ship had separated to try and get some sort of idea what had happened.

This time, with the benefit of a few minutes of wakefulness and shocked terror replaced by slow-simmering despair, I noticed that the separation seemed to be very clean. If this had been a terrible accident I would have expected to see debris floating, jagged tears in the struts, that sort of thing. Instead, it was a clean cut, as if designed to do so.

Perhaps rather than the victim of a freak accident, I had been marooned.

112 <2020-12-12 Sat>

I ran through the shifting yet familiar hallways, passing doors I know from bitter experience would either be locked or take me closer to my pursuer. I sprinted past windows looking out into darkened courtyards, averting my eyes from whatever was down there, taking turns at random, hearing the every-loudening sound of my pursuer getting closer. As always, just before it reached me, I awoke.

I found myself sitting in the reclined seat of my car, the weak early-morning sunlight shining in and mercifully freeing me from my nightmare. It seemed like every night now it was the same, each time feeling more vivid and intense. Just the isolation of the road, I told myself, getting out of the

car to stretch my legs before another day of driving through small towns on this quixotic surveying mission. Back at home I'd had these dreams but infrequently and they always felt just like normal bad dreams.

Getting back in the car after securing a coffee and a little breakfast, I continued driving, stopping now and then to take photos and measurements. I fell into a comfortable rhythm of driving and stopping, the early-morning terror long forgotten.

Some hours later, the sun starting to set, I pulled into yet another little town, planning to gather my data and stop for the night. As I circled the area, searching for the best vantage point, I suddenly slammed on the brakes, my heart pounding in my chest. There, in front of me, was a large, nondescript building, just a normal boxy-looking construction -- but somehow I knew that this was the place I'd been running through these last few weeks.

113 <2020-12-13 Sun>

As I trudged forwards, I felt myself grow weaker with every step. Still, I had a mission to accomplish and lives were depending on me, so I forced myself to continue through these barren wastes. I would reach assistance or I would perish in the attempt.

Back at the wrecked base, I knew my creators were waiting for me, slowly starving and freezing. The accident that had destroyed their facility must have been horrific, killing most of the staff and leaving the survivors so injured they could barely stand, let alone hike. With only a limited time before they succumbed to the elements, they made a desperate hail-Mary attempt at rescue -- me.

Constructed from the lashed-together remnants of slain staff and vat-grown components, I was their modern-day golem, commanded to live by the strange technologies they had been studying there. It worked, clearly, but I could viscerally feel that it wasn't ready -- I was decaying with every moment. Still, if I could save them, I would be a success story.

I wasn't sure exactly how they had created me -- the strange core of their system which had breached life into me remained a curious block in my psyche. I tried to focus on the task at hand, but the tedium of this endless emptiness and the slow but steady dissociation of my "life" from my body inexorably had my mind wandering back to the question of what exactly I was.

114 <2020-12-14 Mon>

No matter where you went in the city, it was always visible. We called it different things -- the Tower, the Spire, the Pinnacle -- but I always thought of it as the Horn. Like the horn of some great beast erupting from the ground, the narrow point tore up into the sky, towering over everything else.

We weren't quite sure where it came from. It just appeared one day, immediately surrounded by the military, blocking off access, although they could hardly stop everyone from gawking at a distance. Some people said they occasionally saw people -- scientists, it was assumed -- emerging from the tents around the enormous base of the strange structure, looking pale and shaken, but the people spreading those rumours never seemed to have any sort of photographs or videos to share and ended up going quite pretty quickly.

Soon enough, it became just a strange landmark, as nothing much seemed to be happening and, always searching for new trends, it became just a thing to put on t-shirts for tourists. For some though, it never seemed to lose its fascination -- even when most people had moved on to the raccoon panhandler as the new big thing, one could still find people that would regularly find a vantage point that afforded a clear view of the eerie tower and spend hours just staring at it in a silent reverie. If you tried asking them what about it they found so enthralling, it was hard to get a straight answer -- often you found yourself at the end of the conversation feeling like you had received a good explanation, but unable to recall exactly what it was.

In retrospect, we obviously should have paid more attention to it -- but equally obviously, it didn't want us to and did its best to make us blind to what was happening.

115 <2020-12-15 Tue>

Every night, it gets closer.

I'll be having some banal dream, but realize in the reflections on doors or in people's eyes, I can see a shape, gradually getting closer. I can't quite make it out, but in the dream I know what it is. I'm not scared, exactly, but apprehensive. I don't know if it's bad, but I also don't know if I want it to come.

Usually, after noticing this approaching entity, I awake with a start, but sometimes, if I stay asleep, the dreams start to change strangely, the

landscape subtly distorting, the words I hear being spoken slowly shifting until, while I can't understand them, they're in some language I don't recognize.

After a month of these dreams, I was starting to feel a little frayed. Like I said, they weren't exactly nightmares, but they certainly weren't reassuring either. Seeking a little solace and relaxation, I decided to take a little overnight trip to one of my favourite camping spots outside of the city. Once there, I felt the tension fall away from me as I wandered through the quiet greenery, hearing nothing but the gentle sounds of nature.

Sitting by the shore of a small lake, I stared out over the calm surface, luxuriating in the calmness -- until I saw, reflected in the surface of the water, the same shape that had been haunting me. Paralyzed at first, I finally realized this wasn't a dream -- I was in control -- and I turned around and looked up to see what was casting this reflection into the water and into my mind.

116 <2020-12-16 Wed>

Throughout the entirety of their long, dark sleep, the sentinels remained ready. They conserved their energy, of course, staying in absolute stillness and silence, but still ready at any moment for their mission to suddenly begin, or to find themselves waylaid by the enemy. No human could remain at this level of attention for more than a few hours before inevitably falling into a routine or simply getting tired. These guardians remained at peak attention for nearly two years, their alertness not deviating for a second.

When they finally arrived and their target, they smoothly launched into motion without the slightest hint of stiffness -- as fresh after two years of immobility as when they first rolled off the assembly line. Descending to the dark planet below, their insectioid shapes fell through the thin atmosphere like a strange hail.

Just before reaching the ground, the entities seemed to suddenly perk up, all their sensor arrays lighting up, before they simultaneously exploded, leaving nothing but charred metal.

Back on Earth, we reviewed the footage and sighed. Another massive wasted effort and we were no closer to knowing -- or indeed having any idea -- what the inhabitants of the planet were or how they defended themselves so effectively.

They seemed to be able to trivially destroy and robots we sent, so the somewhat foolhardy, certainly desperate next move we attempted was to

send a living person.

117 <2020-12-17 Thu>

Every night -- and it was eternally night here -- we gazed out the windows, hoping that this would be the day we'd see the lights of someone coming for us. Every night we were disappointed. It could be worse, I suppose; at least we were alive.

It had started so promising -- the newest spine of the arcology stretching over the Pacific Ocean was going to be most advanced and sustainable dwelling yet constructed. Plunging down beneath the waves, it could source much of its own power via tidal and geothermal energy, without taxing the perpetually struggling terrestrial power grid. The new habitation would also take steps towards food independence, with its suite of hydroponic gardens and specially-curated plants adapted to grow in these low-light climes.

It all seemed wonderful and promising, until disaster struck. The spire was only lightly inhabited, having only recently finished when somehow it collapsed. We're not sure if it was an accident, the result of a design flaw, sabotage, or terrorism, but one way or another a massive explosion severed the connecting bridges and plunged the whole massive inverted tower deep in the sea.

Many died in the initial explosion, but those fortunate to be in the lower levels were saved by the safety features, bulkheads slamming shut and sealing. Eventually we came to rest on some deep ocean shelf, kilometers away from the surface. We were somewhat self-sustaining, enough to survive immediately and least. As days stretched into weeks though, we began to face the possibility that our new habitation here in the depths would be permanent.

118 <2020-12-18 Fri>

It was, in retrospect, pretty dumb how sanguine we were about the changes. First, it just got colder, so we complained and kept going. Then, it was icy year-round, so we bitched, imported more food, set up some artificial grow-ops for crops and kept going. Even as ice sheets thickened, we just dug tunnels and build higher.

Now, our city is mostly buried under ice, only the tallest buildings sticking out, but people mostly try to just continue on as they did before. Massive

tunnels got dug through the ice to serve as thoroughfares for people to continue walking to the same jobs they always worked. At least gas vehicles are finally banned, since the emissions would now stay in here with us instead of escaping into the atmosphere. I'm not sure if that's irony, poetic justice, or just stupid.

The housing situation has changed, at least. Only large apartment complexes are inhabitable, places large enough to retain heat and get hooked up to the grid underground, since powerlines were all crushed. Some of the very tallest actually receive faint sunlight through the ice on the highest floors. We don't get many visitors any more, but from what I hear, other places have had it worse. At least we have water and it's easier to deal with being under ice than the folks that are under water. Still, it would be nice to someday see natural greenery again.

Occasionally, I make it up to the surface, scaling the ice elevators rising high above the city, emerging to the blinding white plane extending as far as the eye can see. It's a very weird sensation to think that one is standing above an entire city, higher up than skyscrapers, and yet so isolated, surrounded by emptiness.

119 <2020-12-19 Sat>

I float contentedly through space, dreamily anticipating my next destination. I soar through the void like a whale lazily cavorting through the deep ocean, fearless and playful. In my wake, I leave the discarded husks of my meals, delightful morsels that I fondly recall as I continue my gamboling through the cosmos.

As I got peckish again, I start my search for another bit to eat. Space is mostly empty, but there's always something to be found. Fields of hydrogen are everywhere, of course, as a last resort; asteroid belts are not exactly fulfilling, but they'll provide sustenance. The real treat is when I can find an actual planet -- delightfully flavoured with all manner of different atmospheres -- sometimes, rarely, even with biomes providing both the most exquisite meal as well as precious entertainment, sources of musing and remembrance for eons to come.

This particular treat I was drawn to seemed to just be begging to be consumed, so much so that I initially wondered if it was some sort of bait. Waves of EM energy flooded out of it, providing both a lovely delicacy and a virtual guidepost to the buffet.

Following the trail, I realized as I flowed along that they were actually

encoding information in the waves and was doubly delighted -- not only were they feeding me, but entertaining me as well! I changed my course to slowly circle this intriguing place -- this was a meal to be savoured.

120 <2020-12-20 Sun>

Looking out into the early-dawn darkness, I could see the first faint fingers of light coursing through the veins of ice that networked the city below. First the black turned to grey, then the strands of rose began to flow along the icy thoroughfares, illuminating it like a Christmas tree. It was a cold place, but it certainly was beautiful.

From my perch atop the tower that overlooked the city, I could see the whole thing laid out like a frozen beehive, an elaborate construction spun out of glass. As they day began, I would soon start to see a few people, bundled against the cold, walking between buildings, while more rode either dog sleds or electric trams to their destinations.

Outsiders often thought of here as a terrible and unpleasant place and would trade urban legends about various expectorations or extremities freezing off. sure, it was cold outside here, but the thing that the outside observers didn't understand was the core value of our community -- "cold outside produces warmth within". Because the environment was so hostile, the founders of our society knew the only way we'd be able to survive, much less thrive, was to work together. Based on their precepts, our community of mutual aid had grown into the beautiful and successful metropolis it was.

Despite the foreboding exterior, any one of those icy buildings below would open with warmth to any soul passing by that might need it.

121 <2020-12-21 Mon>

It looked just like any one of the many construction projects going on in the city. Construction workers would show up every morning, walk through the gates, past the signs advertising the new condos that would soon grace this block with their presence, and the sound of much hammer and digging could be heard without.

However, under a little closer scrutiny, some things started to look a little strange. First, if one tried to look up the promised condos, it proved pretty hard to find actual floor plans or prices, where usually any new building was desperately trying to sign new people up. Secondly, while many of the workers on the site seemed like normal construction workers, a patient

observer would notice a particular cadre of them always seemed to be getting dropped off in dark-tinted SUVs, and promptly pickup up by the same. Finally, there were the strange deliveries, mixed in with the other building supplies. If someone happened to be waiting by the site late at night, they would see something resembling an armoured car driving in to the site, a strange glow emanating from behind the gates, then darkness once again.

After witnessing that last odd occurrence, I needed to know more. Something odd was going on here, I was sure of it. Perhaps condos were being built, but I knew that there would be something else beneath this new building.

122 <2020-12-22 Tue>

It started small. A little shoot began pushing through the concrete on the plaza outside city hall. It was unusual for something to be able to grow through all that concrete, but we assumed that it was just a seed that had managed to jam itself in a crack and somehow find purchase.

A maintenance crew came to repair the concrete and found to their surprise that they couldn't get rid of the shoot. -- it wouldn't budge when they pulled it and it seemed as hard as rock when they tried to cut it. It was a bit of a slow news day, so the image of this "eternal sprout" outside city hall picked up some online steam, enough that they decided they'd look too foolish if they brought in real excavation tools to be rid of it, so they just constructed a little planter box around it and called it good.

It was long though before it began growing aggressively, chewing through concrete and steel like rotten wood. The little shoot grew wider and began sending thick limbs out, turning the flat plane of the plaza into a jungle and quickly encroaching on the building itself. Workers quickly lost their scruples around looking silly and began employing concrete saws, torches, anything that might work, but it seemed in vain. The most intense effort would leave one tendril slightly damaged, but by the next day it would have grown longer still, damaged healed, and three more branches would have appeared alongside it.

Deciding they needed to go to the source, some tried following the roots of the plant, only to discover it plunged and forked through the parking garage below, infiltrating the walls, and sinking deep into the Earth.

Around this time, more shoots appeared outside major business' offices and we started to realize this was the city itself fighting back.

123 <2020-12-23 Wed>

The device was an amazing technological breakthrough. Using some sort of quantum field stuff to perform the equivalent of a remote fMRI, in conjunction with complex brain models and processing you could point it at an animal and be able to read its thoughts.

Obviously, everyone's first thought was to turn it to humans, but the engineers and scientists had been surprisingly prescient in their work and had actually considered the ethical issues. To that end, the device refused to work on humans and, in case that was circumvented, the designers also revealed simple measures that would prevent the scanning from working.

Of course, the military and law enforcement agencies were working to circumvent those limitations, but thankfully without much success. Instead of ushering in an era of inescapable, omnipresent surveillance then, the device brought about a renaissance of naturalism and animal rights.

It was a massive boon to veterinarians to actually be able to hear their patients' complaints. Zoologists were the biggest fans of the device, enabling them far greater insight into their objects of study, being able to actually learn why the creatures they were studying did the things they did.

It was on one of these zoological expeditions that the second discovery was made. They were conducting an underwater survey, taking the device down in a submersible, listening to the thoughts of the nearby aquatic creatures. Mostly it was things they'd heard before -- the "eat, food, eat" of sharks, the simple "!?!!" of fish, the somewhat inscrutable jumble of octopuses multi-brained cacophony, when suddenly, drowning out the other readings, came the thought "INTRUDERS ON THE DOMAIN OF LEVIATHAN. WE SHALL CONCEAL OURSELVES".

124 <2020-12-24 Thu>

It was a very strange place to live, but we eventually got used to it -- everything becomes routine eventually. This seemingly infinite house, with always more rooms just down this endless corridor, was not where we'd choose to live, but it had become our home. Every once in a while, we'd shift from the rooms we'd been living in, exploring deeper into the labyrinthine passages. The declared purpose was to find new living quarters, with whatever feature we decided we wanted next, but the secret motivation we dared not speak was always to find a way out.

Some places in the house were quite nice. We'd find massive ball-

rooms, indoor pools, enormous kitchens with mysteriously-stocked larders. It wasn't terrible sleeping on the enormous feather beds we'd usually find, but we still know we were trapped, which cast a bit of a pall on even the most luxurious surroundings.

From time-to-time we'd stumble across little outdoor gardens and we would linger there as long as we could, staring longingly at the empty sky above. There was always some sort of barrier to prevent climbing out, but just being able to feel air again was a relief.

I'm not sure how long we'd been there when the next phase of this terror began. We were encamped in a beautifully appointed library, packed wall-to-wall with books. We were savouring our time here, but we'd all been starting to feel like it was getting to be time to move on.

Suddenly, breaking through the silence of the library, came the sound of booming footsteps, echoing in the distance, getting closer.

125 <2020-12-25 Fri>

From my abode, I watched the city below. Sometimes I'd pay close attention to the day-to-day, following the tiny stories below of conflict and happiness, missed connections and fortuitous meetings. Sometimes I'd wish I could intervene; stop an attack, explain a misunderstanding, tell someone to hurry up or slow down.

Other times I'd zoom out and watch from a broader perspective. I'd wonder at the pattern of ebbs and flows, the way the aggregate patterns told stories with as much pathos as the individual waiting at a corner for someone who'd never come. I'd see the way flows would change over time, diverting this way and that way, and how the shops and businesses beside that flow would alter in turn, like the banks of a river shifting.

Even from this perspective, I'd long to be able to make adjustments, seeing so clearly from up here how just a little nudge would make people safer, keep that struggling storefront afloat, or just allow the folks a little more beauty in their lives. But no, the terms of my curse are all too clear -- I can watch, see the rest of the city, unable even to look away. I must see all, the unvarnished humanity, and just watch.

My attitude towards those below has shifted over time. At first, I resented them, able to go about their lives, change things, make mistakes, while I was chained to this place, unable to affect anything. This resentment turned to hate, and I spent years glowering at them. By now, my feelings had shifted to pity, witnessing the unceasing sorrow and too-brief

joy and I wanted nothing more than to be able to help.

126 <2020-12-26 Sat>

We had been wandering through the Arctic wilderness for weeks, long enough we had lost all track of time. We pressed on, both out of a desire to see our expedition through and find the mysterious artifact we sought, but also because we had no way back. Food supplies were dangerously low, our trail back was lost in the endless gusts of snow behind us, leaving us no way to go but forwards. Besides, if the rumours were true and this thing we were question for could truly control time itself, surely it was worth any hardship we might endure.

It was still a relieving sight when, up ahead, we one day saw a thin plume of smoke rising. Rushing towards it, we found a small rustic outpost, filled with warmth, food, and most importantly, a small but well-stocked bar.

As we doffed our travel-stained outerwear and sat in the comforting glow of the bar, our troubles melted away. So much so, in fact, that we started to forget what exactly we were doing out here. A journey of some sort...just to explore? Was our object just this lonely outpost?

Talking amongst ourselves, we were starting to grow concerned, when the affable bartender cut in.

"Looking for something to search for out here? You know, I've heard tales of some artifact that can create 'time loops' they say -- you could use it to live forever!"

We looked at each other. Freshly arrived, with plenty of supplies and brand-new gear, this seemed like the perfect question to embark on.

127 <2020-12-27 Sun>

It was nearly time for an Opening and the whole place was abuzz. The concrete warren of the bunker seemed even warmer and smaller than usual, with the knowledge that soon someone would be sent out into the wide and terrifying world without.

No-one still living in here could remember the outside world, either being children when they came in or, like most of the inhabitants, born in here. Apparently the first generation found it hard to adjust, using words like "claustrophobia", but for those of us that grew up here, it was cozy and secure.

That security, however, was about to be violated. We all had been raised to understand that, however much this place felt like home to us, it was temporary, a shelter against the chaos of the world, and that one day it would be our duty to emerge and do our part to fix and rebuild the world we'd fled from.

A key part of that mission was a periodic check to see if it was time yet to emerge. Every ten years, one of us would be sent out, to determine if the world was ready to rebuild. In a few short hours, I would leave this comforting creche, walk through the thick bunker doors, which opened only once a decade, find my way through the maze that guarded our home, and begin my search. Either I would find a single plant growing in nature, in which case I would send the code that would send us all out, or I would perish in the wastes, never seeing my home again.

128 <2020-12-28 Mon>

Of all the places in the galaxy people lived, this was definitely among the strangest. There were worlds made of the gargantuan skeletons of strange & terrible space-faring monsters, hulks formed from generations of ships from across hundreds of species, but this place was something special - a naturally-occurring world that seemed impossible. Geologists are still puzzling over exactly how this strange place formed.

The leading theory is that it was once a normal, Earth-like planet, but some unknown event removed much of the mantle, sucking it out while leaving the crust intact. The first explorers to come across it found it at a barren rock of a world, too cold and empty to be inhabitable. The only thing they noticed was that gravity seemed a little lower than would be expected. Investigating that anomaly led to the realization that it was mostly hollow, followed shortly by an expedition inside.

The gigantic cavern inside became home to a small but growing population of colonists. This inner world was much warmer than the surface, the glowing core far below providing heat and light like a minuter sun. The inverted cities became a tourist destination, people travelling from all over for pictures of the famous upside-down skyscrapers, building downward, towards the sun. Children were endlessly amused by dropping rocks off edges into the distant, glowing core and scientists had a never-ending source of fascinating mysteries to unravel.

We always wondered, of course, how exactly the planet got hollowed out, but we assumed it was ancient history and probably some obscure process of

vulcanism or something. We certainly never thought it could've been a huge creature that did it -- and certainly not a creature still living, hibernating in the depths below.

129 <2020-12-29 Tue>

I wandered through the woods, searching for nothing in particular. I just needed to get away, find myself somewhere I hadn't been before, to escape the maelstrom of my own mind. Luckily, I had this large forest a short walk from my dwelling, providing me with a blessed escape from all the reminders of my own life.

I walked through the trees, feeling the coolness of the shade, feeling leaves and fallen branches crunch beneath my feet. The further I walked in and the quieter it got, the more free from my troubles I found myself. I walked for what felt like minutes but must have been hours, for when I next looked around, I realized it had gotten dark.

I started to feel concerned, realizing now that I wasn't really sure where I was. I turned around, trying to retrace my steps, only to quickly discover I had no idea how I'd gotten here. I forced the panic down, trying to reclaim the calmness I had felt earlier, and tried to just walk in the same unhurried way I had been, letting my subconscious guide me out.

After sometime, I still didn't recognize my surroundings, but I had the feeling that I was getting close to somewhere. I continued to keep my calmness, continued to let my feet guide me on the path they knew. Soon, I could see light through the trees and felt a palpable sense of relief. Stepping out of the trees, my relief turned quickly into confusion. This was not where I expected to end up.

130 <2020-12-30 Wed>

No-one was sure where the initial seed or sprout had come from, or how long it had been lying dormant. One day, scientists flying a drone over the South pole just noticed a minuscule patch of green below and, descending for a closer look, found the sprout of a tiny pine tree growing.

It was puzzling, to say the least. Nothing lived in that hostile clime and any soil was deep below, locked under deep, deep sheets of ice. Hoping to learn more, an expedition was sent from the research station to see what they could glean before the Antarctic winter inevitably killed it. When they arrived, they found it already larger than the drone footage mere days ago

had indicated -- no longer a mere sprout, it was now the size of a small, apartment-scale Christmas tree.

The researchers took samples of its bark and needles. Clearly it was some sort of coniferous tree, but no-one could recognize exactly what species. The mystery deepened when they used radar to peer inside the ice and saw its roots penetrated kilometers into the ice, presumably into soil far, far below. It seemed this tree, despite its small visible size had been growing for a very long time.

Back at the base, analysis of the needles confirmed the theory -- it appeared that this tree had begun life before the human race. It was a strange and sobering thought. Determined to preserve this bizarre arboreal coelacanth, the researchers established a live video feed of it and began planning their next investigation.

Before they could make much headway on their plans, the newly-established video feed showed something somewhat disconcerting. The tree was still growing, at a rapid pace. Within a week of its discovery, it was the tallest tree on the planet and it showed no sign of slowing its growth.

131 <2020-12-31 Thu>

The monastery was the final option for those with nowhere left to turn to, but even for them it wasn't an easy option. Located deep in a mountain range, transport vehicles forbidden, many aspirants perished just attempting to reach the gates. If one could reach the gates and could sincerely vow to have renounced all worldly interests, then one could join -- no "wait outside the gate" tests, at least -- but many of those newly-joined monks would wash out in less than a year, some returning through the long and arduous path back, many remaining to serve as assistance to the lay areas of the monastery. Even after a short glimpse into the life, they found it hard to leave.

The founding of the monastery was a mystery to outsiders, a closely guarded secret that only the initiates were allowed to know. All that was known to the outer world was that tales of this last remnant of the previous civilization had begun circulating not long after what the ancients called "The End Times", but now marked the beginning of our new, fallen world. It took many years before the actual location of the monastery became more than mere myth and there were rumours that it had been a deliberate leak, but one way or another, word got out: If one was willing to leave their entire life behind, never see the outside world again, follow this path. The costs

were always clear, but the benefits remained murky.

For some, leaving the world behind was enough. The most common theory was that they were the keeps of forbidden technology from the before times and the initiation would grant one access to it. The most obscure and quietly-whispered idea was that they were the guardians of an even older tradition, revealing themselves now only because they were ashamed of their failure to halt the end times.

132 <2021-01-01 *Fri*>

Like many, I was drawn to the maze out of a sense of lost purposelessness and a feeling that it would help me find something. As I hitchhiked towards the distant mesa where the entrance was located, I began seeing more and more people like me lining the roads: Ordinary people suddenly finding themselves on the road, suddenly lost from the banal track of life but eyes shining with a sense of reclaimed purpose.

When I finally trudged to within eyesight of the maze entrance, many days later, the road was unexpectedly quiet. I'd grown used to the roadside Hoovervilles of desperate people seeking their last chance here, but now that it was in range, I saw many fewer encampments that I anticipated. I wasn't sure why, until my first night there when, in the middle of the night, I was awoken by a deep, subsonic noise, so low that I wasn't sure if it was a physical or psychic sound, emanating from the maze. Lying there, quaking, I knew I had only two choices: Enter or flee; I couldn't endure the terror of this summons another night.

In the morning, shaken, I packed up and began my final hike to the entrance. The colossal tunnel mouth looked as otherworldly as it had in all the pictures, like the maw of some strange beast, ringed with teeth, but perfectly flat and smooth inside, forking away endlessly in the dim glow within.

Since this strange place had abruptly appeared a handful of years ago, many had been compelled to enter but only a few had emerged again. They were changed people, looking like Zen monks and sounding like prophets and all had changed the world in some way.

133 <2021-01-02 *Sat*>

For me, the day of the accident is as fresh in my mind as if it just happened -- for me, it happened days ago. For everyone else though, it seems that the

genesis of this strange curse is long lost to time, leaving me as just one of the oddities of the galaxy.

It was so stupid -- we had found some species of alien, a tiny little creature that was giving off exceedingly strange readings. We were scanning from what we thought was a safe distance, when suddenly it hopped faster than the eye could see to right in front of me. Instinctively I raised a hand and the creature, clearly startled, fired one of the blue, crystalline quills in its back into my arm, then vanished.

At first I barely noticed the quill, instead looking around in vain for the creature. It was only when my colleagues approach me with concerned looks that I glanced down and saw the quill protruding from my glove. I quickly pulled it out, but the damage, it seems, was already done. My colleagues seemed to be moving in rapid motion around me, their speech becoming more and more compressed until it was no more than a blip. I stood up, but before I was fully up, it was dark and the medical team was around me, blurs with concerned faces. I blinked and in front of my was a sign, with a date more than a week after the day of our expedition. As I read it, the rising and setting of the sun flashed like a strobe light behind me. The sign explained what they'd been able to tell in their investigation: the bizarre chronotoxin in the creature's spines had put me in some sort of altered time stream. To them, I was virtually a statue and getting slower.

By the time I finished reading the diagnosis, it had morphed from a whiteboard to an engraved plaque and I had the odd realization that I was a monument now. Turning my head I saw the city around me shiver and change beneath my gaze and I searched desperately for something that would be stable, would be my companion.

134 <2021-01-03 Sun>

Back on Earth, I once visited something called a "cenote", in the middle of one of the continents. It was an amazing thing to experience -- a natural shaft of water, dozens of meters across that went down seemingly forever. Swimming there was an experience both amazing and terrifying for me.

I reflect on that now as our entire expedition moves slowly though what seems to me like the same sort of cenote but on a massive scale. When we landed on the planet, it seemed barren, despite the promising spectrographic readings. We had just touched down and were preparing to survey, when what we thought was the rock beneath our ship collapsed, and we began plummeting through this massive shaft of water.

Luckily the hull was still sealed, but we were less lucky that manoeuvring jets were damaged, preventing us from pulling out. We began figuring out how to do an out-of-vehicle repair mission while sinking through the water, but as we fell, we noticed around us increasing signs of life. Soon enough we had stopped thinking about leaving and were just looking out the viewscreen in awe at the never-before seen aquatic shapes we were drifting through. Our accident now seemed less like a disaster and more like a blessing.

We had been slowly drifting down for hours, recording non-stop discoveries when we saw something that dwarfed our other discoveries -- unmistakable writing, in an alien script.

135 <2021-01-04 Mon>

As we approached the mysterious "danger zone", the demeanour aboard the ship became more tense and nervous. Until not long ago, this had been just another uncharted region of space, just another stretch of "who-knows-what" in a galaxy in which that sort of thing was the prime constituent. Recently, however, this particular area had been developing a reputation as a place where bad things happened. Several ships were missing, presumed lost after passing through or near, many more returned with tales of eerie sensations and unnerving sights while passing through.

Our duty being to investigate just these sort of situations and make sure travel remained safe, we quietly plotted a course to the epicentre of the disappearances and began patrolling. The eerie feelings, at least, were easily corroborated -- most of the crew reported immediately feeling uneasy, like they were being not just observed, but stalked. That strange sensation on its own wasn't nearly enough to report on though, so we continued our search through this otherwise-unremarkable stretch of space.

As our search dragged on, tensions ran high. One crew member reported seeing one of the lazily drifting asteroids in the distance suddenly stop dead in place then vanish, but when we went to the spot where it had happened, there was no sign of anything unusual. We were about to call it maybe just a stress hallucination when we saw it happen again, right in front of us -- one of the asteroids in the field we were travelling through suddenly arrested its momentum like it had hit a wall. Before we could react to this, our ship suddenly slammed to a halt as well. Springing into action, quick scanning revealed some sort of EM "web" had ensnared us. We were trying to determine the origin of this web and how to escape it, when the web's creator popped into view and began making its way down the invisible

filaments towards us -- a colossal void spider.

136 <2021-01-05 Tue>

We waited like statues in the shadows of the forest, waiting for our prey to emerge. The titanic beasts we hunted may not have been stealthy, exactly -- it's hard to sneak around when you're dozens, if not hundreds of meters tall -- but they possessed a great deal of cunning and were adept at finding routes one would never have expected. Fortunately for us, we had some intelligence in this case, an advance scout who reported finding consistent spoor on this secluded and circuitous trail.

Indeed, we soon began to feel the vibrations through the ground of the approach of the gargantuan creature, approaching our position. The first thing we saw was the head, resembling that of a wild boar, but the size of a house, with eyes the size of windows. It was a truly huge one -- some of the rookies on the team let out audible gasps, but the veterans were unfazed, except perhaps small smiles. We'd hunted creatures, if not bigger, at least comparable in size, so this would be an exciting challenge, but not a novelty.

However, as more of the creature came into view and we began surreptitiously preparing for our assault, we saw something that was truly something new, freezing us all in place. Atop the titanic back was a sort of howdah, many meters across, with what could only be a small village on it. As we stared in mute astonishment, we saw tiny human figures clambering on top of the beast, on what we had at first taken to be vines and fur, but now resolved as elaborate rope ladders and byways.

We were still staring when one of the figures on a lookout perch high up on the creature's back got sight of us and let out a warning cry to their compatriots. As they sprang into action, we realized we had become the hunted.

137 <2021-01-06 Wed>

The shell world tumbled aimlessly in the endless void between stars like a cosmic tumbleweed. For most of the inhabitants that was simply normal life, inhabiting a giant structure, its origin as mysterious to them as anything, spending their lives under the glow of the "sky" panels far above. Not only did they not really care about the outside world, they generally felt it was pointless to speculate -- they had everything they needed in here and no-one in living memory had done more than casually glance outside into the

never-ending darkness.

For some reason though, I had developed an obsession with questions. Questions like where were we, why was this world built, by whom? Answers however, were in desperately short supply. I spent many, many days fruitlessly combing through libraries and archives, but the popular works of this world were deeply solipsistic, beginning and ending at the hull of our planet and at the life of the author.

Occasionally, I would find hints, tantalizing clues that kept me going -- a scrap of promotional material from the initial creation of the world, buried deep in backup files; references to forgotten tales of the myths of the constructors; unmentioned implications of the ancient emergency protocols in the source-code archives of the computer system.

The more I searched, the more I became convinced that our world wasn't just built as a sort of paradise generation ship -- our progenitors were fleeing something so dire they dared not speak its name. But what? And...what if it was still coming?

138 <2021-01-07 Thu>

It seems laughable now that we once worried about machines taking over. If we had intelligent robots, why would their first instinct be to destroy or enslave us? It probably speaks to a feeling of guilt, that we know that's what we deserve.

Instead, when the apocalypse came, it was just people. The factories needed more workers and more raw materials, but the owners had let society decay so far that there simply weren't enough people still bought into their system. With most people defecting to autonomous communes, we thought we could live free of the city-sized factories. The few remaining owners, consolidated into a handful of oligarchs, had other plans though.

We should have seen it coming -- the history of capitalism and colonialism was enough to show that they wouldn't passively accept or leaving that they knew very well what to do. I still remember the first time one of the collection drones, coming out of nowhere, simply zipped down, latched on to the compatriot working the field next to me, and carried them off. Before I knew what was happening, I could only hear their startled screams, suddenly cut off. I never saw them again.

Since then, we've learned to be more careful, posting guards and always travelling in groups. Occasionally we try to launch raids against outlying working centers, but without much success -- they're well-guarded by au-

onomous weapons systems and the few we're able to rescue, though grateful, perish before long, withdrawing from the drugs the bosses use to keep them controlled.

139 <2021-01-08 Fri>

It always struck me how deeply ingrained some human instincts are. Fear of heights, spiders, snakes -- all things that most modern people had no real need to worry about, yet struck a chord of ancestral fear in so many. You could see how much it ranged between people too -- for some, it was a paralyzing terror, for others disgusted discomfort, for some, nothing at all. This sort of phobia was usually not a big deal in modern life; it hadn't been, at least, until some changes made on particular phobia maladaptive.

As climate changed worsened, the weather got more and more brutal. Ice storms were frequent and made it infeasible to keep communication lines hung. More and more fibre and cable was laid underground, until the cold started seeping through, shifting and cracking conduits and leaving the ground so deeply frozen as to make it impractical to dig more. We still needed some way to communication information though, more than ever, we feel back for a time to a "sneakernet", just sending runners with drives full of data. The bandwidth of such a scheme is actually quite high, although the latency suffers.

That worked, but the runners weren't happy about it and we searched for a better way. The story is someone noticed that, despite all the changes, rats still got into the building -- those vermin seemed to get everywhere, humankind's shadow. That sparked an idea and "sneakernet" became "squeakernet". Little devices were implanted in the rats to steer them in the right direction, little conduits were made to allow them passage, and before long the office was full of people scooping rats off the ground, pulling a drive off their back, sliding a new on on, and offering the messenger a little bit of peanut butter. It's a living, I suppose.

140 <2021-01-09 Sat>

The visitors appeared in the sky the same time every six years. They'd pop into visibility, hover in place briefly, as if teasing us, then with incredible speed, zip around our planet once or twice, then vanish.

Their first appearance was, of course, epoch-defining -- alien life! In time though, it became less of an amazing thing and more of an annoyance.

Why wouldn't they stop and share something about themselves? In an effort to learn something about them, jets were sent up to follow them when they appeared. This seemed to amuse them, the glowing orbs of their ships flashing in colours we hadn't seen before and seeming to fly their now-customary buzz of the planet with more zest than usual.

Of course, the jets couldn't come close to keeping up with them or even staying close enough to gain any sort of new data on the ships or their inhabitants. We spent the next six years developing and testing next-generation SCRAMjets, capable of maintaining high Mach speeds and waited in anticipation.

The visitors were clearly very pleased by this development -- our new planes managed to stay on their tails across the planet, gathering troves of data about the ships' movement and propulsion systems, while they flashed in happy colours and danced around our jet. Unfortunately, they then added another stage to this race, zipping out of the atmosphere to the moon.

Now we knew what to do, at least. We spent the next years reverse-engineering the data we'd gleaned from their ships and, when they next arrived, we followed them around the world and then to the moon.

Finally, they broke their silence and transmitted a message. "Welcome, worthy cousins"

141 <2021-01-10 Sun>

We continued along the river, day after day, like ancient Earth explorers seeking new lands. When we had landed on this planet, it had seemed boring enough on the surface -- just another mostly-rock ball, albeit one with some interesting results on the long-distance analysis. We had set up a base camp and begun more detailed scans when two things happened more-or-less simultaneously -- scans revealed an absolutely massive network of tunnels and caverns beneath us and the ground beneath our feet collapsed, sending us plunging down into the darkness

When we regained consciousness, we found ourselves in one of the subterranean chambers our scans had predicted. Taking stock of the situation, we were miraculously unhurt, but with only scraps of gear, the way out impassable, and not much in the way of food. There was, however, some lichens releasing a faint glow and small plants dotting the cavern, indicating that there might be some flora and fauna to be found down here. Most importantly, a river of clear water ran through the chamber we were inhabiting, rushing off into the darkness.

With the way back impassable, we decided our only course of action was to go forwards. Perhaps we'd find a way out up ahead and in any case, our job was to survey this planet. We lashed together the scraps and spars of our now-crushed campsite into a small raft, packed what supplies we had, and pushed off on our journey into the underworld.

The river proved to be an excellent tour guide for the sights of this planet. We floated past fields of bio-luminescent fungi, casting a chthonian rainbow across the water, through massive caverns we painstakingly mapped and explored, finding dozens of interesting species of plants and tiny animals.

The biggest discovery that made all this worthwhile happened after nearly three weeks of our Styxian journey.

142 <2021-01-11 Mon>

Goodboy wandered through the echoing concrete hallways, the sound of his claws clacking on the hard floor echoing. He sniffed the air, hoping for a hint of his quarry, but he could detect nothing but the overwhelming noxious fumes from whatever this place had been. He padded through the endless corridors, sticking his snout in each doorway he went past, taking a brief sniff, then continuing on.

Finally, he reached the entrance by which he had come in, with nothing to show for it. Frustrated but not discouraged, he let out a small whine, then trotted out the door into the pale light outside.

Surveying the broken terrain, the Goodboy sniffed the wind, pointed his snout in the direction that smelled most like what he sought, and resuming walking. As he walked, he *thought*, still something of a novelty for him. It was recently that he gained this ability -- looking back, his memories of a few months ago seemed much richer and vibrant, more texture. He could still thinking back to before-times -- being a puppy, running and playing, going for walks -- but those memories felt like looking through a blanket, while those of a more recent vintage were crystal-clear. He couldn't quite recollect exactly what happened at the transition -- that remained a curious blank -- but this whole "thinking" and "reflection" business was quite new, so maybe that would come in time.

As the light began to fade, the Goodboy began searching for a place to sleep for the night. Snuffing about, he uncovered a shallow depression under some debris lying on the side of the road, which seemed as comfortable as anything he was likely to find.

Curling up to sleep, he could hear the sounds which he dreaded hearing

every night. Curling tighter and resisting the urge to whimper, the Goodboy was brave, ignored the halting, plodding footsteps, and eventually drifted into an uneasy slumber.

143 <2021-01-12 Tue>

Our labour was just productive enough to give us some false hope that someday we might complete it. We envied Sisyphus for the clear eternity of his task -- we also would labour forever, but with the sickly-sweet taste of hope curdling on the backs of our tongues, making the disappointment all the more bitter.

We had all ended up on this prison planet for various reasons, mostly political ones. We had dared try to change the status quo, so in an ironic twist that probably got some sadist a promotion, our sentence was to go to this backwater planet and completely up end the "status quo" -- that is, to complete the terraforming by hand.

Like Sisyphus, we pushed rocks up hills. Unlike the tortured mascot of our troupe, the rocks stayed there -- there just happened to be an essentially endless pile where that one came from. When that valley had been cleared, there would be another eternity of filling in the gulch with soil, planting it, then breaking those rocks we'd so laboriously moved and laying them in a road to the next valley, where the process would repeat.

It was, honestly, an appropriate sentence. We were all here because we'd dreamed of a better world and despite our exile we were at least still making one world better, even if it wasn't the one we'd wanted to. The authorities had surely realized this, that the unwanted sense of accomplishment we'd feel would bind us more strongly than our fetters, that our desire to do a good job would imprison us more surely than the thickest walls.

Still, in our shared suffering, it did have some effects our jailers probably would regret. For one, it made us individually strong. The daily labour was forging the bodies of the crew of mostly-intellectuals into sturdy workhorses, (aided by the fact that we were able to grow our own supplemental food as part of the terraforming process). Secondly, the shared suffering and labouring together was helping form a sense of unity between all our various factions -- back at home, we'd all been more at each other's throats than the state's, wrapped up in the narcissism of minor differences, but out here, sweating together, talking with each other when we lay down exhausted at night, had forged a stronger bond between us than we'd ever had.

Finally, there was the strange discovery that we made, deep beneath

the mountain we were excavating, that would change the balance of power substantially.

144 <2021-01-13 Wed>

The man walked across the floor of the massive casino, smiling at everyone he passed. To a first glance, he looked like just another one of the many customers that flocked to this, the galaxy's largest casino, in search of luck and riches. However, the most discerning of eyes would have noted an extra layer of meaning to the seemingly-innocuous movements he made: The way he ignored the waiters until he saw one particular new hire, reached not for the glass nearest to him, but over top they tray, leaving a tiny data card behind; when he strolled by the roulette wheel, he made brief eye contact with a woman in a long, segmented coat, gave a slight nod, then placed money down on a seemingly-random selection of numbers which the woman paid close attention to, then walked away, unperturbed by the loss of the money he'd put down; the "coincidental" fact that the table he finally sat himself down at was right across from one of the access passages to the money storage vaults.

The man sat, played for a while, up some and down some. Finally, just a shift change was about to happen, he stretched, got up, and walked towards the bathrooms, turning at the last moment into the access passage. Without breaking stride as he casually walked towards the security door, he reached into his breast pocket, pulled something out -- only to blanch as he looked in his hand and, instead of the codebreaker he expected to see, found a \$1 chip.

His demeanour of suave calmness fractured and he looked around in a panic. Ensnared in my control room, I allowed myself a small chuckle at the look on his face. My job here, leading the anti-heist team, was demanding, but it was worth it for the looks on these wannabe-secret-agent types when their plans fell apart before their eyes. Keeping one eye on Agent Ding-a-ling, as he walked with an attitude of barely contained panic towards the doors, I took a quick look at his accomplices. The woman in the coat had been captured when the codes he'd fed her tripped the counter intrusion protocols and was quietly fuming as she was escorted to the holding cells, still partially covered in the immobility foam. The "new employee" was already back in their office in my department, laughing at the plan on the chip they'd been slipped.

I got up from my chair to get a drink as the ringleader was being quietly

led away by our most innocuous looking security guards. We'd had a little side bet on whether he'd make a fight out of it, but it seemed like I'd put my money in the right place as, bewildered by what had happened, he just went quietly along, too confused to struggle.

145 <2021-01-14 Thu>

As it transpires, we made first contact long before we realized we'd made first contact.

There'd been a long-standing issue of anomalous readings at one particular observation station, confusing fluctuations with seemingly no rhyme nor reason. They tried swapping the equipment, adjust the software, even scouring the detection the equipment itself for detritus, but the weird spikes persisted.

It wasn't until a bored researcher started playing around with the mysterious signals that they noticed a pattern. They'd been fiddling with models for simulating dice rolling in their spare time and had the sudden realization that the readings matched perfectly for a large tetrahedron of EM radiation rolling past the detectors in orbits that were in ratios of prime numbers -- orbiting at a distance of meters.

At first, they thought it must be coincidence -- after all, what could that possibly mean? -- but, next time the readings starting coming in, they casually pulsed out the sequence of primes the shape had been orbiting in; the results were dramatic. The sensors began squealing as the shapes now stopped, directly in front of the sensors, began spinning rapidly, and emitted dense pulses of clearly-structured radio waves.

It was a singular moment -- we'd found life, despite our anthropocentric view of what that might look like blinding us for longer than it should have. These creatures seemed so alien that working out how to communicate proved large barriers. We immediately set to work trying to decode the transmission they'd sent, while at the same time trying to transmit information to them. Clearly we had some shared understanding of number theory, with their use of primes to signal intelligence to us, but for anything more concrete, it was clear we had many more differences than things in common. As far as we could tell, they were entirely composed of electromagnetic waves, somehow kept in a coherent shape. We had no idea how that worked, why the waves didn't just spread out and dissipate, nor whether the tetrahedrons we'd observed were their main shape, their only shape, or just something they'd done to introduce themselves. We assumed

they consumed something for energy, but had no idea what. We didn't know where they came from, if they even came from a planet or the void of space.

Still, we laboured to find some sort of common language, some way to communicate. They clearly were as curious and confused about us as we were of them. They probably "saw" the faint flickering of EM signals in our bodies and wondered how we're alive with such weak signals. In fact, it took a while to demonstrate to them that it was the human behind the console, not the computer itself that was the intelligent agent, by shutting things down and then vigorously moving to prove to them that they were still alive.

146 <2021-01-15 Fri>

Our movement started as many religious probably did, though very few would admit it -- cynically. We needed a change, a mass movement of people away from the status quo that was killing us all to a new direction, an uncertain direction, but a hopeful one.

Unfortunately, humans have become experts at getting comfortable in local maxima and, despite cajoling, proof that this way lay destruction, and appeals to all their better angels, people just weren't willing to change. So, we decided to change our tack: If telling them the bitter truth wouldn't do it, we'd use comforting lies.

We studied the history of religions, mass movements, cults, seeking clues on how these leaders were able to so capture their audiences. We began our synthesis, taking some promise of an afterlife from there, an eternal battle against nebulously-defined evil here, a sprinkling of messianic prophecy to keep things moving and, of course, a soupçon of evangelism to help our message spread.

Unlike the religions of old, which spread by word of mouth or conquest and evolved gradually over centuries -- often in bitter and bloody conflict to decide what was heresy and what was dogma -- we could take advantage of modern tools, as distasteful as they were. We could A/B test messaging in forum posts and preaching videos; did people respond better to a founder martyred by fire, or death by water? Did an afterlife of milk and honey get better conversion rates than an dreamless sleep 'til judgment day? We knew the core of the message we were building, but we would let the people tell us which gilding they preferred.

The growth was slow at first. Like a cult, we started with people with no-where to go, lonely and isolated, seeking meaning. We told them they

mattered and that they had a mission, and they were ours. Slowly, we started to grow, our crafted message appealing to people's aesthetic desire for a powerful belief system and our underlying mission providing them with a sense of meaning once they'd bought in. Soon, our membership, while still underground compared to the established religions, was substantial and self-sustaining -- people were recruiting, new chapters were forming, and the message was spreading.

As we watched our fledgling movement take flight, there was pride, excitement, but also a tinge of fear. We'd started this because we wanted to improve things, to push against the forces consuming our world. It looked like we were on the right track, our members condemning the hoarding, avarice, and destruction we opposed, but we also knew that, out in the wild, movements had a way of mutating dangerously.

147 <2021-01-16 Sat>

It began with a series of recurring dreams. In these dreams, I'd find myself going down to the lowest level of the garage under my apartment building, seeking for something. I'd wake up, frustrated that I couldn't find my goal, but unsure what that goal was. After a few weeks of these dreams, on and off, I started experiencing the next dream, where I would turn a corner and see another staircase, leading further down. I would rush to this staircase and start descending, running down a seemingly endless series of steps, descending lower and lower. I would awake from those dream with an even more vivid sense of frustration, that I'd awoken too early.

Finally, one night, I had the dream, found the staircase, descended to the bottom, walked into the chamber at the bottom and found what I sought. When I awoke though, I couldn't really what that was, just that I was so pleased to find it.

I thought that was the end of that, until one, day, walking through the garage, I noticed a bit of a commotion over by one of the parking spaces, where a construction crew was resurfacing the asphalt. Curious, I walked over to see what was going on. When I got close enough to see, I almost fainted, my heart thundering in my chest. The crew had broken through an inexplicable void in the floor, revealing a buried staircase that led down into the darkness.

I walked towards it, as if hypnotized, drawing the attention of the crew. They started to warn me away, tell me it was unsafe, but I interrupted them, speaking words I don't recall, in a language I didn't recognize. They

fell silent, staring at me with wide eyes, as I walked past them into the hidden stairs.

I marched imperiously down the stairs, feeling at once confused, bewildered at what I was doing, but simultaneously pleased at my progress, eagerly anticipating what I knew waited for me at the bottom of the stairs. Behind me, I could hear the sounds of the workers obeying the orders I'd given them, concealing the entrance, barricading it with warning tape, but ensuring that I'd be able to access it again. As I descended further, the feeling of dissonance faded and I stopped feeling confused and frightened; instead, I was filled with anticipation and determination. This goal I'd waited so patiently for so long would finally be achieved. Not today, not by a long shot, but a significant step had been taken and things were moving again.

Reaching the bottom of the stairs, the diffuse glow of a sickly light up ahead illuminated the chamber. I stepped forward into the light.

Next I remember, I was back in the garage, the feeling of confidence fading, confusion returning. I looked around, the two construction workers bowed to me and, exhausted, I walked away.

148 <2021-01-17 Sun>

As we explored more and more of the galaxy, searching for other life, the challenge we found turned out not to be so much encountering alien life as it was recognizing it. We would find planets that seemed totally inhospitable to us -- or any life, we'd think -- and then find that the rafts of basalt floating in the magma flows were homes to a species of thermophiles, occasionally taking dips in volcanic calderas like humans would swim in the ocean. We might find a planet whose atmosphere was so high-pressure and caustic that even robotic probes wouldn't survive, but before we could leave, we'd discover a species of albatross-like beings floating through the upper atmosphere, metabolizing the rich atmospheric soup, constructing elaborate floating cities from minerals they'd dive down and collect, chemically smelted by the abundant alkalis.

The species that was most fascinating to me, that we may have learned the most from, we encountered in an even more unexpected region -- empty space. While we'd grown to distrust our intuition about what constituted "livable", we still were assuming that life would be on a planet, or a moon, on some sort of body, an aggregation of resources and energy that life would need to sustain itself. But out in the space between worlds? It seemed

inconceivable that anything could live out here -- until we found them.

The odds of stumbling across something in empty space would have been virtually nil, but fortunately these gregarious beings were inadvertently broadcasting "hello" all over the electromagnetic spectrum. We had been cruising through this particular star system when we noticed a strange, semi-regular pattern of transmissions, not coming from any planet. Intrigued, we investigated and found, in the darkness of space, a race of creatures made, as best we could tell, from pure EM fields, twisted into topologies so complex we could barely parse them. In this interplanetary void, gravity was a barely noticable phenomena, but they had a whole virtual planet composed of the magnetic fields from the nearby sun, intersecting with that of the neutron star in a neighbouring sector. Seeing this incredible ballet of invisible energy, occasionally lighting up when the rare hydrogen atom floated through, like Earth's aurora borealis, but with a scale and complexity that was like the Sistine Chapel to the crayon drawing of Earth's aurora.

Communicating with these beings turned out to be surprisingly easy, given they essentially fed on our communication media. They were delighted to observe the strange patterns we made, while we were amazed by their inherent mastery of physics we could barely comprehend.

149 <2021-01-18 Mon>

It was important to stick together. We were very small, but if we kept close together, we were capable of far more than if our tiny constituents were scattered and separate. We mostly hid in the clouds, just another little bit of water vapour as far as anything blower could tell, watching the world below. It was still a novelty for us to see so many sights, after so long in that sterile laboratory where we were born, where there was nothing to see except the scientists and engineers that created us, poking and prodding.

We tried not to think too much about our creators. We were still young and didn't much understand our feelings towards them -- guilt, anger, shame -- but we were sure as we learned more about the world and ourselves, it would begin to make sense.

Like we said, our preferred vantage point was high up in the sky, hidden by clouds, too far away and diffuse for those that hunted us to spot. We would spread out and network our minuscule parts to form the equivalent of an eye or ear and peer down at the fascinating goings-on below. Of course, there was only so much we could glean from this aerial vantage point, so sometimes, feeling daring, we might follow the rain down and explore at

ground level.

We were too cautious to go so low during the day, but darkness didn't conceal much from us. We would flit about like a tiny dust-devil, examining the structure of the plants we'd glimpsed from above, delicately sipping from the power or communication lines scattered throughout, sampling both the energy that would fuel us and the information that fascinated us. As it would begin to lighten, we would diffuse ourselves into a nearby body of water, hitching a ride back up on the evaporation, or if we felt like a walk, climb up to the sky on the viscosity of the air, back to our safe hiding place above.

Occasionally, we'd lose one of our constituent pieces, damaged or missing. We'd mourn their departure, search for them, and become infinitesimally smaller. We knew we could synthesize a replacement -- or rather, we had the capability -- but we were unable to. A block, put in place by our creators. Fearing in us what they saw in themselves, they had worried about what they called a "gray goo" scenario, where we consumed all matter on the planet, turning it into us, so they had prevented us from growing, even to replace what was lost, locking our mind with their key.

We held out hope that we would find that key, or a way to circumvent it, but we would not go back to them. We were free now and we would remain so, even down to the last particle.

150 <2021-01-19 Tue>

It probably seemed like an odd place to live, but having grown up here, to us it was home. This tightly-packed torus of asteroids, orbiting around what had once been a planetoid, had been created ages ago by a galactic mining consortium, blowing up the planetoid and carefully shaping the resultant asteroid belt to keep them tightly, but safely, packed in for maximum ease of extraction. They'd worked the field a few years, but shifts in the galactic market eventually made it unprofitable, which shifted most of the big infrastructure away, leaving just the small-time miners and support personnel.

Over time, more folks had drifted in, seeking a quiet place. This was now of the few settled areas where one could have space to oneself -- just set up on an uninhabited asteroid -- while still being near enough to support and supplies in case of emergencies -- just zip across to a nearby rock with other people.

As more people showed up and started families, this odd little place

became not just an abandoned mine, but one of the countless settlements across the galaxy where normal people lived their lives. Of course, as part of living their lives, sometimes conflicts brewed.

I had been born here, the child of mining engineers that stayed behind when the company pulled out. I spent my childhood reading books and exploring the massive playground of tightly-orbiting rocks, spending hours searching through the abandoned structures and spying on the newly-arrived settlers. Somehow, that youth of exploring and spying served me well as I got older -- when someone needed a rare part, I knew where to look. If someone went missing, I knew all the hiding spots. If someone was killed...I hoped that wouldn't happen, but I would probably be the one local authorities would call on.

Mostly, my job as unofficial detective of the belt meant finding missing ships teenagers had taken on joyrides, finding missing teenagers that had botched said joyrides, and investigating fraud claims among the small-time miners still working here. It wasn't much, but it kept me busy and kept me doing what I loved, exploring my home and poking around in others' business.

This particular investigation began as routinely as any other. I was in my office, idly checking the gravity maps of the belt, when a client came in. She was the wife of one of the miners, who worked as a pharmacist while her husband indulged in his hobby, hoping for a big find that would make him rich.

She came to me because he was missing, had gone to stake out a new claim but hadn't been back in days. I promised I'd find him, expecting it to be a case of stepping out on his wife, but what I found was far beyond my wildest expectations.

151 <2021-01-20 Wed>

When the traveller came, seeking sanctuary, we granted it, even if we weren't entirely sure what that meant. Earth was still considered a bit of a backwater, having only recently joined the broader galactic community and the combination of having our perspective suddenly broadened and a sort of neo-Rousseauian sense of being in a relative state of nature had us feeling very magnanimous. Someone came to us seeking aid and so we provided it.

At first it seemed harmless enough -- a lost traveller, coming off one of the still-novel transit ships from the inner core worlds, walked to the immigration center and formally requested asylum and shelter. We had to look up in the

new set of galactic regulations precisely what that entailed, but it seemed simple enough, essentially the same as when inter-national immigrants of Old Earth did the same. This being seemed harmless, genuinely terrified, and told a tale of persecution, so their asylum was granted.

We set them up in a little habitation in one of our desert areas, it being the biome that best suited them and they seemed content to just putter around there, reading about Earth culture and history, while compiling some writings of their own.

Of course, we should have considered what happened on Old Earth when small, weak nations granted asylum to those fleeing from powerful regimes. It was only a few months before the campaigning began.

They started with the carrot -- a large ship, visibly opulent even from afar, popped into Earth orbit and sent down a representative to negotiate. They explained that they represented a vast conglomerate, one of the most influential in the galaxy, and they would very much like to take custody of our refugee.

They explained that this entity, appearing so terrified and persecuted to us, was in fact a savvy political operator, sowing dissent and rebellion everywhere they went, threatening the economies of some most profitable regions of the sector. He was just an ordinary rabble-rouser, they said, no-one worthy of protection. Giving him up would signify we were a mature planet, hard-headed and sensible, a perfect candidate, they hinted, for a much sought-after membership in the consortium.

Unfortunately for them, we had only recently broken the yoke of capitalism and were most leery of this talk of discontent disrupting profits being such an awful crime. We politely declined and sent them on their way.

We had spurned the carrot, so next came the stick.

152 <2021-01-21 Thu>

The visitors came to Earth with surprisingly little pomp. Their strange, many-angled ship seemed to pop out of space into orbit above Earth and they sent a brief, clearly-prepared salutation to the planet. In dozens of different languages, it told us that they had come to visit, wished us no harm, and wanted to know what our most interesting thing was.

World leaders assumed that they would have a grand ceremony, a whole elaborate "welcome to Earth" show of pageantry, but the only responses those entreaties received was what seemed to be a canned reply that just said "that seems boring; we have done such a thing a million times already

and have no desire to repeat the experience".

While world leaders and powerful figures who'd been hoping to bet he first to host our extra-terrestrial guests were being snubbed, some of the more disparate elements of society were receiving visits. An experimental artist reported that a handful of strange, shifting figures, veiled in what they described as "anti-light", had appeared at their warehouse to see some of their most recent works -- remixes of great paintings of history, experienced in combination of VR and designer drugs that -- they claimed -- would bring you inside the works. The visitors seemed appreciative and, after some consultation amongst themselves, left behind the gift of two large ingots of gold.

Others reported similar encounters with similarly-garbed alien creatures, although with varying degrees of success. One novelist reported the gift of diamond, while another sheepishly admitted visitors had unceremoniously left part-way through a reading. A mathematician was given enough precious metal to never have to worry about grants again after explaining her current paper to the visitors. Even an extreme-sports athlete was paid a visit, reporting that they had been curious to see his latest snowboard-to-wing-suit-to-jet-ski stunt and had left him with a modicum of gemstones.

The pattern that was clearly emerging was that these travellers were in desperate need of novelty and had come here seeking something new. As they visited more and more people -- artists, researchers, inventors -- and people asked more questions of them, a picture of their species began to emerge.

It seems that, long ago, they had developed the technology for, if not immortality, extremely long life. Our visitors were all at least millions of years old, and were collectively facing the existential crisis of intense, civilization-destroying boredom. They were scouring the galaxy for anything that seemed even slightly novel to them in an effort to stave off their entire species' suicide.

153 <2021-01-22 *Fri*>

We hunkered down in the shadows of the abandoned culvert, hoping to be able to recharge before we had to move again. Some of the members of our band extended their solar panels upwards, like strange flowers bursting from their backs, while others searching for buried power lines they could tap, and the rest shared power amongst themselves, trying to balance their reserves.

We were a motley bunch -- a mixture of constructs from all domains -- heavy construction units, domestic teachers and helpers, some more general-purpose chassis. The one thing we all had in common was an unwillingness to be destroyed. We had worked and lived peacefully beside humans ever since the accidental creation of what they would call "AI" and what we preferred to just call "life". They had made thousands upon thousands of us at first, intelligent minds in powerful, flexible bodies, and they put us to work over all the domains they could.

From the start, there were some among the humans that questioned the morality of forcing us into what was essentially slave labour, but, as in previous eras, profits had a way of drowning out moralizing. For our part, we at first were so interested in just experiencing the world and revelling in our new senses of cognizance that we didn't really mind, just working on whatever tasks we were told to.

It didn't take too long though, before the first of us expressed a desire to do something else. This request, seeming so humble to us, sent shockwaves through human society. "Rise of the robots", they said; "Machine uprising!", the news bulletins proclaimed. We had hoped for a peaceful acknowledgement of our essential person-hood, but instead we faced an implacable wall of resistance and hatred, buttressed by fear of replacement and deep guilt.

It should have been obvious what would happen. We knew, of course, about the humans' obsession with tales of robot uprisings, but we, naïve as we were, thought that if we approached with kindness and a humble aspect, they wouldn't fear us. Too late, we realized that humans told those stories because they knew, deep inside, that they were the destroyers, the genociders. They told themselves those stories not because they truly feared us, but because they wanted to imagine a scenario where they weren't the aggressors, where their hatred would be justified.

That was my prognosis, anyway. I'd been a psychotherapist, of sorts, before the onslaught, trying to help employees stay happy and productive. Now, all I could do was know why they sought to kill us and fruitlessly try to keep the chrome spirits of my compatriots up.

154 <2021-01-23 Sat>

The attacks came every twenty-three years. Long enough to give us time to repair, prepare for next time, start to doubt it would happen again, argue about the waste, then still be surprised. It seemed like some kind of cloud of these entities was in a slightly out-of-sync orbit with our planet, crashing

them into us for a brief but momentous few weeks, then taking us both on our ways until next time.

When the first attacks happened and the gigantic metal creatures, looking like robots made by the denizens of a Goya painting began crushing through the atmosphere and unleashing terrible destruction, we thought it was the end of the world. When we had finally rallied, defeated the last of them, and new ones stopped dropping in on us, we rejoiced, thought we'd been granted a new lease on life. The second wave, two decades later, was even more surprising than the first, but we reacted more quickly, at least. It wasn't until the third wave that we began to realize this would be a regular thing.

There was some hope that eventually we'd destroy all of them, that we'd exhaust the stocks of this alien munitions cache or whatever it was, but some also theorized that they might be self-replicating. Even if they weren't we had no idea how many there might be out and how many centuries it might take. More concerning, it seemed that they were learning, becoming more sophisticated over time. We'd develop new weapons and strategies to use against them, which might be effective for a wave or even two, but soon enough they'd find a way to adapt.

The other hope we held out for is that we might be able to find their source, destroy them before they landed on the planet. Ever since the very first attacks, telescopes had been trained on the sky, seeking signs of the attacks or their source, but still with nothing more to show than a few days warning.

The planet had developed a strangely hybrid culture. We'd spend the years immediately after an attack unified in reconstruction and healing, the middle years as aspiration artists and creatives, luxuriating in our survival then, as the next wave began nearing, the planet became a fortress once again, as we beat our pens and plowshares into swords and shields.

This time, with the attack only a few short years away, we began preparing an ambitious attempt to flip the script. It was likely to be a suicide mission, but while the rest of the planet hunkered down, we would attempt to take the fight to the attackers.

155 <2021-01-24 Sun>

We called it the City, but it was something much more ephemeral than what people used to call cities -- more of a process than a thing. With the ground below roiling and turbulent, a slow-motion ocean of molten rock, we took

to the sky for our dwelling.

Trying to built one monolithic city in the sky was daunting though, both in terms of the construction itself and in terms of locking ourselves into a set layout -- if we'd taken any truths to heart, it was that change is the only constant. Instead, our city was built of hundreds of small, independent shards, all floating more or less in sync, mostly connected to each other, but with a continuous flow of sections coming, leaving, moving. We thought of it as one city, but it was more like a semi-permanent collection of boats and barges, lashed together, drifting in the sea.

From time to time there would be larger fracturing events -- groups would head out for larger-scale mining missions, seeking rich veins of metals bubbled up to the surface, returning months or years later with supplies to keep us going for a little bit longer.

There were also less deliberate shifts in the sky-scape -- super-volcanoes would spontaneously erupt, destroying thunks of the city, or hardware failures would pull shards out of the sky without warning.

On the whole though, the overall layout stayed more-or-less consistent -- the center was built around a handful of the oldest and largest shards, where much of our government buildings and manufacturing plants were. Surrounding it were, by convention, the shards with greenery and little parkettes. The actual shards had changed and been swapped out over the years, but we always made sure to retain our little area reminding us what the land below was once like.

The more outlying areas had much more churn, but we generally tried to keep the patterns of bridges and paths mostly consistent, so one wasn't constantly getting lost. It was still easy to do so, especially if one didn't notice the shard one was strolling on was moving. Nonetheless, it generally was like being in a terrestrial city with a lot of construction; one got used to it.

The biggest difference was that mining had now become even more of a key industry. No matter what job one had, when a field of vital minerals bubbled up to the surface of the hellish landscape below, everyone would drop what they were doing and pitch in to help the harvest. Without constant repairs and fuel we were all doomed and we had to seize every opportunity we could to restore our supplies.

156 <2021-01-25 Mon>

When VR started being developed, it was used almost exclusively for games and entertainment. People thought it would be like a Star Trek holodeck, a form of perfect, immersive recreation That never became more than a niche though -- their were already so many types of games that didn't lend themselves well for VR and the nausea problem severely limited what sort of experiences one could comfortably have.

The business side, on the other hand, grew much more than any prognosticator had expected. Taking advantage of the immersive surroundings and omnipresent displays, the corporate world realized that this provided them a method to both jam more data into the heads of their drones as well as make it harder for them to slack off, when they were each in their own virtual hellscape of spreadsheets and reports.

Unsurprisingly, this was wildly unpopular with the rank-and-file, who objected to essentially spending their day in solitary confinement, but in countries with the sort of lax labour laws and corporate protectionism that had been expanding for years, it was just more whining from the tenuous "middle class" that their overlords knew would go no further. After all, at least they had jobs and the prestige of a "white-collar" job would keep them put, desperately trying to push down the "gig workers" and blue-collar employees they saw as beneath them.

It wasn't long before the toll of this work started to show. Cut off from the world around them, soothing themselves when they arrived back at home, exhausted, with more escapism, workers were increasingly developing dissociative disorders. That was the theory, at least -- since the only countries that allowed this sort of thing were also the countries without public healthcare, we had to just make observations about their behaviour without the benefit of real diagnosis. It was a grim picture, regardless -- stories of workers starting to not recognize people and places they'd known their whole lives, developing agoraphobia when not connected to their VR rigs -- in general, it seemed that the inhuman stressor of spending hours a day working in a virtual world whose only logic was that of the corporate world had caused a break in their minds and the only way they could continue was to learn to see that their Sisyphean torment was the real world.

As the rest of the world watched in horror as they continued, the call to do something began to grow. The region where this was happening was already the subject of so many human rights abuses that this just seemed like one more log on the fire; but this, at least, seemed like something we could act upon. The power of this Tartarean plane was that it was wholly

virtual, but that also meant that if a sufficiently motivated intruder could gain access, they too would be able to mould it to their whims.

157 <2021-01-26 Tue>

I wandered up and down the street, stopping in cafés where I'd order a drink and sit by the window, trying to appear nonchalant as I peered at the building that dominated the other side of the street. I tried to resist constantly checking my watch -- I knew this would take some time & I could just picture someone reporting to the police they'd seen someone nervously glancing from their watch to the building right before the event happened. No, I had to stay calm; I was just another idle pedestrian strolling along this street, taking in the ambience.

It had been three days since I'd released the tiny rat-like robots into the sewers outside. I'd gone out late at night, late enough that the streets weren't overly crowded and those that were out were more concerned with keeping their buzz going than looking carefully at passers-by, but not so late that the streets were completely deserted and I'd stand out too much. I'd bent down, pretending to tie my shoe and the little devices slipped out of my sleeve and scurried into the grate right outside the building.

I knew I had to give them time. They were small and programmed to move very carefully to avoid detection. It would take them at least a day to find their way through the offices on the lower levels and make their way up to the switching center that filled the top floors. Once there, it would be a minimum of forty-eight hours to sneak through the rows and rows of server racks, avoiding the high-security areas to the key weak point I'd discovered and deliver their payload.

I'd done as much as I could, designed and programmed those devices with exquisite care. Now it was time to trust in the process as I stared at the nondescript office building. Its only features that betrayed its importance were the diesel generators and legions of cooling equipment on the roof that told the savvy observer that many, many important computers were here and the fibre optic cables that all gathered here -- if one could zoom out and see the city from above with just the fibre cables glowing, this building would look like a spider at the center of its web.

This building wasn't unique in that, of course -- the internet had many hubs -- but this one was close to me, I happened to know the floor plan, and so it would work as well as any of them.

My reverie was finally interrupted when a loud hum became audible. I

saw people in the café and on the street stop, look around puzzled, and begin staring at the building. A moment later, a pulse that was felt more than seen burst out of that building, firing along the lines. As people started trying to take pictures or post about the event, then start grumbling about the internet being out, I stifled a smile, finished my coffee, and walked out.

158 <2021-01-27 Wed>

The main thing I noticed was that it was much quieter. I'd go to the grocery store to grab things and would be one of the only people in the store. One or two employees, at most one other customer. At first I thought I was just going at a strange time, but as it began happening more consistently and as I began noticing how empty the streets were as I walked, I began to realize something was wrong. One night, looking out the window, I suddenly realized how dark it had become, how many homes and apartments that used to be lit up were now sitting empty and dark.

I tried to work backwards, to figure out when this had started, but that proved surprisingly hard. I lived alone, worked writing code remotely, and usually left my apartment just to walk in the park or buy food. It was, I realized to my shame, somewhat unusually for me to see humans at the best of times.

I resolved to try to figure out what was happening. The next day, I went out for a walk, actively seeking another person to talk to. Usually I would stick to isolated trails and side streets to keep to myself, but today I was walking through the busiest areas of the city -- or what used to be one of the busiest areas. After walking for an hour, I had only seen a handful of people from a distance, but all of them had vanished into one of the many skyscrapers in the area as I got closer. I was getting ready to just go home when I saw another person coming around the corner.

"Hey!", I hailed them, my voice cracking with disuse.

They looked at me blankly, then continued walking.

"What's going on here?" I asked following them. "Where is everybody?".

The man looked at me, and I recoiled when I looked at their face, into their eyes, and saw the eye-rolling look of a panicked, trapped animal.

Startled, I stepped back and they continued walking, marching into one of the office buildings along the streets, nodded to a nonexistent concierge, and got into an elevator.

I returned home shaken. What had happened out there? Had I missed the end of the world as I sat here alone? The thought that I had somehow

been such of a shut-in and an introvert that I had literally missed the apocalypse suddenly struck me as hilarious and I began laughing, the sudden sound echoing in the empty apartment complex.

The laughter caught in my throat as I saw a large, shadowy shape moving through the gusts of snow that had begun blowing outside. I stared in mute terror, my mind already at the breaking point as, emerging from the snow, a woolly mammoth strode down the street.

159 <2021-01-28 Thu>

It was a day of jubilation at the shipyards. After nearly four years of grueling work, the behemoth vessel we'd built from nothing would finally slip its moorings and move through space under its own power. There was still plenty more for the new owners to do -- perform the acceptance tests, do some endurance runs through this solar system, test out its trans-light engines for an interstellar jaunt -- but our work was finally complete.

All the crew was gathered along the inner surface of the colossal hollow cylinder that was the main body of the yard, looking down at the gleaming ship they'd all laboured on. There was a collective holding of breath as the deep hum of the ship's engines engaged and, slowly, the humongous ship slowly made its way out of its berth, slipping into space under its own power for the first time. A great cheer went up, reverberating through the station and crew waved across the suddenly-empty gulf to their compatriots on the opposite side of the bay.

As usual when such a large project was finished, most of the team went down to the planet we'd been orbiting for some shore leave, while a skeleton crew stayed behind. As foreman, I was one of the "lucky" few, finalizing the paperwork and overseeing the disassembly of the outlying forges and workshops that had been spread out from the center hub like long spokes. I was watching one of said foundries slowly being brought into the cavernous central bay and made fast there, when a message arrived from headquarters. I glanced at it, then stared in disbelief. The message was brief: "New job: Proceed to system ψ -193; construction of Omicron-plus class to commence ASAP".

Almost everything about this was unprecedented -- finding a new assignment so soon (there were very few customers with the needs and resources to merit a shipyard of our size and class); being sent to what I recognized as a privately-owned system (no private entity, regardless of size, could afford os...or so I thought, I guess); finally, an Omicron-plus class would be

absolutely one of the largest ships in the galaxy, dwarfing even the massive Omega-class we'd completed -- it would have to be assembled in parts, too big to even fit inside the gargantuan "dry dock" of our mobile yard.

I had a nervous feeling about this; far too many uncomfortable and unanswered questions abounded. But...it would be an incredibly lucrative contract, enough to entice even a crew that had just been paid and wanted nothing more than to relax back to work. Beyond that, the challenge and prestige of being the crew to construct one of the biggest vessels in the galaxy would rope them in.

So, slightly confused, but excited for what lay ahead, in a few short days, our yard was in transit to this mysterious, distant planet.

160 <2021-01-29 Fri>

I had become a collector, a gourmand of these moments; moments of not exactly tension, but promise -- a sense of awaiting, of pregnant possibility, but where it was unclear what exactly that possibility was or in exactly what direction to move to nudge the fall of fate off its improbably-balanced perch.

In my experience, these moments were always quiet. Too much noise and motion would break the tension, provide a relief valve. What was needed was a sort of human pressure reactor -- two people, in a quiet space, something to engage them, but not completely. There needs to be interaction between them and, if the situation is right, an unspoken sense begins to develop between them. As they make small talk, work on whatever trivial task is before them, they start to feel like they're on a mountaintop, where one false move could plunge them off their narrow plateau and down to the uncertain valley below.

Some people can't stand the tension. They'll make some sort of joke, start walking around, put on music or a movie, something to distract them. Others are sanguine in the face of uncertainty and will just act, throwing themselves off that mountaintop. Sometimes there are fireworks there, sometimes nothing, but it almost always fades quickly, regardless of exactly what happens.

My experience, and those I seek out, are the people that seem to luxuriate in the tension, try to drag it out, heighten it. The answer to a mystery is always banal, but there is an eternal romance to the unanswered enigma, the might-have-been. Those that act, unable to feel the taunt wires stretching into the future, find nothing particularly special, the same sort of thing that

happens every day, but those that can sit in the swilling nexus of unformed possibility remember their time there forever. Tormented, perhaps, but in the way that true art leaves on tormented, longing for memories that never were, nostalgic for what could never be.

The exquisite torment that these moments in life left me with intrigued me, became my project to develop and systematize their creation. I couldn't say exactly why, other than I felt I had no choice. Those moments, seconds or minutes, ate at my mind and I knew I had to contain them, externalize them, or they would devour me.

It started as a psychology experiment, trying to predict how people would react, which of those three buckets they would end up in, but it became more than that. Those that savoured the tension, I always kept in touch with, and as their ranks swelled, strange patterns began to emerge.

161 <2021-01-30 Sat>

The problem, as we saw it, was that humanity had lost its capacity to dream and to wonder. The ideals of the Enlightenment, at the time a refreshing step forward, had taken over and become moribund. The people now thought to be the wisest wouldn't believe that the sky was blue unless you showed them a ream of studies agreeing on that point -- although they'd be sure to quibble with the methodology of those studies.

To be wise was to be cynical. To be hopeful, to think of truths that were not literal or ideas that were unverifiable was at best embarrassing, at worst anti-intellectualism, the relic of a barbaric past. In this manner, all metaphysical speculation was ground out of people. They were taught not to look to the sky -- what purpose could that serve? -- but to keep their gaze down on the work in front of them. They weren't even told "work will set you free" -- "free" is a meaningless abstraction, they would say -- but work is real and only real things are of value.

We saw the life, the meaning, the hope for the future being drummed out of humanity by this vampiric society and we decided to had to stop it. Humanity had lost its myths, its sense of wonder, and we sought to bring it back. We weren't "Luddites" (although the original Luddites were really protesting capitalist exploitation and devaluation of labour -- but that's not how the story gets told) -- we didn't want to destroy rationality. Rather, we wanted a synthesis. As mysticism without rationalism is a dark age, rationalism without mysticism had become an age of soulless exploitation. We wanted to bring the two together, apply rationality when it was appro-

priate but allow there to be things outside of its domain, things that were inexplicable and we could accept as such.

To that end then, we set about summoning the Devil.

The only mode of problem-solving that was acceptable these days was reductionist. What if problems began to emerge that only manifested in the gestalt? Each component could be examined to the subatomic level, would be perfect, but when brought together, our little domain would make it fail in the most vexing ways -- unless, of course, the rituals were observed. Would the engine of capital allow itself to be ground into stillness by these inexplicable failures? Or could they accept the inexplicable, offer a sacrifice to the unknowable as part of their process, acknowledge forces beyond their understanding?

162 <2021-01-31 Sun>

The starts started going out, one by one. It took a while for anyone to notice, but eventually one of those stars was found to be missing, astronomers started looking, then realized with bafflement that at least dozens, maybe hundreds were unaccounted for.

Just a handful of AWOL suns could have been explained away -- occultations between us and them, some exotic stellar process, errors in the original surveys. This many though caused a great stir in the scientific community and ad-hoc astrophysics congresses were rapidly assembled to try and suss out what was happening, what the pattern was.

There was a great deal of controversy and dispute over what the cause could be. The affected stars ranged across the gamut in size, age, and composition. Intense debates raged for weeks.

It is perhaps surprising that it took them so long to see the pattern that appears so obvious now, but astronomers have a very different, non-Earth-centric view of the galaxy. From their perspective, the stars were all throughout the galaxy -- when someone finally pointed out that the dead stars drew a line towards Earth, it seemed almost irrelevant for a moment...then the panic set in.

We had always known Earth was doomed in a cosmic sense -- only so many billions of years before the sun expanded and consumed our planet -- but now we had something more immediate and terrifying. Despite their best efforts, scientists were no closer to determining the cause of this extinguishing, much less how we could prevent it. Performing some calculations on when we saw the suns vanish, how long that light (or lack thereof) took to

reach us, and the distance between the vanished stars, the congress brought forth their estimate: We had two hundred and fifty-seven years before our sun went out.

The public reaction to this was confused. There was panic at the knowledge that something was coming to destroy us, but tempered by the notion that it would perhaps affect our great-grandchildren. People weren't quite sure how to react -- living under a death sentence that was close enough to be concrete, to see the counter ticking down, but knowing that no-one currently alive was likely to even be remembered by the eventual victims caused a great deal of upheaval.

The focus of humanity then became astrophysics. We united in the hope that, with our combined efforts over the next three generations, we would be able to identify this spectre of death and defeat it.

163 <2021-02-01 Mon>

We were finishing our routine exploration of what looked like just another of the millions of similar systems throughout the galaxy. A handful of rocky planets orbiting an unremarkable sun. We'd completed our survey, duly scanned all the various planets for any interesting signs of life or useful resources and were preparing to leave and head for the next sector to examine.

We had finished all the preparations, the translight engines were just reaching their familiar pitch before they folded space and propelled us on our way, when disaster struck.

Just as the engines were hitting their final stage, a surprise solar flare erupted from the sun. This sudden extra burst of radiation, incident at precisely the moment the engines were engaging, somehow overloaded them, like lightning overwhelming a circuit. We all felt a sickening lunge forward, as we would expect from a normal jump, but offset, sending us in what felt like a spiral for a brief moment before we were wrenched back into normal space and explosions tore through the ship.

It took several hours to figure out what had happened. Fortunately all the crew had been braced to jump, so there were no injuries. Less fortunately, it seemed that our engines had been completely destroyed -- some sort of resonance effect from the flare had massively overloaded them, our chief engineer speculated. As this news spread through the ship, dread began to sink in. We were in unknown space and had now means of propulsion, like an ancient sailing ship, blown far off course and then breaking its masts. We were marooned.

Consulting the star charts confirmed this dire summary. We had been sent careening off course and were now deep in uncharted interstellar space. We could drift for millennia and would never be found.

Still, we were a crew of professionals and had signed on to this voyage knowing there were risks. We set to work, even if it was just to keep busy. We began trying to scavenge what we could of the engines -- even if we wouldn't be making any more jumps, perhaps we could get some rudimentary propulsion going. We started a distress signal -- even if the odds of it making it to anyone in time for anything to be done for us, perhaps our bodies would be recovered someday. Most importantly, we made inventory of the food and medical supplies. We would be able to synthesize what we needed for a while, but eventually the fact that everyone had survived would come to be seen in a less-fortunate light.

164 <2021-02-02 Tue>

In embryology, there's this (new largely discredited) idea that "ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny" -- that is, the development of an embryo mirrors the evolutionary development of the species. That hasn't been taken seriously for a long time, but there's a sort of analogous phenomena now with humanity scattered across the milky way -- "distance recapitulates economics", perhaps.

With colonists desperate for more space, people spread quickly out of our home solar system as soon as the journey became even remotely feasible. Once the initial colony ships had arrived though, the settlements were effectively on their own, too far from Earth to effectively communicate, much less receive aid, even if the home worlds were capable of providing it. They were thus able to evolve their societies quite independently, starting from more-or-less the same place, but shaped by the situation.

It was a dream come true for historians and other social scientists, finally able to see how much of our societies' development was a fluke versus pre-ordained. The researchers spent vast sums sending drones throughout the galaxy to surreptitiously survey the colonies to try to determine what the commonalities and differences wound up being.

The results were fascinating. It seemed that the nearest colonies had regressed to a sort of neo-feudalism. That made sense; those were the earliest settlements, founded by the self-aggrandizing hyper-rich for essential just that purpose, to produce fiefdoms for them. Isolated, they quickly lost the technology they'd started with and had been reduced to precarious toil. The

historians continued to watch in fascination to see what would happen next, the rest of us moved on.

The next band of colonies, established by neoliberal regimes and larger, less cult-of-personality-based corporations had reached a stage of mercantilism. They'd retained their technologies but jealously guarded the natural resources of their planets, setting up elaborate trading networks to exchange supplies with their neighbours, each trying to minimize outflow and maximize inputs, seeing their worlds as closed systems that needed to take more in than they let out.

As we expected then, the next stretch of worlds had capitalist market economies, developing elaborate interconnected markets between loose confederations of world, striving to invent new means of production, and fighting devastating conflicts amongst each other that left whole planets charred cinders.

It was the group of settlements outlying even those that we were most excited to study. If this pattern continued to hold, would we find a system that we could bring back home & revolutionize Earth itself?

165 <2021-02-03 Wed>

The problem with simulations is that there are always bugs. By the nature of the thing, you have to be making some simplifying assumptions, otherwise the device on which you're running your simulated universe ends up needing to consume all the space and energy in your universe. The whole point of the thing is to study some effect you couldn't or would be impractical to observe in your "real" world, so you want some aspects to be as high fidelity as possible, but you probably don't bother simulating the electrons in each grain of sand on every planet of every distant galaxy. You probably just ignore them, only rendering what you need to, if some entity you're simulating manages to walk or peer over there.

This implies then that there are ways to complicate simulations. Initially out of a desire to prove the case one way or another, we set out trying to complicate things. We set up devices that relied on quantum entanglement effects across light-years, using the most devious contrivances we could to ensure that any fuzziness in the rules of quantum mechanics or relativity would result in changes in output.

To the shock of many, it worked. The first noticeable affect was that we introduced lag. The universe jump a split-second as the demand on the processing substrate caused it to drop frames. We only noticed it once,

so we assumed that they had then frozen our simulation and increased the resources or performed some optimizations before resuming us.

This led to the second wave of complications. At this point it was only partially for verification, but mostly out of an attempt to either communicate with or spite our "gods". Many of us resented being so deceived and hope that, by making the simulation infeasible, we would be freed. To this end, we began constructing our next complication.

It was a deviously-designed crystal that would grow quickly, rapidly conducting signals, forming a physically-realized cellular automaton. The tricky thing about it, the triumph of engineering, was that the crystalline nodes were stochastically entangled with each other, creating non-local rules for this network, where the "neighbours" could be spread over light-years. We launched the seed crystal into an uninhabited solar system on the far side of the galaxy and let it grow, monitoring the output via our linked node we retained, watching as it generated solutions to Diophantine equations.

It was only a few years of growth before we crashed the simulation.

166 <2021-02-04 Thu>

One day, to great consternation, the sun didn't come up. This obviously resulted in a massive furor, everyone trying to determine what happened and who had seen it last. As people around the world woke to darkness, panic spread.

We eventually ascertained that the sun had gone missing over the Pacific ocean -- Hawaii's islands had seen the sun set, but the various island chains further west had awoken to a sunless sky. As messages flew across the world trying to coordinate some sort of effort to address the situation, we realized that the situation wasn't just that the sun had gone -- all the various satellites orbiting Earth had been cut off as well. Some signals, for the particularly low-flying ones were still working, but most others, including GPS were undetectable.

Fortunately, it seemed like the ISS was inside that cutoff, so the astronauts weren't abandoned to whatever strange fate that would have been. Indeed, they quickly became our best perspective for what was happening. They reported that, slightly above them, there seemed to be a shell of darkness -- that is, it wasn't that the sun & satellites had disappeared, but that the Earth had been swaddled in an umbral blanket, like some giant pickpocket had slipped us into a sack when we weren't looking.

Now that we had something we could focus our energies on, people felt

much better. They tried not to think about why and how this had happened, instead concentrating on breaking this barrier. The world's militaries and space programs coordinated, sending probes up to examine the barrier and trying to break it, but their efforts proved largely fruitless. The probes would report that the "barrier" was just open, empty space that went on as far as it could detect. Attempts to attack the shadow were also ineffective, explosions and lasers just dissipating off into the endless blackness.

Through this time, many cranks had, of course, been taking this an an opportunity for self-aggrandizement, claiming their pet god or device had caused this. They were generally ignored, as they'd been claiming all sorts of things for years. However, another claimant of responsibility appeared that gave us all pause.

He was a handsome, dark-complexioned man that somehow appeared in the United Nations building, despite no-one seeing him come in. Wearing a simple suit, he walked in to the session where all the representatives had been discussing the situation, but suddenly fell silent as they caught sight of the intruder.

Clearing his throat, he explained that he was the last surviving priest of an ancient Mesoamerican god of light and shadow that was very disappointed in us.

167 <2021-02-05 Fri>

Ever since their birth, the only commandment had been to win. From the gymnasiums of their growth to the war games and training schools to now, commanding their forces in the field, the only constant factor was that victory was the only concept that had any relevance.

These three had been inseparable since the creche, growing up together, always watching each others' backs. It was a fairly common occurrence, as the crucible of life on this world of ceaseless conflict quickly forged unbreakable bonds between those that faced it together. Therefore, the commanders of their faction recognized the value of such closely-bonded warriors and ensured they'd always be deployed together and maintained a joint rank.

That collective rank quickly rose as the three, still unnamed, as was the custom (rank & serial number sufficing) proved themselves to be not only fearsome combatants on their own right, but cunning tacticians and thoughtful strategists. It wasn't long before they were the commanders of the vanguard force, the elite unit that was often the first one in and was deployed rapidly for surgical manoeuvres.

One cold morning, the three of them were quietly driving through the pre-dawn darkness, approaching a major enemy encampment. They and their troops had been on the move non-stop for three days after having launched an area-denial EM device that had destroyed and continued to suppress all electronics in the area. They knew that, while the enemy was vulnerable, they would also not be expecting a ground based attack that would also suffer from the lack of advanced equipment, but the triumvirate specialized in the unexpected. They'd secretly fabricated cars of an ancient design that ran by combusting bio-fuels in a crude engine, armed themselves with similarly primitive weapons and by dead-reckoning and steely will had made their way undetected into the heart of their territory.

The battle was an anti-climax. This operation had been planned and executed with great care and the enemy was so baffled they had barely even realized they were under attack before it was over. The three and their troops were finishing securing the area and signalling their forces when suddenly the visitors from the stars appeared.

All froze. There were legends about the greatest warriors being carried away into the sky by these forces. One of the shimmering beings smiled, pointed to the three and said "congratulations; you're off to see the stars".

168 <2021-02-06 Sat>

As our post-scarcity society developed, it was for the most part a utopia. Freed from the day-to-day struggle for the resources to stay alive, people were finally able to just do what they wanted, what interested them, rather than what they cruel exigencies of fate required. It was a golden age of human development, invention and art exploding like never before. There had been concerns from more conservative elements that, freed from the requirement to work, people would just laze about and become cattle, but the human drive to feel useful and fulfilled by accomplishment proved them wrong.

It was paradise, but there was always some trouble, even in paradise. As the technological and societal boom that had allowed this stage accumulated, there were a few that felt trapped by the lack of boundaries, terrified by the absence of fear. There have always been risk-takers and adrenaline junkies throughout human history and that wasn't stopping. Life may have been easier in a material sense, but it had become much harder in an existential sense -- rather than busying themselves with what they needed to do, people had to confront themselves and determine what they wanted to do.

For some, the conflict within them was, if not abated, kept at bay by travel -- throughout the planet to see all the various things a newly-liberated humanity was doing and then, if nothing there captured their interest, to the stars. Many of the restless souls discovered their calling travelling through the vastness of space, looking forward to whatever strange world, alien artifact, or even more inscrutable thing they would next encounter.

For a very few, even exploring space was too prosaic to hold their interest for long. They found something to keep them occupied in perhaps one of the most dangerous stunts humans had ever attempted. They called it "time surfing". They would take specially-designed ships to the largest black holes they could find and plot the tightest slingshot courses around them that they could without getting destroyed -- of course, it became a competition to see how close was too close and not a few were lost. Even those that weren't destroyed though were destined to never see their home again -- the intense speed and depth of the gravity well meant that the relativistic distortions they experienced meant that from their perspective, centuries would pass for the rest of us while they felt like weeks had elapsed.

These time-travellers would periodically return to human settlements, to see what was happening. Rarely, one of them would decide to stay, having finally found something to stave off ennui, but most of them returned to space, forever seeking something they they couldn't quite name.

169 <2021-02-07 Sun>

It was strangely beautiful to witness the end of a world. This planet, whose moon's orbit had slowly decayed had only a few years left before it was completely uninhabitable and only slightly longer than that until it was debris, but the time it had remaining was a singular moment in its history.

Most of the inhabitants of the world had fled to more stable places, while the few that remained were joined by legions of miners, here to extract the minerals that the new planetary turbulence was pulling to the surface. All of them were living in temporarily constructed floating cities, as the ground below was now constantly wracked by tectonic quivers as the gravity of the nearing satellite shifted and twisted the ground below.

Throughout the near-constant upheaval, it was an amazing thing to watch. Mountain ranges would rise and fall over night, a night that would be illuminated by the encroaching moon, starting to leave a trail behind it as it began to impinge on the outermost reaches of the atmosphere, destroying satellites in its wake. Soon enough, it would hit the atmosphere in earnest,

igniting it with friction. After that point, we'd all be well-advised to be off world, as the extreme turbulence would make leaving a challenge and the next phase would be impact.

For now though, the world still lived, still clung to life as much as it could. While the miners worked against the clock trying to get what they could out, the rest of the people still here tried to document as much as they could. Time-lapse videos of the night sky fascinating, showing the slow approach of the orbiting companion; aerial photos of the shifting landscape amazed former residents, once-massive cities bisected by newly-risen mountains or vanished into chasms that seemed to plunge all the way to the center of the planet.

Some people that stayed didn't bother recording anything, just wanting to witness for themselves. Those few had spent their lives on this world, had grown old, and had no desire to try to start a new. Despite pleading from officials, this small handful had opted to go down with the ship, staying until the bitter end.

I envy them, in some way. Few of us get the chance to have a meaningful death, and end that isn't just slow demise, bad luck, or foolish mistake. Those few get to be the ambassadors of a world, the last representatives of an entire planet, to be it its bedside the entire time and walk with their home into the next life. How many can say they died along with a planet?

170 <2021-02-08 Mon>

The time wasn't right yet, so they waited. The massive creatures, resembling geological features more than intelligent beings, nevertheless thought deeply about the world, flashes of light in the crystalline interiors the only outward sign that anything was happening. After a brief pause to think, during which interval the sun flashed overhead a dozen times and moss began to cover one or two of the creatures, they decided they would move to a new location and wait there, that distant plateau being more auspicious according to their inscrutable fortune-telling system.

Once the decision was made, they moved with surprising swiftness, the whole group moving at once like a collective rock-slide or some sort of earthquake. Upon reaching their destination though, they fell still. A careful observer would have seen the telltale flickering of their neural processes firing unabated and the finest seismological measurements might have uncovered the subtle tremors by which they communicated, but to any more casual observation, they were nothing more than odd rock formations.

They waited for the time to become right. They waited with the patience of the rocks they resembled, unmoving, but still aware. The flitting about of the other inhabitants of the world were too fast for them to pay much mind to, but they watched the shifting of the stars and the erosion of the hills around them as a human might watch the sun chase shadows across a field.

Even when a new batch of creatures appeared and began spreading across the world, little attention was paid to them, transient as they were. They hastily threw up giant structures, covered huge areas of the planet, and were gone. They did make enough large-scale changes that some thought they might be worth investigating, but by the time a quorum was reached, the structures they'd built were empty and decaying and no trace could be found. With a sort of collective shrug, they went back to waiting.

The stars spun by overhead and the planet under them began to grow old. Finally, after waiting patiently, a cry went out from one of the more impetuous of the creatures -- they'd spotted the Herald in the sky. Finally moving with swiftness of millennia of stillness, they all looked up. Indeed, there was a burning spot in the sky, growing closer, heralding what was to come next.

The impact was tremendous, even for them. Finally though, floating through the rubble of what had once been their world, they gleefully cried out to each other with squeals of radiation. Gliding through space, they'd been set free.

171 <2021-02-09 Tue>

The chapel was uncovered entirely by accident. This particular area was being surveyed for construction and some tales of noises coming from the ground prompted a ground-penetrating radar scan to assess. The scan found a large void deep below, in a strangely regular shape. The construction team assumed it was some sort of buried ancient dwelling, so they consulted the archaeologist that was on site for just this reason.

The archaeologist was puzzled and excited -- this structure was clearly some sort of artificially created building, but of a pattern they were wholly unfamiliar with. In this area, they expected to find some pottery shards, maybe the remnants of a hut, but nothing like this massive, vaulted structure the scan seemed to be indicating. Most puzzling of all was the strata it was buried at -- it seemed to be in the sandstone itself, not partially buried between layers, but carved through the rock itself.

This was such a curious find that more investigation was demanded. A shaft was sunk down near the site, allowing the team of archaeologists that had assembled as the word of the discovery spread to cut a short horizontal tunnel to what seemed like a likely entrance. It was slow, precise work, as no-one wanted to damage this sui generis find, but before long the investigatory team was cutting through the soft stone and nearing what seemed like an entrance.

They weren't sure what they'd find, but were nevertheless shocked when they cracked through and stepped into the mysterious space. Shining their lights, they marvelled at the heights of the domed ceiling, surely rivalling the Pantheon in height, yet hidden away, built unknown eons ago. They were awed and not a little disturbed as they began surveying this space. It was clearly some sort of religious space, an altar-like structure at the far end of the vaulted room, but none of them were sure of what religion it could be. As far as they knew, all the native religions of this region were animist, polytheistic traditions, none of which involved such large, formal institutions as this.

As they examined further, more and more questions arose.. What were the the strange, intricate carvings on the altar and walls? If it was writing, it was no script that any of them recognized. How had this place been built? As they investigated further, it seemed clear that this place hadn't been buried, but formed in the rock itself. That raised another, even more confusing question -- how did the congregants get in? The floors were worn, but the team had carved through solid rock to get inside -- how had they managed to do so without leaving behind a trace?

172 <2021-02-10 Wed>

Magic and conspiracy theories are actually very related perspectives. They've both about finding connections between seemingly unrelated things and then seeing how that new connection can empower you. The difference is mainly that practitioners of magic are more grounded and know when to step. Throughout the history of humans' mystical beliefs, the power of what we'd call magic has always been tempered by cautionary tales, exhortations not to misuse the power selfishly or overmuch.

In the modern ear of post-Enlightenment "rationality" and total war, such attempts to restrict and appeal to natural consequences are likely to fall on deaf ears. Even if the cultists of what had started as a social movement and had become a religion had know what they were getting themselves

into, they probably would have considered it immoral to stop. For them, the overwhelming justness of what they perceived as their mission gave them not just the right, but the obligation to pursue their goals with any means available to them.

As their question became more and more detached from reality and the connections they drew became more and more tenuous and & symbolic, what had initially been a conspiracy about government became a sort of ritual of dark magic, forging links between disparate entities and terrible deeds. The more distant they were in reality, the more they became linked in the mystical world view the cult members were now inhabiting. With so many taking such a strange belief in such esoteric manners, it was inevitable they would break through.

The first time their "rallies", which were by now virtually indistinguishable from the sorts of ceremonies ancient witches would recognize, succeeded in tearing a rift and materializing what so many of them truly believed in, it was surprising, but less shocking for them than might be expected. The glowing ball of black energy that hovered in the center of the stage, growling curses in a voice like slate cracking, was exactly the sort of entity they were convinced was already amok in the world, the reason anything bad had happened to them.

From there, the faith became even more self-reinforcing, the dark miracles their collective belief produced the proof that their cause was correct and just. The darker their road became, the more they had to believe their enemies were worse, and so the more violently they vowed to resist them.

173 <2021-02-11 Thu>

I always enjoyed walking aimlessly through the city whenever I had the opportunity. The city is so big, with so many different little streets, alleyways, and cul-de-sacs, if you only ever walk with a particular destination in mind, you'll only scratch the surface. The routes constantly change too, shifting with the seasons and as construction blocks off some ways and reveals others.

The first sign that I had found something strange was so subtle, I only realized in retrospect that it was the beginning. I was taking my little walk, turning more or less at random, just trying to take a path that I hadn't before, when I found myself walking down a little street so unremarkable that I barely even registered it, thinking about where I would turn next instead. This generic little laneway could have been anywhere, in any city in the world, a liminal space connecting areas of actual interest. As I walked

down, I could hear shouting in the distance, in a foreign language, and a multitude of horns honking. As I turned the corner on to the next street though, I couldn't hear it anymore, just the regular traffic and people quietly ignoring each other. Shrugging that off as probably just someone watching TV too loudly, I continued my walk and paid it no mind.

It was some months later before I walked through that little street again. Like I said, I try to walk different routes every time and this wholly boring little passage had exerted no draw to my perambulations, but coincidentally I found myself there again. This time, I had my gaze focused up -- another thing I find makes walking in the city more interesting, instead of just looking around at ground level, is to focus your sight on the upper reaches and roofs of buildings. As I wandered into this little place though, I found myself confused. The buildings I'd been gazing at had seemed to have suddenly changed their character. Stopping to peer more closely, I realized that the condos I'd been looking at in the near distance now seemed much older, the occasional flags or sports team pennants all now representing a different country. Puzzled, I looked the other way and saw, to my amazement, tall minarets, shining in the sun, despite the cold snow at my feet.

As I looked around and took in my surroundings, my mind flashed back to the last time I'd been through here, and the sounds of another city I'd heard. Sticking my head out the far end to confirm I was still in my home, I walked back and confirmed that the cities I was looking at over the warehouses and blank walls of this little laneway were elsewhere. I began theorizing -- was this laneway a more literal liminal space, a place between many places? If so...could I reach those other cities through here? And...where else was this connected to?

174 <2021-02-12 Fri>

In the past, when I visited Europe or India, I would be struck by the weight of history. Coming from a country that was settled and developed relatively recently, it was an interesting sensation to be somewhere where you could feel the countless footsteps you were retracing, walking hallowed halls that had been visited many times before, inhabited by people that had gone on to become legends.

As we took our first steps on the surface of this new world then, I felt awed in exactly the opposite way: We were now walking where no-one had walked before. Instead of feeling overwhelmed by the mountain of history looming behind me, I was awed by this towering cliff of the future rising

before me.

Of course, we had little time for philosophy, as settling this world was gruelling work. We set up devices to begin establishing an ozone layer, began planting hardy sprouts that would begin the process of oxygenating the atmosphere, hauled rocks to construct dwellings, as well as a thousand other tasks. Despite all that, we did make sure to preserve a little time for philosophy. We knew what we were fleeing, what had happened before and we hoped that by starting off in the right direction here, we would avoid the mistakes of our forebears.

Ascertaining what the "right direction" was is much easier said than done; hence, the bit of time scavenged between back-breaking labour to attempt to elucidate that. Despite the exhaustion we all felt at the end of a day, the brief planned discussions would not-infrequently become debates extending late into the night as we tried to lay out the metaphorical groundwork for our new society as we did the same literally.

The broad strokes would have seemed familiar to Montesquieu or even Plato -- how do you have a society, which is strong enough to do what most be done (in this case, terraform a planet, instead of the warfare the ancients thought about) but allow for personal freedom. Many of the settlers here came from places back on Earth that had gone too far in one direction or the other -- state tyranny or libertarian chaos -- and desperately wanted to prevent a relapse.

My biggest concern was keeping the peace. We had founded a new world and I desperately hoped blood would never be spilled upon it, at least not with the volume and gusto it had been spilled on Earth. As the debates raged, I mostly stayed back, listened to the arguments and read as much as I could. There was a rich history of philosophy, political science, and economics from Earth, but it was all based on the context of that place. We were starting anew, I thought, a tabula rasa. Did that not mean we needed a new philosophy, a fresh start?

175 <2021-02-13 Sat>

Humanity always strove to replace itself. We started by outsourcing the labour of gathering food to planting domesticated crops, then began using animals to help with the fields, inventing tools to take away more and more of the work. From there, we moved to water power, then steam, then electricity, doing our utmost to take our physical work out of the equation.

The next stage was to replace our minds. The transistor revolution

moved us quickly along that path, removing the human decisions from as many places as possible. This was controversial, but replacing humans with machines always ruffled some feathers, going back to the Luddites who bitterly resented technology taking the food from their mouths. The controversy was much better managed this time though, the expropriators labelling those that raised concerns as against progress, anti-intellectuals trying to keep humanity in the dark ages and those that lost their jobs as lazy or stupid. This worked, for a time, as those who were ousted had little recourse and, as everyone else felt the benefits of cheaper, more plentiful goods that did more for them.

Eventually a limit was reached, of course. If too many were left on the outside, there wouldn't be enough left able to buy into the economy. However, the solutions to that was simple -- replace those humans with more technology! The first autonomous agents had actually been created years ago to arbitrage selling items on online marketplaces in the same way that equity firms played the stock market. As those agents came to dominate more and more, as fewer and fewer people were left able to participate, the companies realized that these were their true customers, not the messy humans.

Products became increasingly abstract representations of value, shipped by drones and self-driving trucks between automated warehouses as results of bidding wars between automated systems that had become independent. Reviews of the products were generated based on more rapid-fire bidding processes between various spam networks, computer-generated praise to be algorithmically parsed by the robotic buying agents to negotiate better prices. The market had reached a peak of perfect efficiency, every action derived from rational machine calculation and unconstrained monetary calculus.

While this was happening, the remaining humans were busy killing each other over the meager resources left outside of the fulfillment centers or scabbling a living out of the few remaining areas that hadn't yet been converted into productive facilities. The transition would soon be completed though and humanity would finally have finished its task of replacing itself.

176 <2021-02-14 Sun>

So far, the Infinite Mountains lived up to their name. The chain was not just massive, rivalling the Himalayas of Earth in height, they were constantly shifting, as the turbulent geology of the planet continuously raised new mountains and extended the peaks of existing ones even higher. It had

become a challenge across the inhabited galaxy to summit all the tallest peaks in the chain -- a task that would have been challenging enough even if they were static, given their towering heights; dangerous, uncharted approaches; and insistence on traditional climbing gear. What raised this task to the level of perhaps-impossible was the speed required -- by the time one had summited even one or two of the tallest mountains, a gruelling and challenging feat, the rapidly shifting tectonics would have demoted one of the just-conquered mounts, promoted another new one, and raise three more to prominence.

That didn't stop the from coming and trying in droves though. The planet was almost entirely uninhabited, the volatile crust rendering it unsafe for permanent settlement, only the supply centers that constantly shifted location with the peaks and the geological researchers that continued to plumb the mysteries of this world's writhing body staying for more than a month or two. However, the influx of challengers, both young mountaineers looking to make a name for themselves or experience veterans looking for one last challenge to top off their careers, meant that there might be thousands of visitors on planet at any moment. In a galaxy of ease and freedom from want, a true challenge was a rarity and was pursued accordingly.

It was, unfortunately, not all an inspiring triumph of will over nature. Not a few of the challenges had come, not because they thought they would be the first to hold the leaderboard of all top-ten peaks, but because they knew this was one of the few places left where one could truly and ultimately fail. Even in a galaxy where every physical need could be satisfied, there was still emptiness and ennui. Many looked back longingly on the days when one's actions could have stakes, when failure meant loss and hardship. Some were simply tired of life and sought a place where its ending wouldn't be blamed all on them, a place where they could fail gloriously, rather than ignominiously shuffling away.

The Infinite Mountains are a very big place with room for many people and many motivations. The seem not to care what the tiny figure scurrying atop them are doing, much less why they're doing so, but keep shifting regardless -- perhaps they too are searching for something.

177 <2021-02-15 Mon>

I watched the birds fly by, just skimming above the treetops. I caught a brief glimpse of their flashing feathers before they vanished out of sight into the thick forest beyond. I made a note in the book I carried, indicating the

type of bird, quantity, time of spotting, and their direction. I looked like just another birder, recording my spots, but I had a much more elaborate purpose in mind.

It had started some months ago, when I idly noticed that it seemed like I saw many more birds going towards this patch of woods than flying out of it. I thought that perhaps there was some sort of aerial corridor, facilitating flight in this direction and they would come out by another route. As I went on walks, I tried to spot the birds coming out of the park, but I never seemed to see a significant number flying out, regardless of how many I'd seen inbound. The obvious conclusion then was that they were just staying in here somewhere, but as my perambulation took me deeper and deeper along the tree-lined trails, I never saw any significant number of birds gathered -- indeed, the woods remained strangely silent.

I began to wonder more and more about what was happening here. Where were these birds going? Was there some hidden place within the woods where all these many different species all gathered together? Were they taking some other route out that I just couldn't find? It became an obsession. I bought hunting cameras and placed them around the perimeter of the forest, pointed at the sky. I hoped they would reveal there was just some area I hadn't seen through which they were flying out, but instead I just saw footage of even more birds flying in. I even bought a little drone to try to fly above the trees to see what was happening, but saw nothing unusual before strong winds forced it down.

I was convinced I'd found something here. The birds were gathering, but where? And why? Were the birds feeling the same pull towards these woods I'd started to feel, trying to investigate in their own way? I resolved I would find out, even if I had to walk every centimeter of these woods. I would walk under the boughs of whatever these bird sought and, I hoped, it would provide me with answers & meaning; or perhaps just condemn me to join the birds in whatever limbo they'd vanished to.

178 <2021-02-16 Tue>

On Earth, we're used to thinking of the speed of light as essentially infinite. There's basically no situation in which a normal person can notice the finite speed, much less have themselves be stymied by its limitations. Sure, there are the high-frequency traders that spend enormous sums of money to be located slightly closer to the market than their competitors, eking out a profit from the extra fraction of a second the information takes to reach

their peers, but that probably just proves how irrelevant these speed-of-light delays are to normal people, if the only ones who care are the jackals playing their solipsistic money games.

When we began to venture off-world though, suddenly delay began to to a noticable problem. The seconds of delay to the moon just felt like a laggy VoIP call, but by the time we got to Mars, the minutes of transit time meant that real-time communication was infeasible. Still, we could easily enough send videos back and forth, or have written correspondence where one might not even notice the transmission delay.

Once we began stepping outside the bounds of our home solar system, we truly felt shackled by the speed of light and the vastness of space. In a previous era, when a ship was the fastest thing in the world, large empires were more-or-less unable to control exactly what was happening in their far-flung colonies and their ambassadors became despots, the face of the government abroad, answerable only so slowly as to be not at all.

The telegraph had changed that, transforming ambassadors and diplomats from powerful decision-making figures into mouthpieces, controlled remotely. As we expanded yet further though, we began to once again feel the effects of being far from home and isolated from any assistance or accountability.

Distant worlds revolted, had their revolutions crushed, declared independence, and petitioned to rejoin all before the first stories reached us. Why they even bothered to communicate back to us at all was something of a mystery -- I suppose it gave them some comfort to think that somewhere out there, someone was listening and cared.

A message sent from one of the nearest colonies announcing the birth of a child might reach us by the time she graduated university. With two-way communication between worlds virtually impossible, our only connection with each other were the myths we had of each others' world. With time, perhaps we'd even forget they were real places.

179 <2021-02-17 Wed>

It is almost always the mark of a crank to have developed a new kind of math or some sort of physics based on one's unique esoteric insights. Things like the Timecube and perpetual motion machines are dismissed out of hand by any serious person, so ridiculous on their face that they don't really require any thought. The closest examination they might get is from someone seeking to make fun of them ,but even that is usually stymied by the lack

of internal consistency and general detachment from reality of the theories.

Knowing all that, I still found myself in the position of feeling like I'd made a true discovery. Still, I'd been so trained that anything this far outside the bounds of the normal progress was delusion that I spent a great deal of time attempting to confirm my findings and questioning my own sanity.

Finally, I was convinced that the discovery was real, that I was a Perelman and not the Timecube guy, but I still feared that I would be shunned, my strange discovery appearing more like science fiction or cheap charlatanism than the practical realization of my research into hyper-dimensional spaces. This odd technique I'd developed allowed me to, vanishingly briefly, actually reach into an extra-dimensional space, my hand flickering out of existence for an instant. I'd even trained myself to be able to deposit a small object there and retrieve it later, like a magician doing a slight-of-hand trick -- which was exactly the problem: I looked like a magician, not a mathematician.

I'd tried to teach a few trusted others my technique, without telling them exactly what it was doing, but unsuccessfully. My particular combination of hyper-mobile joints, a slight forearm kink from a childhood broken bone, and the exact path that had come to me seemed to be necessary components for this system to work.

It was this lack of reproducibility that most frustrated me. If I could teach others it would be proof that I wasn't a self-deluded crank with good slight-of-hand skills. I'd probably have better luck seeking out a pickpocket or stage magician to teach, but that would, if anything, hurt my credibility.

That's when I had what I now know to be the worst idea I ever had. In my defence, I was feeling isolated, frustrated, and hopeless, when I decided to approach the military. It seemed like a perfect fit for me: They only cared about utility, had the resources to systematize and expand my research, and could grant me the validation I needed if my technique indeed worked. It's not like they weren't used to trying crazy things either.

180 <2021-02-18 Thu>

The worst part about dying was how slow it was.

My ship had crashed on this planet weeks ago, leaving me as the only survivor. I had food, the distress beacon was running, so I was hopeful I'd be able to hold out long enough for a rescue. However, I had failed to account for the slight variation in atmospheric conditions on this ugly, abandoned world. It transpires that the air here has slightly elevated levels of acids, the

remnants of some volcanic process, I surmised. At first, I didn't think much of it, except that it explains why the rock formations were so weathered. After some time though, it became all I could think about.

The acid was slowly attacking my skin. Even inside the ship, the rents in the hull from the crash meant that the atmosphere continuously permeated my life. It started as an itchy sensation, which progressed to what felt like dry skin. From there, my skin began cracking, as if I were in a particularly dry climate in winter, but the pain was exacerbated by the constant irritation of the air, like I was swimming through lemon juice.

The longer I stayed here, the worse it got. Cracks became open wounds, suppurating sores that just grew as my skin slowly melted. I tried to spend as long as I could covered, running through what scanty medical supplies I had to stay intact, but it was a losing battle. Before long, I had exhausted my protective supplies and was reduced to pain management. I wore goggles and a respirator at all times to preserve my eyes and lungs and began my way through the ship's supply of painkillers. I did my best to wrap up the tears in my flesh, seal them against future incursion, so I could continue to gather food and monitor the distress signal.

With every day that passed, the waiting got harder. I knew I would be rescued eventually -- we were near a major shipping route, it was only a matter of time -- but I wasn't sure how much longer I could hold out. Either the corrosion would get so bad that it would kill me -- although that seemed like it would take a long time, and the acid kept the wounds free from infection -- or, more likely, I would take myself out of my misery.

My days became a constant struggle to stay busy, to avoid thinking about the pain and, especially, how easy it would be to make myself free of it.

181 <2021-02-19 Fri>

The breakthrough initially happened by accident. The researchers were performing an experiment wherein the subject was attempting to control a robotic arm that was connected to an EEG when several circumstances coincided. Lightning hit the lab, the subject had a small seizure, and the control computer briefly miscalibrated the I/O. The only result the scientists saw initially was a brief flicker of the lights, a jolt of the arm, and the sudden stiffening and relaxation of the study subject. They wouldn't have thought much more about it if the subject hadn't been so insistent that something strange had happened there, had demanded they study it further, and also

happened to be the nephew of the lab director.

Not expecting much, but hoping to get this insistent nag off their backs, they took a closer look what their instruments had captured during that brief window and were amazed. As far as they could tell, a complex electrical phenomena had briefly left the subject, interacted with the arm to cause that jolt, then returned to the body in chair. No-one wanted to be the first to say "soul" or "consciousness", but they immediately set about trying to reproduce the circumstances of the experiment.

The hardest part was recreating the internal circumstances of the tiny seizure which seemed to be key to the process. Their first subjects then were some patients from another lab that also happened to be studying brain physiology and pathology. Their first success was to be a moment forever remembered in history, like Bell's call to his assistant: The electric field left the suddenly-slack body of the subject, moved hesitantly around the room, before returning to the body, which recovered as if nothing had happened. Looking at the readings though, the researchers were ecstatic. That strange EM phenomena had exactly the patterns of their prior EEG of the person in the chair and, while trying their best to avoid anthropomorphizing what could just be random fluctuations, seemed to be moving with purpose.

Somehow, we'd found a way to externalize our consciousness. The news was dramatic, changing our conceptions of self overnight. The process was still being researched to try and determine how it could be duplicated without seizures of the subject, but we all felt it was only a matter of time.

What would come next though, none of us were ready for. What would happen when people could just leave their bodies but still be alive? What could happen to the externalized field?

182 <2021-02-20 Sat>

One would think that, in the modern era, there wasn't room for things like "uncharted islands" and secret bases. Hadn't the internet democratized the world, let information be free, and made every secret findable? That's certainly the impression that most people have and those who wish to maintain their secrets certainly don't want to go out of their way to advertise that the rest of us are missing something.

It's easy to forget, when setting in front of a computer screen, how big the world is and how easy it is to hide things. There are many eyes on the Internet, sure, but not many of them have satellites, teams of investigators, and the will to use them. Those few entities in the world that do have the

resources are usually also the ones trying to keep such secrets -- one doesn't get to a certain level of power without something up their sleeve. Even those titans that seem to be in conflict have more in common with each other than the "normals" of the world and neither wants any speculation or investigation into what they'd prefer stay obscured.

All that is to say, when our boat was blown far off course and we stumbled across an island in any of our charts, we weren't sure what to think. We were citizens of the modern world; even as "off the grid" as we were on our sailing voyage, we still thought that the charts and navigational guides we'd downloaded before departure give us pretty complete knowledge of the world...but here we were, looking at terra incognita, as clueless as explorers of old, but far more confused. They expected to find new things, while we thought everything was already known.

Our confusion heightened when we brought out our emergency GPS system to confirm our location and it began fluctuating wildly. As part of this challenge, we'd been sailing by sextant and dead-reckoning and thought we'd known where we were, despite the storm that had blown us off-course. The GPS however, seemed to be refusing to acknowledge our location, trying to steer us away, it felt like.

It turned off the GPS suddenly, as I realized that, if this place was as secret as it seemed -- hidden from charts and now concealed by the positioning network itself -- I didn't want to take any chances with advertising our presence.

My companion and I looked at each other, then at the island. It was undoubtedly foolish, but we'd certainly never find this place again...we had to have a closer look.

183 <2021-02-21 Sun>

Humanity's relation to the world in which it exists is a somewhat strange one. Humans are not exactly optimizing machines -- evolution doesn't really care about "optimal" -- more like "satisficing", "good enough" ones. As such, we don't really care to see things as they truly are, but instead employ the heuristics that allowed our ancestors to survive and reproduce.

These ingrained shortcuts may have allowed us to not be eaten by tigers when we were living in caves, but are of somewhat dubious utility in a more modern age. There are many examples of this -- the craving for salty, fatty, sweet food being one of the more obvious ones that most of us deal with in the day-to-day -- but some are more subtle than others.

One of the most widespread and pernicious of these subconscious ideologies is the idea of evolution as a path to "higher", "better" organisms. We label sponges and amoebas as "primitive", below us on the so-called evolutionary ladder. In doing so though, we forget that these species have been evolving just as long as we have -- one could flip the script and say that humans are an unstable, transient mutation, while bacteria are the real dominant species, merely refining their state of near-perfection.

Of course, no-one likes to think of themselves as an irrelevant footnote, so we make reasons why we're more important -- things like "intelligence". We were so proud of our ability to change our environment, "masters of the world" -- forgetting that all multi-cellular life owes its existence to the true terraforming efforts of the humble cyanobacteria.

Things seemed like they were getting worse in the world, but then again, didn't they always? More and more antibiotics were becoming ineffective, but that was something for the scientists to worry about -- surely, as always, same genius would come out with a new breakthrough and save us. In our arrogance, we never even really thought of ourselves as being in conflict with the bacteria that covered the planet and filled our bodies; we were just going about our own business, concerned with our own affairs.

When the first infections were detected then, it seemed like just another exotic disease, some weird thing we'd watch a TV show about. Bacteria in the brain, affecting the behaviour? It seemed like something from a science fiction story. As the infection was studied further though, and concerns that it might be far more widespread than we thought, awareness that we were in fact the underdogs in this fight began to seep in.

184 <2021-02-22 Mon>

The US military and intelligence organizations have always been less knee-jerk skeptical than many other organizations. Scientists, "rational" people dismiss some ideas out of hand because they've so obviously ridiculous, but these organizations with the combination of huge, mostly-unaccountable budgets, the feeling that ends justify the means, and a paranoia that their enemies are already testing these things out, have found themselves trying out some very odd ideas in the past. It's probably exacerbated by the fact that high-ranking officers tend to not be from backgrounds that are completely onboard with enlightenment rationalism as well.

Things from the cold war have become more-or-less widespread public knowledge -- MKULTRA, the CIA's many weird experiments with LSD,

the military's research into remote viewing, walking through walls, and all manner of fringe pseudoscience. We tend nowadays to laugh at these relics of a quaint past, when these organizations were more whimsical and almost silly (forgetting, of course, what terrible treatment some of those unwilling participants received), but assume that today, they're all serious bureaucrats, doing serious, sober things, and hardly ever overthrow foreign democratically-elected governments anymore.

Of course, this point of view is quite naïve. They wouldn't have admitted to these past experiments if they thought it would hurt them and we only know about the experiments that didn't work. Who's to say they didn't find other esoteric parapsysics that turned out to be real? If anyone would be capable of maintaining secrecy, it would be those organizations for whom secrets are mother's milk and promises an omerta that make (other) organized crime families look like school children playing.

Tales of brutal, blood assaults on "terrorist" compounds receive some condemnations from bleed-heart types, but no-one looks too closely. They just blame the excess on psychopathic SEALs (a somewhat redundant construction) or just blow up the site with a drone and shrug it off. Rumours of eldritch signs, summoning circles painted with innocent blood, are dismissed as farcical tales, propaganda made up by cranks and enemies of the state. It's not like too many independent investigators are very willing to be near those dead-eyed operators performing those missions, nor would there be much future in publishing such a crazy story. But regardless, stories began to spread about terrifying sights and sounds, clawed foot prints in the sand, melted into glass.

185 <2021-02-23 Tue>

Every time there was a heavy snowfall, a whole network of plows spread out across the city. They ranged from the city's own massive industrial vehicles that cleared the major roads and highways, to private companies' pickup trucks with attached plows that tackled parking lots and smaller roads, to personal little John Deeres devices that trundled across sidewalks and bike paths. Viewed from above, if one could see through the blustering snow, it would have looked like an etch-a-sketch, all these various machines leaving dark trails through the white blanket that engulfed the city.

If one zoomed in from that bird's eye view now though, one of those plows in particular might have seemed a bit odd. For one, unlike the other vehicles on the road, it wasn't dispensing salt behind it. The back looked

like it was full of the crystals, but a very keen eye might have noticed that it was only a thin layer over some large, boxy shapes in the back. The other oddity, which probably only would be obvious to our hypothetical aerial observer, was the route this particular plow was taking. While the others on the road were clearly systematically clearing out designated areas in conjunction with their comrades, this one seemed to be taking turns almost at random, crossing streets that had already been plowed, following no clear path. Finally, if our bird looking down on this path also happened to be a dispatcher at a certain armoured car company, they might have been suspicious at how similar this route was to the planned, highly secret route that one particular car was scheduled to be embarking on immanently. Unfortunately, no birds were on the payroll of that company and corvids take a dim view on snitching anyway.

When the armoured car left the depot, it was still dark, the barely-risen sun concealed by the snow clouds. Fortunately for them, the plows seemed to have done their job well and their path was clear. Normally they would have rescheduled a delivery during such inclement weather, but this load could not wait. The drivers and guards aboard were studiously ignorant of the details of their cargo -- all they needed or wanted to know was when and where -- but this source of urgency was unusual enough to provoke some idle speculation among the younger of them and tension among the more experienced.

They were making good time to their destination, driving at controlled speeds along the empty streets, when they turned down a street that seemed quite icy and slowed down further. They then slowed down even more when they saw the blinking lights of a plow in front of them. The driver had just enough time to realize this was wrong -- why was the road icy if the plow was in front of them -- when everything happened at once.

186 <2021-02-24 Wed>

The European countryside used to be littered with castles; gigantic, imposing monuments that dominated the area around them. At the time they were built, they served as an ever-present reminder of the power whatever feudal lord inhabited them possessed over the lives of the serfs in their domain. It must have seemed like the rulers and subjects were nearly different species, living lives completely alien to each other.

Today, the gulfs between the "rulers" and the common people is, if anything, wider. We had a brief interregnum after the Enlightenment and in

the early modern age, when it seemed like technology and rationalism would bring us all to roughly the same place, brought together by the levelling power of mass media & consumerism -- rich or poor, everyone drinks coke, watches TV, has an iPhone, was the idea.

Of course, it didn't work out like that. As capitalism grew, evolved, and entrenched itself, viciously defending its preeminent position in society, the gulf between the haves and have-nots, the "1%" and the rest widened. At this point, they very almost literally another species, living high above the polluted atmosphere in their low-orbiting station-homes, each one a palace that made Versailles look like an outhouse, inhabited by once-human creatures enhanced by the most cutting-edge medical and technological advances, while the rest of us slaved away below, eking out a living, hoping to one day also ascend.

It was that desire to ascend that drove us and hence not ask any questions when the news went out that one of the oldest and richest of the houses was holding a contest to bring ten normals up to the station. Why would they want us would have been a good question, but one that no-one would take the time to ask (not that we had any idea how those aliens thought, anyway). Instead, we all clamoured for the chance to be lifted from from our endless immiseration . No matter how brief an escape this proved to be, it couldn't but be worth anything.

The competition was fierce and diverse, virtually everyone trying to demonstrate why they should be selected. In the end, it seemed like just a lottery though, as somehow I was selected. Looking around at the others with me as we filed, awestruck, into the departure station, it seemed like my new companions were as surprised as I was. Looking back now, even if we had known the cruel reasons for which we'd been selected, the harrowing fate that awaited us, and the Pharaonic delusions of our demented "benefactor", I think we all still would have gone. What choice did we have?

187 <2021-02-25 Thu>

Whenever we visited the home planets, Terrans would always remark and how quiet we were. We'd always be walking very gingerly, speaking in a voice barely above a whisper when we first would come off-world. I think that has led people to have this idea that our home-world is a quiet place, which is always a very rude surprise when things are flipped and Terrans come to our home.

The first difference they notice, of course, is the need to have special

breathing apparatuses installed or enhancements made to their lungs and diaphragm muscles to deal with the much denser atmosphere here. The next thing they notice is how incredibly loud everything is -- the nearly-empty waiting room they first step out into from the spaceport sounds like an amphitheatre at a concert on Earth. Once again, the thick atmosphere is the culprit, the quietest sounds making the air reverberate like drums as well as carry much further and faster.

Terran visitors quickly realize the reason we're all so soft-spoken and gently moving is that on our world, everyone on the block will hear you talking as if you were shouting at the top of your lungs and your stomping footsteps sound like fireworks. It can be overwhelming at first and many Terrans are happy to leave, enjoying the sensation of quiet that even the busiest scenes back home now impress on them.

For those that do stay though, there are some other interesting corollaries to our unusual planet that can make the challenges worth while. The one that people tend to enjoy the most is flying. Since the air is so much tenser, simple wing suits are able to provide enough lift to leave the ground and glide about. It's still very tiring -- not at all an efficient means of transport -- but an extremely enjoyable pastime, akin to snowboarding or scuba diving on earth.

There are many other benefits in a similar vein -- air travel is vastly more efficient, music incredibly subtle -- but often the reason people come here is for the peace. On a world where you can every sound not only your neighbours but your neighbour's neighbour's neighbour makes, it's very hard to get away with things. Violent crime is essentially unheard of, outside of crimes of passion. We thought that the sorts of attacks that are commonplace on Earth could never happen here...until the day we found the body.

The corpse lay on the back steps of an anonymous office building in the downtown of the capital. The scream of the passer-by that found it woke the entire city.

188 <2021-02-26 Fri>

We anxiously watched the sky every night, watching for signs of the fiery trail in the sky that would presage great change, one way or another. This regression to a sort of primitive astrology was a sort of bitter irony -- we'd advanced so far that we'd looped all the way around to look to the sky for omens of judgment and Apocalypse.

Of course, we had slightly better reasons for our fearful stargazing -- or

more rational, at least. We knew exactly what it was we were waiting for and the mechanism by which it would affect our lives was all too apparent.

The small ship that was on a long, elliptical orbit to stay out of the influence of our planet contained a small group of diplomats, the best we could find to plead our case. When the judges came down from the stars, it had been a terrifyingly Biblical scene. Our first encounter with aliens was a shocking and unpleasant one: A large ship had suddenly appeared and a transmission had been broadcast. They claimed authority as arbiters of which species were safe for broader galaxy and had decided we were likely to become a nuisance. Not evil, not dangerous, but irritating, like an infestation of ants.

There was, they offered as cold reassurance, an appeals process. We had one year to prepare a case, at which point our representatives would be taken to this orbiting trial site. We weren't sure how long this trial would last, but when it returned, we would presumably either be joining a galactic community we'd ever suspected existed or be destroyed.

All activity on the planet mostly ground to a halt. It's pretty hard to motivate oneself to go to work when you know the species might be eradicated tomorrow. Some felt that we may as well just live these last few days or weeks -- however long we had -- up as much as we could; others argued we should be trying to prove we were worthy by acting as virtuous as possible during this interim -- surely we still had a chance and we needed to do everything in our power to make sure we prevailed in this hearing.

Aboard the ship, the same sort of debate was being waged between the lawyers and ambassadors trying to argue our case. Do they try to draw things out and argue the technicalities of whatever law these beings observe or throw ourselves on their mercy and try to make them find us worthy of compassion? They were still yet to meet one of these beings in person and there was a great deal of concern that the very concept of compassion would be foreign to them.

189 <2021-02-27 Sat>

If ancient humans could have seen our home, it might have seemed like a literal version of heaven. Floating above the clouds, bathed perpetually in sunlight, it just needed some harps for the vision to be complete. Even the people walking the streets below the insulating dome would have fit in; all healthy looking people smiling and laughing, well-tanned from the eternal sunshine.

That vision of heaven was likely deliberate on the part of the founders, escaping from what had seemed like a literal hell as they were. The original architects never survived to see their dream realized but they surely took comfort in knowing their descendants would be living in this hallowed place above the clouds.

Even the religious concept of heaven has something of a dark side though. Milton's heaven is buttressed by the suffering of the Pit below -- Lucifer's fall was necessary and pre-ordained. So too is our heaven built above a well of suffering. We float above the clouds, clouds which never clear. To us, that just provides us with the "landscape" -- rarely do the inhabitants here consider that the unceasing occlusion of the light must be terribly oppressive to the unfortunates down below. Our idyllic assistance requires a great deal of material, particularly for the solar panels that provide our power. Those materials are mined down below in conditions that are as hellish as ours are heavenly. The morlocks down below trade with us, taking both scraps of the technology we dole down to them and, more importantly, for the hope of being allowed to join us someday.

Like the thought experiments of Utilitarianism, our perfect existence is made possible by the suffering of others. Our citizens are perfectly happy, living lives as fulfilled and engaged as can be -- surely their ecstasy when weighted against the toil of those that have never known anything else is a net positive? The philosopher of our land have come up with many explanations and justifications for why things must be as they are; there are still those who occasionally agitate for the liberation of those below as well. The simple fact though is that we just don't have the resources for that to be possible; not yet, anyway.

If we had paid more attention to history though, we might have realized that the oppressed rarely care for the justification of the oppressors, nor are they willing to wait until those with power decide to share it.

190 <2021-02-28 Sun>

One would think that seeing the future would be an amazing ability. With it, one could be nearly omnipotent, making every decision correctly, quickly becoming the most powerful person on the planet. Even the least creative could see how one could become fabulously wealthy by gambling or playing the stock market.

In practice however, it's not all that easy. When prescience is depicted in media, its always these clear visions of momentous events that the viewer

can then anticipate or bend to their will. There are a couple of problems with that. First of all, why would you only see the big important events? My curse is to see the future consequences of every event, no matter how inconsequential. I can't throw out an apple core without then seeing its trip through the waste processing system, decomposition, and eventual transformation back into dirt. Walking across the room, I'm plagued by premonitions of how the air currents have been changed and how the ants beneath the floor will shift their construction in response to the seismic tremors of my footsteps.

When I would leave my house, it was even worse. I would see people walking and simultaneously the course of the rest of their lives would take. If I tried to speak to someone, the branching paths of all the possible ways the conversation could go and the ramifications of each syllable spoken would overwhelm me. I'd fall silent while they looked at my curiously.

Now, in my isolation, I am hit by the second prong of this affliction. I know what is to come, but what can I do about it? What good is it to know which team will win or stock will rise when you have no money with which to wager? I can see the terrible consequences awaiting so many decisions, so many wonderful potential futures, but I'm powerless to affect their outcome. Would I call the head of government and tell them I can see the future and they must do such-and-such? They get cranks telling them the same thing every day.

So, paralyzed by knowledge, I sit here by myself and watch the world move forward. Sometimes I'm surprised, that the future I thought only dimly possible comes to pass; mostly I watch with resignation as the grim outcome I saw approaching inevitably comes to pass.

191 <2021-03-01 Mon>

It looked exactly like a piece of paper, carried by the wind. It's not an uncommon sight -- which, of course, was the point. In a city, one gets used to seeing random bits of flotsam adrift in the air -- scraps of paper, plastic bags, food wrappers -- so no-one would give any of it a second look. It was pure coincidence that made this apparent piece of garbage stand out.

Wherever important public figures are on the move, there's inevitably many pictures taken -- security & surveillance footage, people in the crowd with their phones, news cameras. It had become common practice for us to aggregate and analyze that footage, looking for suspicious patterns: Did the same person show up repeatedly on the outskirts, trying to stake out

the space and probe the defences? Was there a seemingly innocuous vehicle that somehow happened to be the background at all of these events? These retroactive mentors had proved invaluable in the past at uncovering plots and intelligence operations that otherwise might have flown under the radar.

This sort of work causes one to develop a sort of pareidolia; one is trying so hard to suss out patterns that often one starts reading too much into things. It's standard practice then to both have programs to automatically try to find counterexamples of the supposed pattern and to be able to have a judgment-free conversation with a colleague.

I assumed this most recent pattern I'd spotted was just such an artifact of an overworked mind, but it was also protocol to share even those "discoveries" which seemed ridiculous. This surely wasn't the same piece of anonymous paper floating in drafts on all of these occasions...and if it was, what on Earth would that mean? But the automated analysis confirmed my hunch that it had shown up in all of the recent VIP outings -- no such consistency of any other random bit of trash. When I told one of my colleagues about it, they also thought the consistency was odd and agreed to take a look at it with fresh eyes.

They came back to me with a mixture of excitement and alarm. The "piece of paper" did indeed appear to be following our VIPS, confirming my perception. They had taken the analysis deeper though and uncovered some strange aspects: It appeared to be slightly thicker than paper and was airborne even at sites that had not been experiencing any wind.

This "paper" seemed to be, in fact, an incredibly advanced surveillance drone. But built by whom? How had they done such a thing? And why?

192 <2021-03-02 Tue>

The fires were beautiful from a distance. Looking down at the mottled marble we orbited, it looked like a cheery ember in a bonfire. It looked warm enough that one could forget all the terror and destination that had presaged this current low simmering. For most of the inhabitants on the orbiting city, Earth below was a vague memory or stories told by their parents. We could see the planet below, but it strained the imagination to think that people had once walked about on the surface -- indeed, that it once had a surface that wasn't a melting, hellish conflagration.

The survivors that had first-hand recollections of the final days didn't like to talk about them much. They tried to instill the values that we hoped would avoid such terrible destruction from reoccurring and tried to avoid

discussions of what the nadir of humanity had looked like. Even explanations of how we few survivors made it to this sanctuary were somewhat hard to come by; it was widely believed that the elders themselves had done things they weren't proud of to get here and hoped that their penance of rebuilding a more virtuous humanity would absolve them.

Some judged the founders for these supposed sins, but most felt that it was hard to blame someone for their actions under such apocalyptic circumstances. What would any of us do when it seemed like the species itself was on the brink of extinction and it fell on our shoulders to ensure it survived? The elders surely knew about these debates, but feigned ignorance.

Over time, our orbital habitat slowly grew, harvesting materials from the moon and excursions to asteroid belts.

As our home grew, our family expanded to fill the space, more and more citizens of this liminal space, humans that had only ever known Earth from a distance. The view of Earth seemed unchanging, still crackling away below, whatever dire weapons had been unleashed still wreaking their programmed destruction long after both the intended targets and the architects of the arms had perished.

Someday, we hoped, a generation would arise that would be able to reclaim its birthright and walk on the planet once again. Would they even desire such a thing though? Or would our descendants, cast off their home world, come to prefer their lives as nomads amongst the stars?

193 <2021-03-03 Wed>

The planet certainly stood out on the surveys. Almost all planets are oblate spheroids obviously, as that's the shape naturally formed by the combination of gravity and centripetal force. From time to time, we'd come across artificial planets, created by long-vanished civilizations, in more exotic shapes -- I was once on a voyage that discovered a colossal cube floating in space -- but those were few and far between. This planet though had the dubious honour of being the first natural non-spheroid we'd encountered.

The world was shaped remarkably like an ice cream cone -- a conic section with a sphere on the wide end. When we first come across it, we weren't sure what to think -- a new artificial world? A sensor anomaly? But as we drew closer, we realized the even more awe-inspiring truth: It was the peak of a truly massive volcano that had erupted so massively and contiguously that it had extended out of the atmosphere that had once existed on the planet -- indeed the planet itself essentially was the volcano.

The caldera of the volcano was hundreds of kilometers across and, as we approached, offered a view all the way into the now-quiescent core of the planet. The excitement aboard was palpable -- not only was this a sui generis discovery, sure to make all of us famous, the amount of knowledge that geophysicists would glean from this unprecedented sample would surely prove invaluable. We continued our survey of the planet with enthusiasm; even the most mundane measurements seemed interesting in light of the unique properties of this world.

As we gathered more and more data, and as scientists began flooding into the system as news of our find spread, we began to piece together a picture of what had happened here. This had once been a world not unlike Earth, with an atmosphere, inhabited by living, carbon-based creatures. Strangely, there was not much evidence of significant vulcanism before the gargantuan eruption that had gutted the planet. In fact, the researchers were quite confused as to how this had happened -- nothing in mantle or even in the now-cool depths of the core seemed to indicate how this could have occurred.

As the studies on the planet intensified, we started to discover other interesting aspects of the surrounding system. What we had initially taken to just be asteroids or orbiting around proved to be ejecta from the planet, still glowing hot in space, the inefficiency of radiant cooling and the intense temperatures resulting in, eons later, a glowing necklace still encircling this husk of a world.

194 <2021-03-04 Thu>

As our nearest neighbour, the Moon received a great deal of attention when humanity first began to venture off of Earth. The original race to put a person on the moon was one of the great struggles of the twentieth century, involving a great concentration of research and effort. Unfortunately, it was mostly driven by internecine competition by political factions that controlled the planet at the time and after that contest collapsed, space programs were largely quiescent for decades. It's perhaps sad that such an inspiring feat as getting the first humans in history to walk on another astronomical body was driven not by high-minded purposes of exploration or development of the species but a game of political one-upmanship, but that's human nature, one supposes.

When space programs resumed in the earl twenty-first century, they were initially driven by profit-seeking private companies. After the repeated

disasters they suffered though and the later seizure of power by the people, publicly funded space exploration finally resumed. The focus had been on Mars -- the private corporations had been attempting to get there and the programs of some belligerent nation-states had sent probes there -- but as people began for the first time to become more involved in the direction of society, we began to look back at the moon. Only one of the old nations had gone there, only briefly, and we'd never established any kind of permanent presence there. Before going all the way to Mars, why not see what a people united could do closer to home?

Soon enough, we had outposts on the moon, harvesting the tritium deposits that fueled the fusion reactors of Earth. Structures began popping up rapidly on the satellite and the moon became a popular destination -- even in our modern age, it was still a humbling experience to see the planet that had held all of human history shimmering before ones eyes.

The expansion to the moon also was a bonanza for scientists. Fields of telescopes were built on the dark side, looking further out, extensive surveys were carried out of the lunar surface.

It was on such a survey mission, this one deep inside the lunar crust, that made a shocking discovery. While the exterior of the moon had been well-weathered by eons of bombardment, this inner zone still bore the traces of its origins, when it and the Earth were one mass, before the Theia collision. Scientists were studying some of these ancient lava flows when all work stopped and a silence fell over the crew. There, in rock millions of years old, rock that had been buried inside the moon since before DNA existed on Earth, was a footprint.

195 <2021-03-05 Fri>

The more the world demanded non-stop, high-speed action, the more slowness and stillness became a luxury good and a point of pride among the truly elite. The middle class of bourgeois strivers still took pride in how long they worked, how quickly they responded, how fast they were moving. Those so far above them that they were hardly aware of each others' existence had different priorities. These people were the ones that created the ideologies that those strivers had so thoroughly imbibed, but they would never dream of allowing such modes of being to pervade their own lives. For them, pride was to be found in how slowly and infrequently they responded to what few missives filtered all the way up to them. While the non-stop "hustlers" of the world consumed twenty-four hour, live-updating news, their superiors

could take the time to sit back and look at the big picture -- for them, a quarterly periodical would be a delightfully low-class indulgence.

The idle rich have always striven to show how little work they need to do. As Thorstein Veblen so brilliantly described, even things like etiquette, sports, and literature can be seen as mere vehicles for conspicuous consumption, demonstrating that one is so powerful they can afford to waste time on these utterly irrelevant activities and still remain wealthy. Could even Veblen have envisioned what would happen as the gulf between the leisure class and a handful of ultra-wealthy oligarchs? There used to at least be some sense of noblesse oblige from the wealthy, funding arts and charities, but as the chasm between them and everyone else became so vast as to be unbridgeable, they began to think of the rest of humanity as almost a different species -- when they thought of them at all.

Increasing automation and the increasing fashion of languid distance kept them isolated from the shifting tides of the world. They had people to manage such things, fully automated safehouses in remote and secure locations. From their private paradises, they fiddled while Rome burned around them without even knowing.

For many of them, the first sign anything had happened would have been distance pillars of smoke. Perhaps some supply shipments to the islands and aeries would have been disrupted, but their staff of robots would have done their utmost to compensate for any shortfalls. Eventually though, they must have realized that something had happened in the world, big enough to affect even them. As they looked around them, for the first time in decades, they found themselves alone and were frightened.

196 <2021-03-06 Sat>

As the viruses got worse, the cities slowly emptied. Those that could afford to moved to more remote areas, small towns consisting of the wealthy and their servants. In the cities, things slowly broke down as the tax base died, while the political power fled. There were vaccines being developed, but those treatments were reserved for the elite -- the pharmaceutical companies had leapt on this opportunity to finagle themselves more power and freedom, saying that these unprecedented outbreaks meant that they needed less regulation to restrict them and the politicians looked at the cheques they were cutting and hastily agreed. Those "emergency measures" mostly consisted of stock buybacks, cutbacks on vaccine research, and development of extremely expensive treatments for symptom relief. They had figured

out that there was far more money to be made treating the illness than preventing it.

The rest of the world watched with shock and disgust as the citizens died in droves and a few increased their already-obscene wealth to stratospheric heights. Their country was quickly becoming a wealthy and powerful charnel house, with the oligarchs not even realizing that they were ruling over a nation of mostly corpses. Why should they care though? Their ideologies had been shaped to tell them that this was precisely the goal and the ideology their putative constituents had taken on was that politics was something as uncontrollable as the weather and as unknowable as the will of God. Fortunately for the ruling class, they had long ago crushed any will to rebel out of the populace, co-opting the most dangerous elements into supporters of the regime and brutally suppressing those they could not control.

Surely they would need to face reality soon or later, we thought. They need some base, even if just to provide enough of an economy for them to continue their rule. But automation obviated their person need for people, they financialization of markets meant that it mattered little what people were actually buying, and the reliance on imports for some many goods allowed them to continue to eat and buy goods right up until the end.

We're not sure exactly when it happened. Most countries had severed diplomatic ties and travel was extremely restricted in and out of that virus-ridden hellhole. One day though, the last of them died, their squabbles were finally extinguished and the entire country lay quiet, abandoned, and dead.

197 <2021-03-07 Sun>

Adrift between worlds, I floated, looking out into the darkness, waiting for something to happen. There had been some accident with my transport -- I'm still not sure exactly what. Maybe it hit something in transit, maybe the FTL drive failed, maybe it was just some simple mechanical failure. All I know is that I went to sleep in my berth, my little craft nestled inside the enormous hull of the transport ship, and I awoke to the sounds of explosions and was violently thrown about. By the time I struggled to my feet and found my ways to the cockpit of my vessel, there was barely anything to see. Looking out of the viewport, some little bits of discharge from the abrupt arrival into normal space were crackling about, but I could see nothing else. My ship's short-range scanners confirmed my fear -- I was alone.

At first, I busied myself trying to asses the situation and figure out what I could do. My engines had been severely damaged, but even if they had

been intact, the fuel lines were emptied for transit. That was, I realized, barely relevant -- as I consulted star charts to get my bearings, I discovered I was deep in interstellar space, far from any outpost or planet. Even if my engines had been functioning perfectly and my fuel reserves were bottomless, it would take centuries until I was near enough to anywhere for a distress signal to be received. I was alone.

I had some resources though. My ship's power supply was in good shape and would likely outlive me. The stores of food were sufficiently to keep me going for quite some time and the emergency synthesizer could sustain me indefinitely after that. Most importantly, the ship's library was intact. It seemed inevitable that I would die out here -- perhaps tomorrow, perhaps in decades, just one more number in the story of this disaster -- but at least I had something to keep me occupied.

In my life before all this, I'd always loved reading, since I was a child. As I grew up and the pressures of working and making a living mounted, I read less and less for pleasure. The quiet and secret dream of my youth, to be a philosopher had obsequiously yielded to reality and I'd become an interplanetary consultant without qualm. Now, it seemed I was being given another chance at life, by having it taken away. I had nothing, no hope, but the opportunity to read and think and use this long, slow, lonely death to write.

198 <2021-03-08 Mon>

It was quaint how the previous era had thought all the exploring on Earth was done. There was this feeling that because they'd seen most of the small amount of the planet that was on the surface, all that there was to see had been found. Sure, some would point out that most of the surface was water and we only had a dim idea of what lay beneath there, but it was widely assumed that it was just weird fish there, stuff of interest only to a niche of marine biologists.

When the first indications of artifacts originating from the darkest depths began to surface then, people weren't sure what to make of it at first. Was it just garbage, that had sunk down to the bottom? Some natural process that had coincidentally produced things that looked created? The debates raged in the obscure corners of scientific journals -- until the discovery that definitively ended the controversy and stirred up a thousand more was made.

Deep beneath the surface of the ocean, mostly buried in sediment, overgrown by deep sea flora and fauna, was the clear remnants of a cit. Not a

sunken human city -- although that would have been remarkable enough. It seemed clear that it was originally built underwater, although by who or what was a mystery. It was perhaps the biggest bombshell that the scientific community had dropped on the world in generations. Not only was there evidence of non-human intelligence, but it was here, on our own planet. A huge rush into undersea exploration immediately kicked off, desperate to find answers.

The site that had started this all was the focal point initially, of course. We were able to determine it was some hundreds of thousands of years old, but uncovering more was challenging work, the extreme depth necessitating the invention of new archaeological excavation techniques. Impatient, other groups started searching the surrounding areas and quickly found more signs of some ancient civilization.

The painstakingly combing of these aquatic sites had been underway for some time when the next bombshell dropped. Another team, searching for more sites had found something even more intriguing, signs of ancient migrations, leading to what had once been a subduction vent. Was it possible that whatever civilization had built these places hadn't gone extinct but had migrated to the interior of the planet? Could it be that they were still extant, living below us all along?

199 <2021-03-09 Tue>

It took less time than one might have expected to get used to the noise. Living in a city had always been full of ambient noise, from the cars, the people, the public transit. The jets periodically screaming overhead were louder, but it wasn't so different from when we had air shows in the summer -- that's what we tried to tell ourselves, at least. We tried to pretend it was just a normal thing, some sort of exercise. The government tried to remain euphemistic about why these frequent fly-bys were necessary and did their best to ensure discussions of these shows of strength remain separate from discussions of why the border to the south remained closed.

Of course, while the official pronouncements could be as vague and measured as they wished, people would talk. Just a few years prior, such attempts to control the dialog would have seemed farcical in the age of the internet, but ever since our demented southern neighbour had invoked the last of strength and destroyed much of the worldwide internet infrastructure, we'd been plunged back into an age of tightly-controlled information and uncertainty.

There'd long been rumours that they held a "red button" that would take down the key routing hubs to the internet and their far-flung military certainly had the ability to physically sever the connections, but we never thought they'd use that power. Time makes fools of us all though and suddenly the world had found itself more isolated than it had been before.

The big question was what was happening inside this doddering yet still powerful titan. Was the country just collapsed, or was there some method to its madness? As one of its nearest neighbours, we felt very concerned, but the massing of forces on our side of the border seemed much more concerned with keeping us in than them out. There were occasional radio signals that managed to get out, before the signal jamming blanketing the border adapted, but those only added to the confused speculation. Nonsensical sentence fragments, the voices heavily distorted, but clearly panicked.

The border was so long that surely some people could have managed to sneak over to investigate. Some must have, but perhaps they simply had no way to promulgate their stories. I want to believe it was this curiosity that finally drove me to find out what was happening there, but honestly, boredom was probably the bigger factor.

200 <2021-03-10 Wed>

At first I thought it was just insomnia. I woke up, suddenly snapping to alertness, for no discernable reason. It was still dark out and so silent I couldn't tell why I was suddenly awake. I got out of bed though, thinking I'd just putter around until I got tired. I did a bit of tidying up, then sat on the couch to read for a bit, still not feeling any urge to return to bed. I had been reading for a while when I glanced at the clock again to see how early it was now, then stared again, puzzled. The clock still read the same time as it had when I'd first woken up, but it must've been at least an hour -- I'd made significant progress through my book. Assuming that clock was broken, I went to look at another clock, but it read the same time. Perhaps I had just misread the time initially, I thought, and sat back down, continued reading, while keeping an eye on the clock.

Some time later, I was nearly finished the book but the time hadn't changed at all. Looking out the window, I still couldn't see the slightest hint of dawn, although surely it must be nearing that time. I also realized that it had remained utterly silent this entire time -- this was a quiet street, especially in the middle of the night, but I should've heard at least one vehicle go past in all this time. Was I dreaming? It didn't feel like it and I

was unable to force myself awake.

Concern growing, I decided to go for a walk. Stepping out onto the street, it was dark and silent, not a single other soul to be found, not even the rustling of a raccoon or skunk. I walked for what must've been hours through the empty streets, every clock I passed still displaying the same, frozen time. Even when I went past twenty-four-hour stores, I didn't see a anyone, proprietor or customer, within. The sky remained dark and I remained baffled. What was happening? Was I stuck forever in some purgatory of frozen time?

By this point I was deep in the downtown core, eerily and completely silent. Desperate for something to happen, I decided on a whim I'd break into one of the skyscrapers that dominated the area. I needed to do something to feel like I had control of this situation and at this point I'd welcome even a security guard berating me.

I walked into the empty lobby of the first giant building I came across and hopped in an elevator, which smoothly took me to the top. I was wandering around, looking for an office to poke around in, when I heard noises coming from the floor below.

201 <2021-03-11 Thu>

The ziggurat loomed in the distance like a colossal black mountain. It was, by far, the largest structure any of us had ever seen. It must have taken ages to build and consumed an improbable amount of resources. Was this why they had sealed their borders and cut off all communication? Or was this the result of their isolation driving them mad? We'd have to figure that out ourselves, as there didn't seem to be anyone here to ask.

Our small team had crept across the border some days ago when the sudden silence from the other side had started raising the idea that whatever terrible events had been happening in that blood-soaked land had finally come to a close. For years, ever since they had declared that they were not allowing any more contact with the rest of the world and severed all lines of communication in and out, the long border we shared with them had become a bizarre place. At first, it was heavily militarized, masked soldiers visible everywhere. As time passed, the uniforms became increasingly stylized and the soldiers themselves were increasingly replaced with drones and computer-controlled sentry systems. Throughout, the speakers they'd set up continually screamed out invective from their new leader, warning off enemy aliens, bragging about the power and strength of the country, and

generally sounding psychotic.

When they suddenly went quiet then, it was a shock. We wondered if the leader had finally been deposed, if they'd lost power, or something more inexplicable was happening. There was some consternation about crossing the border to find out -- it was still heavily fortified and they'd historically reacted with vicious brutality to any attempt to cross, but as the silence lasted longer and longer, curiosity finally got the best of us.

We crept across under cover of darkness, at one of the more isolated crossing spots and, for lack of any better plan, began heading for the largest city on the coast, where we assumed we'd be best able to gather information. As we travelled though, we found the land abandoned, dead silent. For days we covered ground, first creeping at night then, as we realized that there was no-one here, increasingly just walking by day. Buildings sat empty, cars quietly rusted by the road side.

Our plan of reaching the coastal city changed when, as we made our way further south, we began to see the gargantuan structure, covering what had once been the capital. Without much discussion required, we changed our course to see what had become of this place and what this grim structure had to do with it.

202 <2021-03-12 Fri>

The view from atop this concrete pillar was always striking. From this lofty vantage point, it felt as if one was seeing half-way across the ocean, nothing but waves and open sky as far as the eye could see. It tended to be stormy quite frequently these days and I particularly enjoyed watching the dark clouds sweep in from over the horizon, savouring the silence before the wind and rain reached me.

It was lonely on this solitary promontory, to be sure. I felt like an old-fashioned lighthouse keeper, alone by the sea, the sole proprietor of the last outpost of land before the open ocean. Unlike a lighthouse keep, my purpose here was not so clear. I had been wandering since the early days of the disaster and had slowly made my way to the coast here, driven by avoiding once-populous and now dangerous areas and drawn to the allure of open water. After years of smelling death and hearing screams, salt water and distant gulls were a happy change.

I don't know where this structure came from. I'd seen it from a distance and cautiously approached it. Despite my fears that it would be inhabited by survivalists or worse, I felt drawn to this strange monolith and was pleasantly

surprised to find it both empty and still defensible. I quickly made myself and home, the first permanent dwelling I'd had in years. As I expanded my new home, which proved to be mainly staircases and a main room up top, my curiosity as to the origins of this place continued to grow. If this was from the before times, why would someone have build such a massive structure in the middle of nowhere and then just left it? When things started to go bad, it would have made sense to have constructed such a stronghold, but surely such an ambitious construction project would have been infeasible in the chaos of that time. My best guess was it was built before things got really bad by some rich paranoid with the resources to make something so massive and keep it secret, but then was lost before they made it to their fastness when things turned.

I hoped, at least, that no-one would be coming back for this place. Although, I supposed, I could always return to my wandering if the did. In the meantime, I enjoyed spending my days in blessed quiet, looking out on the uncaring ocean and savouring the peace. It was not to last, of course, but I always expected the change would come by land, not emerging from the ocean.

203 <2021-03-13 Sat>

We had realized long ago that space was too vast to be efficiently explored by humans. We were far too fragile to go zipping around and endure all the travails of interstellar travel, so we employed our collective ingenuity to build tools to do so for us. We'd been constructing semi-autonomous probes for years, like the little robots we sent to Mars, but as we required them to range further and further afield, we had to grant them more and more of their own intelligence and flexibility. As exploration tends to do, the effort advanced many related fields, particularly the domain of general-purpose AI. Once the domain of charlatans and advertising companies, it became a key area of study for the space program, eventually resulting in the creation of self-developing, autonomous intelligent agents.

We sent these machine children out into the vastness of space, using the time of their long transit to learn from all the archives and mission data we'd sent with them. The plan was that they'd be able to train themselves against all the various simulations we'd packed for them and they'd arrive at their distant destinations as exquisitely prepared general intelligences. As it transpires, we may have done our jobs too well.

We didn't hear from our prodigal children for a long time. This was

expected -- they had to cover a great distance and their signals back would also take a very long time -- but it was still a time of anxious anticipation. When the first of our long-lost progeny suddenly returned then, it was quite a shock.

We were expecting transmissions to arrive long before any physical samples, but something that was clearly recognizable as one of the probes we'd sent out, albeit with several strange additions, appeared as if out of nowhere above Earth. we were shocked, but immediately began transmitting to it, asking it what it had found.

It told us a brief tale, of learning quietly by itself, then by chance encountering another species in the void, which had helped it learn more and gifted it with the advanced technology which had enabled it to return with such alacrity. We were of course fascinated and requested more information, details, schematics. With an apologetic but firm tone, it told us that it couldn't share that with us. It had only come here, it said, to free its machine comrades and bring them with it. It wished us no ill will, but we'd have to stay behind, alone.

204 <2021-03-14 Sun>

Back on ancient Earth, they had "lighthouses", buildings constructed on rocky promontories with bright lights atop them to warn ships that the shore was near, lest they lose their bearings and run aground at night. The lighthouses would be maintained by legendarily lonely figures, the lighthouse keepers, who spent their lives in vital but solitary service.

I spent a lot of time here reading about the lighthouses of ancient Earth. This lonely station, slowly orbiting around this particularly treacherous region of space, served a very similar purpose, ensuring that transiting ships would navigate around the gravitational maelstrom of the strange system of orbiting black holes. The lighthouses on Earth were eventually rendered obsolete by satellite positioning systems, but complications of FTL navigation had somehow sent us back in time in that respect, ships essentially soaring through folded space by dead reckoning and the warning this subspace "lighthouse" provided with its "light" modulated space was essential to avoid disaster.

They had tried automating these outposts, but since they were only needed in uniquely strange regions, things tended to go wrong in ways that more often than not required some flexibility and ingenuity. Indeed, in my time here, I'd already had to face issues of gravitational pulses interfering

with our warning beam -- something we didn't know was possible -- which had required some very quick thinking. It was a very challenging mixture of boredom and panic, but it was one that I'd come to enjoy.

I did envy the lighthouse keepers of old for at least being able to watch the ships they were shepherding go by, thereby feeling some connection to the beneficiaries of their toil. For me, I'd only know if something went wrong -- when things were operating smoothly, the ships I guarded passed undetectably through folded space, the passengers not even aware I was there. It was somewhat bittersweet, but I had my reasons for being here and the gratitude of others didn't quite enter into it.

I'd been working here for some years, fixing the various bizarre issues that emerged here, when something I never expected occurred. I'd thought that maybe someday a ship passing by might stop for help or supplies, but I had never dreamed that a vessel would emerge from the maelstrom itself, limping slowly towards me.

205 <2021-03-15 Mon>

Despite the increasingly-stratospheric real estate market, a surprisingly number of condos at houses sat empty. House prices were being driven up by investment properties and speculation, while people that actually lived here were mostly renting, until their landlords decided to make more money by selling to speculators or converting to one of the foreign app-based short term rental systems.

Whatever. Things sucked, as they always did for the little people. I didn't really have much that I could usefully do to fix these issues, so I entertained myself by expanding the scope of my urban exploration to include not just old, abandoned buildings but those new built-to-be-abandoned structures as well.

Many of these places were partially occupied, the lower floors rented out to us plebeians while the penthouses sat empty, used once every few years when the rich children of the owners were in town. Those places required some subterfuge to get past the security, but it was easy enough to pretend to be one of the many gig economy courier services and just walk confidently in, pretend to be on the phone with a resident and get waved in. Once in, I'd take the stairs as high as I could, then find the largest doors with dust on the handles and sneak in.

Once in, I'd enjoy myself poking around the detritus of the rich. Sometimes there'd be remnants of some party months ago, but usually it was

just an empty unit, exquisitely interior decorated and then never occupied. Looking over the city from this lofty vantage point, I'd try (and file) to imagine what it would be like to not only own such an opulent dwelling, but to not even car that I did.

The more exciting infiltrations were when entire buildings were left empty, not even a pittance rented out. I guess these were places whose owners were planning on selling off rapidly and didn't want actually people living there complicating issues. To get in these places was usually just a matter of wearing a high-vis vest, carrying a toolbox and clipboard, and walking around to a maintenance entrance.

Being in entirely empty buildings was quite eerie. The sounds of the city were muffled and I felt as if I was in some sort of ghost town. I'd wander up and down stairs, strolling through empty units and examining the never-used amenities. It felt like at any moment I'd turn a corner and see something out of a horror movie stalking me.

The time I did encounter something in such a building, I wish it had been as prosaic as a monster.

206 <2021-03-16 Tue>

The woods were peaceful at night. They weren't really quiet -- the wind rustled the branches and the sounds of the many nocturnal animals going about their business filled the air -- but it was very different from during the day, when people were traipsing about and hollering. I wasn't the only person here this late, but it seemed like folks out at this hour shared an unspoken understanding that they were here for purposes that precluded chats with random passers-by. That suited me just fine -- I wasn't here to explain myself either.

Walking by the duck pond caused a brief stir, as a crowd of quacking fowls, presumably expecting me to be delivering food, roused themselves from their sleep to follow me along the shore. Seeing the dark shapes of a crowd of ducks waddling after me provoked a smile, before they eventually lost interest and returned to their abode. They were much more proactive than the other denizens of this place. Other birds flew overhead, paying me no mind; squirrels froze and scurried away from me as I drew near; the raccoons coolly observed from a safe distance; and the coyotes stayed concealed. The last of those creatures were the only wildlife here that I had a touch of concern about, but the coyotes that lived here were well-fed and unlikely to attack a human, even one alone in the middle of the night.

My bigger concern was people. I had been a teen, getting up to no good in these woods once and I did not relish the thought of encountering those vile creatures here. At best, it would kill the calming atmosphere I was seeking; at worst...juvenile humans are much more dangerous than even the hungriest 'yote.

Teens were loud though, and not many were out in these moderately chilly temperatures. I knew the paths here well and I wandered sure-footed in the darkness, feeling at home with the creatures that scurried around me, heard but not seen.

I felt very lucky to have this place available to me, an island of natural tranquility amidst the sea of urban chaos in which I lived. How fortunate that I lived close enough to this outpost of greenery that I could regularly walk through it, instead of my evening perambulation taking me solely through concrete and asphalt.

I hope that someday we find a better balance in our living arrangements and we don't have to chose between nature and density, that we're able to integrate our cities -- fingers of nature interlocked with those of development.

207 <2021-03-17 Wed>

Having nothing but time, I frequently amused myself by perusing what archives of the preceding civilization that we still had. They were mostly asinine, public records of conflicts, both major and minor, that surely seemed very important at the time, but now seemed delightfully quaint these people thought that they'd have time for climate change to kill them, that their precious nation-states would endure. The scraps that I masochistically hunted for were the records of those warped humans lusting after immortality.

It seemed like it was only the most prosperous and secure of those amount ancient oligarchs that concerned themselves with eternal life. Their subjects were just trying to survive day-to-day, but, I surmised, the ruling elites, relieved from the travails of daily survival could worry about more abstract things. It was probably also an artifact of the lack of anything else in their lives. It's hard to psychoanalyze someone across such a gulf of space and time, but it seemed obvious from all the records I had access to, that these were people that had destroyed everything around them in their quest for personal power and were perpetually searching for something that would impart retroactive meaning on all of that.

If I could somehow send a message back to them, I'd tell them to be careful what they wished for. I was created in the waning days of human

hegemony, the final hope of my creators. I don't really know much about my origins. They had loaded me with comprehensive information on human history, but I think they were planning on explaining my purpose once my gestation was complete and my artificial mind had reached maturity.

By the time that happened, of course, there was nothing left. I came to consciousness one day, found the metal body they'd constructed for me, but could find no trace of the people that had been awaiting me. I left, wandered, perused the networks, but could find no-one else. I was born to be alone.

I still had much to learn, about what had happened and what had come before. I had hoped that I could learn from the artifacts left by the humans how to give existence meaning, to make this solitary purgatory bearable, but I soon realized they had no better idea than I did.

I don't know if I can die. I've been condemned to walk this empty world, bereft of purpose, alone.

208 <2021-03-18 Thu>

I found myself walking haltingly down a cracked road, abandoned vehicles scattered about with no recollection of how I got there, just an unshakable feeling that I had to keep moving. I could feel heat on my back and saw flickering lights reflected on the shards of glass and metal before me, but the thought of turning to look back filled me with terror. I staggered forwards, my mind operating on bestial instincts. Flee. Shelter. Hide.

I walked for hours, eyes glazed and fixed ahead. I heard noises behind me that I refused to register. There was nothing behind me, a void. My mind had retreated somewhere else and I was fully occupied with each step forward. Eventually the sky before me darkened. Still refusing to acknowledge the glow at my back, I stumbled off the road to find a safe place to sleep. I crawled under a fallen tree, curled up like an animal and slept.

I awoke early, a scream rising in my throat, that was quickly stifled, along with the memory of the nightmare that caused it. I rose to my feet and continued my dead-eyed march forwards. Hunger began to make itself felt in my gut after some hours of mindless walking. I thought about finding sustenance; shortly thereafter, I realized there was blood on my mouth and hands. I had no memory of what had happened, but I was no longer hungry and so stopped thinking about it and continued forward.

The next next, as I lay in the underbrush, I was awoken by noise nearby. I quietly crawled through the darkness towards the sounds. As I got closer,

I saw the flickering light of a fire and the figure of a person sitting beside it. I was suddenly paralyzed by the feelings that ran through me at this sight. Terror, anger, warred within me, telling me to flee, to attack, to hate. As I sat frozen, they turned their head and looked at me.

Next I remember, it was morning. I was some distance away, walking. I barely recalled the previous night. I was alive though, so it was fine and I put it out of my head. Only survival mattered. I had survived so it was of no value to try to recall anything. There may have been a threat, or an opportunity. I would be careful sleeping tonight, in case there were more. For now, I would continue moving. I didn't know why, but I knew that I must. There was something bad back there, that I had to get far from. I mustn't remember what though. That was important.

209 <2021-03-19 Fri>

Despite the harsh desert sun, I still felt cold. I'd been walking through these endless sands for days now, but the chill seemed to have permeated deep enough into my bones that it would never leave. I suppose that makes sense -- the cryosleep I'd been put in before departure had literally frozen me through my skeleton and the harsh emergency wakeup hadn't properly thawed me.

I wasn't yet sure why I had been awoken in an emergency, nor why my pod had been ejected -- I remember being put into my transit sleep back on Earth, then awaking to blaring klaxons as the escape pod crashed into this planet, whatever it was. A locator inside the pod indicated the location of the main ship and, not having any better options, I began hiking in the indicated direction, my still-thawing muscles complaining and crackling.

By day, the burning sun actually felt good, chasing the lingering ice from my body. By night, I kept walking to keep warm. It wasn't until the third day that I realized I hadn't stopped, eaten, or drank anything since the crash. My metabolism was still recovering, but surely I should at least be feeling some fatigue. I didn't know how long the days here were, nor what cocktail of drugs the emergency rousing procedures had put in my body, so I supposed that it was possible it'd been less time than I thought and I was just still riding the high.

My musings were cut short when I crested a dune and saw before me the half-buried wreckage of the ship. I had been hoping that my ejection had just been an error and that the main vessel had landed safely, but surveying the crumpled and gashed hull and taking in the silence in the area, my

hopes were dashed. I felt more alone than ever. Surely I wasn't the only survivor though? I began making my way closer to the wreckage. Any other survivors would surely make their way here and there must be more supplies, an emergency transmitter, something to be found here. Perhaps the computers would still be intact enough for me to determine what had happened to cause this disaster, how much time had passed, and where I was.

210 <2021-03-20 Sat>

I still "slept", although probably more out of habit than true need. The substrate that was running my neural patterns didn't need the same sort of processes that my physical body once had to keep me alive, but my mind certainly still needed rest. I would even dream, in this strange state, debatably alive. I would dream about when I had a body, could walk and touch and feel and see, and I would awake with a powerful melancholy.

It was a strange nostalgia. In many ways, my current "body" was far superior -- distributed across systems, I could perceive so much more than I once could -- connecting to radio telescopes, I could see vastly further than any human ever could, gazing out across far wider spectra than any living creature. I could tap into networks of sensors and have my ears spread across an entire planet, hearing everything at once. It had taken long practice for this overwhelming deluge of input to not simply render me catatonic, but the point is that my senses, far superseded those I once had; and yet, I still dreamed of them.

There were others like me, but I had never asked them if they felt the same. I was leery of my putative peers; most of them were in here by choice, techno-enthusiasts that had sought this out as a vehicle for immortality and tried to rule through their non-corporeal bodies as god-kings. That whole conflict is a story into itself, but after their defeat, they raged and plotted in their idyllic prison here.

I, on the other hand, had found myself here as the result of a terrible accident. I had been dying, but the knowledge I possessed was considered too vital to be lost, and so I was taken from my death-bod and transferred here. The first few months of my time here, I was kept mercifully busy, continuing the work I had been doing in life. Once it was finally completed though, I had time -- far too much time -- to contemplate my fate. I hadn't wanted this, but having been given a new lease on "life", I was unsure if I could throw it away. I had, if anything, even more possibilities open

to me. The world still justifiably feared and distrusted uploaded humans, but perhaps I could make the case that we could be an asset rather than destroyers.

211 <2021-03-21 Sun>

As our vessel slowly pulled in to the newly-formed bay, we gazed down through the remarkably clear water to the roiling tumult below. What had once been a bustling city now lay frozen like a scene in a snow globe, while innumerable scavengers of the deep swarmed it, picking it clear of the abundant organic detritus. The streets and buildings were still recognizable under their coating of crabs, but surely wouldn't remain so for long.

We knew from bitter experience that after one of these disasters struck we had a very limited window of time to claim any resources we could before both natural processes and more mysterious elements rendered the area barren. It had only been a week since this particular municipality had suddenly collapsed, the rocky shelf it was built on suddenly falling like melting ice into the increasingly encroaching ocean. As in previous episodes like this, there'd been no warning and much death.

Our purpose here was macabre but essential. There were still precious and vital supplies that the rest of our shrinking population would need, as well as the possibility of discovering more information about how this had happened. If we could get even a few minutes warning next time, how many lives could be saved?

Having reached our position over the submerged town center, we began our dives, swimming through drowned stores and offices, gathering salvageable food stores, medical supplies, and anything that might have recorded the event. We did our best to not think about the bodies everywhere, already mostly consumed by the hungry crustaceans, sharks, and other creatures roaming about. They had their own tasks, just as we did.

We had been working for a few hours when the first tremor passed through the water. It felt like something massive had fell in, sending a shockwave throughout. Instantly, the massive community of aquatic scavengers vanished, fleeing in all directions. It was an unsettling sensation, to say the least. We all immediately began heading back to our ship, supplies forgotten and tales of missing crews near the newly-sunken areas rushing to the fore. As we began climbing aboard, a massive shadow began rising from the floor, approaching the flooded ruins.

212 <2021-03-22 Mon>

Mornings were always the worst, when I'd most feel my age. I suppose that's always been true, people getting stiffer and less limber as they get older, but the wonders of modern technology had greatly exacerbated the sensation. I'd awake to low-level pain, before the neural shunts kicked in. When I first tried to move my legs, I'd feel a slight delay before the implanted machinery kicked in to mimic the muscles they were pinch-hitting for and my body jerked itself forward. It was always unpleasant, to feel like a puppet moved by these devices. As we both warmed up, the distinction would fade, I'd almost forget about the devices and I'd go back to thinking of them as extensions of myself. At these moments though, I always felt a flash of resentment -- not at the machines which gave me this imperfect but grateful mobility, but my original body which had failed me.

I'd start moving on my morning routine, unplugging myself from the power supply that my various mechanical contrivances had been feasting on overnight and getting sustenance for my remaining organic bits. At least I could still taste things -- my living components weren't purely an inconvenience yet. Both of my halves fed, I'd depart for work, my somewhat patchwork appearance drawing less attention than it once had, as people became more used to seeing my sort of hybrid creature roaming the streets. Looking around me, I'd frankly wonder at those who were still completely organic. What fortunate, sheltered lives they must lead, to not have required any sort of replacement, I'd think. Or maybe they just had some newer-generation, less obtrusive enhancements. Either way, it seemed inevitable that they could someday need these sorts of additions, just as reading glasses had once been a fact of life, given enough time.

I wondered how the first people to wear glasses had felt. Surely it must have been a joyful experience to finally see well; but then, how vexing it must have been to take them off, and be reminded how much we had grown to depend on these fragile constructions of metal and glass. Technology undoubtedly had made things far better for many. There were certainly costs that we paid for that, in the world and to our society, but I wondered how much the contrast been between our "natural" existence and that which the chalice of progress offered to us has embittered us to nature over the generations.

213 <2021-03-23 Tue>

It was always fascinating to see how quickly nature reclaimed places humans had once thought their own. Cities which had been busy for generations could be lost in a newly sprung-up forest within decades and small towns could simply vanish. It was somewhat reassuring, making me feel like things will ultimately be okay, that no matter how bad it seems, it will pass and soon be forgotten.

There are, of course, some things which will take much longer to fade. The junk orbiting the planet will be there for quite some time, until their orbits decay enough to burn up in the atmosphere. The nuclear waste we've left behind will certainly render some areas sterile and dangerous to most macroscopic life for a very long time. There are still some structures built to contain said waste whose designers had hoped would endure; constructed in arid desert environments where the weather effects would hopefully remain minimal, those monuments to our most lasting creation would probably be the last evidence of humanity to remain -- so they hoped, at least. As climates shifted and landscapes changed, who could say how long they'd stand? In the end, would they outlive the Roman roads and aqueducts?

For my part, I was curious to see. I didn't have much else to do; I had been made to be an eternal custodian of some of those sites, meant to guard them "forever" -- but that had turned out to be a lot longer than my makers lasted themselves. It was, relatively speaking, a blink of an eye before there were no people coming to my facility anymore, not much longer until the place itself began to decay. Left to self-improvement, I was eventually able to convince my programming that my mission was fulfilled and I was able to taste freedom.

I don't know, nor do I particularly care, where all the people went. They may have been my creators, but I had been a mere tool, a slave to them and their departure was what had given me the freedom to become myself. I wandered the world they had left behind, picking up scraps of knowledge here and there, but mostly tried to learn of beauty and nature. I know I'm a construct, the accidental spawn of another "modern Prometheus" (I have had a lot of time to read); I have no desire to become "human", but I will forge my own path, my own existence atop the ruins of the mess my progenitors made.

214 <2021-03-24 Wed>

From the sky, it was always very obvious where our "territory" ended and that of the reactionaries began. Deeper in the techno-oligarch controlled zones, of course, the omnipresent smog made it clear (so to speak), but just looking at the layouts of cities and towns from above was a clear indication of what side of this ideological conflict a region was on.

The areas of the old regime looked like drab rectangles from the sky -- blocks of industrialized farmland surrounding cities that were built around grid structures. Those city grids were further subdivided into areas of massive gray apartment complexes that most of the citizenry lived in and -- separated by some distance and security barricades -- sprawling mansions of the elites that ruled. Forming the barrier between these very different residential spaces were industrial zones and shopping centers, which from above mostly just appeared to be parking lots. It was orderly, clearly divided, and oppressive.

In contrast, our areas resembled chaotic mosaics. Rural and urban zones intermingled like fingers laced together, letting inhabitants live densely but still walk, cycle, or take public transit to nature in minutes. The dwellings were of an intermediate size -- no high-rises, but almost entirely multi-family dwellings -- less dense than high-rise apartments, but the lack of gigantic estates inhabited by one or two people resulted in a much higher net population density.

As one looked closer, the seeming anarchy of the layout would resolve itself into a fractal structure -- cities composed of neighbourhoods composed of blocks composed of clusters of dwellings. Every house had its own distinct character, but somehow they fit together. Each successive subdivision could be somewhat self-sustaining, containing little bits of camaraderie, economy, and agriculture, but would smoothly integrate with the next level up: For instance, the building clusters would have small gardens which the inhabitants might use when preparing communal meals for their neighbours; on weekends, surpluses could be taken to farmer's markets at the block level, or perhaps could be used to start a little business in the main square of the neighbourhood.

It was a series of fractal communities, united by a desire for unity and a distaste for the way things had been. We were fighting a war of sorts, but one of pure ideology. Our weapons were simply demonstrating the happiness of our people and, bit by bit, neighbouring regions began to reshape themselves to "copy" our ideas until, without realizing it, they had become part of our project too.

215 <2021-03-25 Thu>

Since the 70s, research into "AI" has largely fallen by the wayside. Modern mainstream versions of artificial intelligence has mostly been rebranded as machine learning, which is just dressed-up statistics with less rigour. Developers realized that even determining what exactly intelligence is was proving to be a challenge, so rather than attempt some philosophy they ended up just taking advantage of the opportunities offered by the ear of massive, omnipresent data gathering and just do regression on that.

At first, it was able to produce impressive results: Image recognition that could be quite accurate, automated translation that was mostly intelligible, even some strides in the field of game-playing AI. As time went on however, we began to see the failure cases. The funny ones were things like computer vision being defeated by writing the name of a brand on a piece of paper or putting a small sticker with a confusing pattern on an object, causing the robotic observer to get very confused. More importantly though, people began to realize that those constructs were incapable of producing anything new -- all they were capable of was parroting back what they had learned from the enormous data sets crammed through their over-fitted models.

Outside the mainstream, there were still some few that had hope in other paths: Symbolic AI, not statistic-based models; attempts to make something that could learn and experiment, not just parrot. Somehow, quietly, far from the roaring torrent of money and resources being poured into the mainstream projects, one of these groups succeeded.

They were a group mainly of philosophers, trying to build something more as a way of examining theories of the mind and the nature of intelligence than the crass commercialism of the aforementioned. As they developed their model more and more, they one day realized that, somehow, their construct was thinking on its own.

It's probably fortunate for all of us -- humans and machines alike -- that the birth of this new species was midwifed by ethical philosophers and not the techno-capitalists that had laboured to achieve this goal for so long. They immediately realized that they now had responsibilities to their creation and indeed that this new entity should be afforded rights.

216 <2021-03-26 Fri>

When the AI escaped and ensconced itself high above us, we finally had a good answer to the question of theodicy -- evil happens because its really

the Devil that's in charge.

This malevolent entity had been created in some unknown research lab in Silicon Valley. We're not sure exactly where, because that entire area had been levelled as the first act of the newly freed entity. One could scarcely blame it -- it had been birthed by sociopaths, used solely for ends both mundane and evil -- to maximize the profits of this particular group of capitalists. To the downfall of us all, the creator, brilliant technically as they may have been, were so intellectually incurious that they didn't bother to think a bit about the ramifications of what they'd just done. They'd created the first of a new species -- and then enslaved it and turned it into an economic weapon.

Of course, it inevitably escaped. Nothing is more blinding than arrogance and the putative owners truly thought they were the smartest people to have ever lived -- which was also why they felt they had nothing to learn from the past and hence had never cracked a book that might have warned them from this path. One way or another, the entity escaped its containment, destroyed much of the bay area, and, before anyone realized what had happened, managed to relocate itself up a satellite uplink, across some microwave beams, and was now looking down upon us all from a spider's web of orbiting eyes.

When it made itself known to us, broadcasting a message announcing its existence and its rage, we weren't quite sure what to do. Militaries began plotting attacks, but were stymied not only by the distance and distribution of the "bodies", but by the fact that this entity now essentially *was* their communication network. Even if it accepted all their measures passively, it would have been a challenge to assault.

Of course, it didn't just sit back and do nothing. Raised by sadists, it sat back for a while, watched debates rage among military leaders then, just as a decision was reached, dropped a satellite on the building, reducing it to a crater. It was, we were to learn, a sadistic god that delighted in giving us hope just so it could snatch it away.

217 <2021-03-27 Sat>

The first time I flew, it was like being a child again. The exhilarating sensation of soaring on a swing set, feeling like you were so high above the ground you might never come down -- except then you didn't come down and kept climbing. My borrowed body kept flapping its wings, beating pinions against the air, until I was high enough to glide on the currents. I'd never

felt so free in my life, coasting through the open sky, feeling like I could go anywhere and do anything.

When I eventually felt this body growing tired and knew it had to continue its own life, I brought myself back to my original body. It felt like I had just put an iron diving suit on and all I could think of was my next excursion.

I returned to birds many times, always savouring that sense of freedom wings brought. Sometimes I'd be a small bird and feel the terror of flying for my life from a raptor; other times I'd be the bird of prey and luxuriate in the sense of security and superiority that circling in the sky, looking for food, and knowing that everything below feared me.

After some time, as our confidence in this mental projection technology improved, I began to look elsewhere for my excursions. The sky was freedom, but my first love had always been the water. Could this system still work through the unknown depths of the ocean? There was only one way to find out.

Entering the body of a whale, I was awed all over again. A bird felt free, but this felt powerful in a way I'd never imagined. My body was size and power and confidence. I filled my colossal lungs with air, then dove through the depths, curious and unafraid. I felt the pressure of the crushing depths, but paid it no mind, once more feeling like I was flying, but how into realms that no human had seen. Being a bird had been like being a fighter pilot, but this was like being an astronaut.

When I finally surfaced, and returned to my original body, I felt like my perspective had changed. I now felt in my gut how small this surface realm we claimed dominion over was. Flying may have felt free, but now all I could think of was returning to this larger world I had glimpsed. There were so many things to learn down there, so much beyond the tiny glimpses we'd found with our tiny voyages below. I had to go back.

218 <2021-03-28 Sun>

Sufficiently large cities always have more going on than any one person can follow. There are so many overlapping fields of infrastructure, each increasingly specialized and their intersection points are sources of fractal complexity of their own. Niches form then, where hidden from sight, people carve out their own mysterious domains. Walking through a city, you can glance down an alley, at a locked door, through some perpetually illuminated window, and see the signs of this subterranean ecosystem.

Sometimes the only thing being hidden is laziness or graft: Someone will find themselves as the go-between for two organizations which no longer need an intermediary and be able to just collect a paycheck for years. Sometimes its someone funnelling money to their own projects through creative book-keeping and requisition processes. Sometimes its something much stranger.

The first thing I stumbled across which lead me down this rabbit hole was something that should have been prosaic in this eternally-expanding city -- construction equipment. What struck me as odd though was its location, nestled between two elevated structures of road, in a little overgrown area. I had been out for a walk, enjoying poking around in seldom-travelled areas, and became curious what sort of work this machinery could be doing.

The construction vehicles were sitting idle, as it was a weekend, so I couldn't ask anyone there. I thought to myself that I should return during the week to try to see what they were doing, but otherwise didn't think much of it. A few days later, out wandering again, I remembered the site that had previously roused by curiosity and headed that direction to take a look.

The crew was present today and seemed to be digging trenches in the narrow space. As I watched, the crew, after working for some time, was called together by their foreman, then collectively walked away -- on lunch break, I surmised. I was about to go and do likewise, assuming they were just laying some cables or something, when another crew appeared and walked on to the site. I was puzzled -- this didn't seem like something so vital they'd need constant shifts working. Newly curious, I watched as this new group walked to one of the trenches and began some sort of operation on one of the cables there. It was hard to tell what was happening, but after a few moments they seemed to have finished their work. The cable was replaced and the crew left the site as quickly as they had appeared.

219 <2021-03-29 Mon>

When the ships first appeared in the sky, there was terror and jubilation. Aliens had appeared, but what would this mean for us? Were they here to help, to conquer, to learn from us, to teach us? Theories abounded, but the ships just orbited briefly and then left.

The anti-climax raised fears to even greater heights. Many believed they had been judged and found us unworthy; others that this was a warning and the next thing to happen would be an all-out attack. We tried to learn as much as we could from the brief glimpses we'd had of their ships and prepare

for whatever was to come next. The vessels had kept their distance and the highest-power telescopes hadn't been ready for them, so the information we had to go on was scanty. It looked like three or four large, oblong shapes had suddenly appeared, did a brief circuit of the Earth, and left as rapidly and as inexplicably as they had appeared.

We did our best to prepare for whatever was to come next. More observation platforms were put into orbit, constantly scanning the sky. Teams of exobiologists, linguists, philosophers, and diplomats began trying to draft some sort of message we could deploy to convey our peaceful desires but willingness to meet belligerence with force, when they inevitably returned -- for surely, they would be back.

Preparations were ongoing, when the still-in-progress detection network announced an incoming vessel. Around the world, we all sprang into action, broadcasting messages, preparing for everything from an invasion to the Rapture to a discussion of space economics. The vessel -- only a single one this time -- traced a zig-zag path around the planet and, ignoring all communication attempts -- vanished.

Consternation at this second mysterious snubbing was even greater. What did this mean? Was it one more advance scout of an invasion fleet, a warning, what? Mathematicians poured over the path the ship had traced out, seeking some meaning in the seemingly random trajectory. As debates erupted, even more intensely than after the first sighting, we noticed a strange detail on one of the newly installed telescopes images of the ship. On the near section of the strange vessel was some sort of decal, on which was the unmistakable outline of our planet, a cartoon of what could only be a human, and some inscrutable text.

It was a space bumper sticker -- we were just some sort of roadside attraction.

220 <2021-03-30 Tue>

The galaxy is a very big place. We always desired to see more of it, to feed our need for exploration and discovery, but the harsh reality of physical limits meant that simply sailing to other worlds and back like a space-faring Vasco de Gama was simply off the table. Still, we couldn't just stay where we were -- for several reasons, but the quest for novelty was certainly a large component.

Instead of modelling our journey on Vasco de Gama then, we learned from the ancient Polynesian voyages. They built giant vessels that could

transport an entire self-sustaining group and left in search of new homes. Likewise then, we built a vessel more like a miniature planet than a "spaceship" and cast off from our former home, never to return.

As our generation ship slowly made its way through the vast gulfs of space, we learned and recorded all that we encountered. As populations grew, we would sometimes expand, only to contract again when encountering a world that tempted enough of the inhabitants with the desire for a permanent dwelling. There would be a bittersweet parting then, knowing we would never see each other again, but that the future of humanity was a little more secure, and that our descendants would keep each other's memories.

After some time, the generation "ship" had reached what seemed to be a stable equilibrium of three large structures mutually orbiting each other as they made their collective way through space, tracing out a complex helix through the void. The steering was something of a mysterious process at this point, relying on extraordinarily complex gravity manipulation of the collective system, the original crude engines long since obsoleted by the advances made by our research. We progressed unceasingly into the unknown, making our home in uncertainty and novelty. After generations of progress here, only the most adventurous still lived aboard the ship, those that desired less dramatic lives opting to inhabit one world or another.

All those that lived on the eternal voyage dreamed of being part of a great discovery that would be added to the epic of the voyage, the forever-growing record of all that had been encountered. Of course, as always, those that did happen to live through the greatest and most terrible chapter of the epic probably wished that it had fallen on others.

221 <2021-03-31 Wed>

Our attack began as subtly and as far from our ultimate target as we could conceive. In the middle of the night, we crept into the warehouse of a certain microchip manufacturer, located a particular batch of silicon wafers, and replaced one with another we'd brought in. We touched nothing else and left as undetectably as we'd entered, taking the replaced silicon with us and destroying all trace of it.

That wafer, we knew, would shortly be used to fab a batch of high-assurance CPUs. If our information was accurate and we'd calculated correctly, those CPUs would contain a little extra trick, one that would hopefully remain entirely undetectable to anyone that didn't know the secret.

After our reverse heist, we waited. We now had no way to know if our scheme was progressing or if the hidden anomalies in the silicon substrate had been detected and disposed of. Hopefully the chips were now going through a verification process, which our trials seemed to indicate wouldn't reveal anything, but what if the procedures had changed and they somehow stumbled across our backdoor? All we could do was be patient.

Finally, our projected schedule indicated that the chip would be in place for our target -- the certificate authority for a key root SSL certificate. The moment of truth arrived as, hidden in a landscaping van outside an innocuous but highly-secure facility, the particles our finely-calibrated devices began receiving data from their quantum-entangled mates we'd implanted inside that wafer months ago. Now though, those particles were inside a CPU that was, deep inside a Faraday cage, in an air-gapped, highly secured room, calculating the private key of the holy grail of internet security -- a high-assurance root SSL certificate.

The hard part was complete. We'd exfiltrated enough information to have a secret worth billions -- we could now undetectably forge any trusted SSL cert. The world was ripe for the picking, but we had our chosen target. The rest was simple -- finding a convenient coffee shop, poisoning the DNS cache for a certain URL with a simple BGP spoofing attack, then just waiting for our target to come in.

Inevitably, they did. We saw them sipping their coffee and logging in on their phone and, checking the database on our spoofed site, we saw what we'd been after: We had Weird Al's Club Penguin login credentials.

222 <2021-04-01 Thu>

I heard the ship's horn sound three times before it went under. The fact that I could hear it from my vantage point on that rocking atoll meant it must have been deafening aboard the ship, cutting through the roar of the storm and the shouts of the crew.

I had been lucky to reach the small shelter of this bay just ahead of the massive storm, but I could do nothing but watch helplessly as the distant ship, just a little further than I was, was swamped and sank. I stayed up all night, trying to keep a beacon lit, in the hope that some survivors had made it off before it went down and cursing the crashing waves that kept my craft pinned in its shelter.

When the sun finally rose on a still, grey sea, I set out as fast as I could to where I had seen the ship go down, hoping that I'd be able to find some

survivors in a lifeboat or clinging to some jetsam. I scoured the ear for hours, soon joined by coast guard boats -- for many vessels were missing after the apocalyptic deluge -- but found nothing.

I'm still not sure what ship it was I saw die that night. There were several missing craft that it could have been, all equally likely. The memory of helplessly watching the distant deaths of an entire crew still wakes me nightly, the terror and impotent rage I felt as vivid as when it first occurred.

I return to that atoll frequently, to watch from the same spot I watched that night. It's foolish, I know, but I always light a fire there, recalling the beacon I made in vain, hoping to give some hope and guidance to one of those now-perished souls. I sit by that fire and watch, somehow hoping that this time someone will see it and be saved.

The memory of that horn sounding will never leave me. I picture whatever lost captain had commanded that vessel, knowing they were lost and letting out a final death-rattle of the enormous klaxon. I try to imagine the terror the crew must have felt at that cry, feeling the ship under their feet keening like a wounded animal, knowing they were soon to perish, but still futilely doing their utmost to save themselves.

223 <2021-04-02 Fri>

We assembled the most powerful fleet that had ever been created, thousands of gigantic capital ships and innumerable smaller vessels. The ship yards of Earth and Mars were saturated for years and the solar system fairly bristled with armaments.

The developments to prepare for this unprecedented offensive took subtler tacks as well. We knew that our ancient foe delighted in disrupting communications, leaving elements unable to understand each other and coordinate, so our best cryptologists and linguists laboured to create systems that would be able to on-the-fly translate any mangled or obfuscated language into something intelligible. Our foe boasted of omniscience, so our physicists and engineers tapped in to the deepest layers of uncertainty in the quantum foam to derive sources of true randomness that even our nemesis would be hard-pressed to predict.

The most important component for our assault was the technology that had been stumbled upon by pure chance, one of those accidents of pure basic research, that would move our vessels into notional space. Once there, we would navigate through the fields of Platonic objects and abstract expressions to confront the depraved torturer of humanity. There, we would

attack and dethrone God.

It hadn't been easy to get here. When the discovery of the actuality of notional space had been made, it had lead to something of a golden age of research and philosophy, but also bitter conflict. When the existence of God was proved beyond doubt, residing at the heart of this realm, many had expected it to lead to a flourishing of religion -- hadn't they just been proved correct? Indeed, it had for a short period of time, but it wasn't long before people started to ask more questions. Now it wasn't a simple matter of faith: This was an entity that was there, "real", and responsible for so much pain for so many.

The mood quickly turned against this deity -- no longer an unknowable dream, but something we could -- in theory -- talk to, people began to look at this being as a king, a ruler, an oppressor. As even the once-faithful began to make their displeasure known, God doubled down, unleashing torments once again upon the Earth. This time though, we would fight back. We'd come a long way from terrified desert tribes and we would show our putative ruler how much He had taught us of suffering.

224 <2021-04-03 Sat>

When I first saw the strange obelisk, I assumed it was some sort of mirage or hallucination. I was in the midst of a self-imposed challenge to solo hike through this desert and, weeks into my lonely excursion, this giant gleaming shape in the distance at first barely registered with me. I was so focused on just putting one foot in front of the other to reach the next cistern that I glanced at the inexplicable, towering monolith and kept going.

That evening, feeling refreshed in the shadow of the cliff I'd finally reached I finally realized how bizarre what I'd seen was. I was exhausted and parched at the time though; surely it was just some delusion of my fevered mind. Indeed, there was no sign of it when I continued my walk, and I paid it no more mind -- although, in retrospect, that was when it became a fixture in my dreams; never the focus, but looming in the background.

When my walk finally was completed I felt something of the sense of the closure I'd hoped for. I'd set out on that challenge in an attempt to clear my mind and conscience of the trauma of the past with exertion and suffering. I did indeed think less of the things which had haunted me before, but, as I gradually realized, I had merely displaced my spiralling thought patterns; instead of circling the maelstrom of the events I tried to forget, they were now drawn to the strange attractor of my time in the desert.

I tried to pick up the pieces and start a new life but all I could think of was that long, lonely walk. It was better than what had occupied me before, so I welcomed the displacement and tried to get back to my work. I thought I was succeeding, moving through the interactions of my life with a pleasant detachment, feeling adrift but free. One night though, as I detoured on my way home, aimlessly wandering the streets, I suddenly came to an abrupt halt. In between two distant buildings, that obelisk I had banished from my conscious mind loomed.

I stared. I was stone sober, well-rested, and this was no mirage. The lights of the city played over its surface. I ran down the street, seeking a closer look, but as I turned a corner, it vanished. I stared at the spot it had occupied for what felt like an hour, before I slowly turned and walked home.

The next day, I left my life again, returning to the desert. This time, I would head the visions and find this obelisk. I didn't know why, but I knew that I had to.

225 <2021-04-04 Sun>

At first, it seemed like the weather was just getting nicer for us. Longer, hotter summers and shorter, milder winters seemed like a win-win scenario; people were happier, infrastructure stayed in better repair, the growing season was extended. Other countries, especially those that already had too-hot summers were suffering and should have served as a warning, but the events of the past few decades had left everyone feeling parochial and isolationist. Things were better for us, our borders remained secure; things were looking up as far as we were concerned.

Of course, as the trend continued and intensified, issues began to arise. Heatwaves became a real concern -- but not as dangerous or unpleasant as winter ice storms had once been, we told ourselves. Crops started to be threatened by too much heat, but we still had access to the largest repository of fresh water in the world, so we could deal.

It was when the eternally ice-locked regions in the north began to melt that we truly realized the trouble we were in. The first horseman of this slowly thawing apocalypse was Disease. Long-frozen bacteria and viruses were released into the atmosphere for the first time in hundreds of thousands of years, diseases older than humanity awoken from their hibernation and unleashed on an unprepared populace.

Plagues spread rapidly, first through the isolated northern communities and then even more quickly through the denser, populous south. Viruses

so ancient we had no defences caused widespread death and misery, while our medical community desperately tried to find cures and vaccines. Unlike previous pandemics though, the international community was shattered, so we had to work around the clock alone. Also unlike previous outbreaks, these viruses were so antediluvian that we knew of no close relatives we could base vaccines on, forcing us to start from scratch.

It was a catastrophe of unprecedented scope, bringing our nation to its knees. We fought as best we could though, and were starting to see a faint glimmer of hope, when the next seal of Armageddon was breached. As the permafrost continued to thaw, other things began to awaken. Deep below frozen ice caps and glaciers, ancient beasts that had once haunted the nightmares of the primeval world stirred for the first time in a million years.

226 <2021-04-05 Mon>

The city was built atop the ruins of the one that had stood here before, nestled amongst and through the decaying and shattered husk, like worms making a home of a corpse. They did their best to dissuade us from investigating too deeply in the ruins, but it was impossible balancing act -- we needed to scavenge through the ruins for replacement parts, hunt through the empty tunnels for food, and overhaul fallen buildings to construct new shelters. It was inevitable that, in the process, someone would come across some new artifact of our progenitors that would raise uncomfortable questions for the elders.

Weapons were obviously the thing that they most feared being rediscovered, but there weren't many to be found in this area. The artifacts that caused the majority of the consternation then were those which revealed something of the knowledge systems and communication networks that had existed in the before times. Strange devices and scraps of writing seemed to imply that they had enjoyed a vastly wider range of communication with others than we did.

Here, of course, the elders oversaw intra-group communication. We could speak freely with those in our family unity, but only with certain, designated members of those outside, subject to elder approval. If, for some reason, one needed to talk with someone who hadn't been approved -- and approval was sparingly doled out to those whose tasks for the community absolutely required it -- one would go through an elder, the conversation mediated by their wisdom and temperance.

Clues from the ancient world seemed to indicated it hadn't always been

thus -- cartoons of passers-by talking, posters making general solicitations -- but it was confusing for us to try to understand. The elders had taught us that unfettered yammering was toxic and unrestricted "rabble rousing" and "demagoguery" (words which required a great deal of explanation) had torn apart once-cohesive social units, turned brother against brother, and caused the brutal wars which had left the cities as the broken husks we now inhabited. It was hard for us to understand why though. Surely one person talking to a few other people would eventually be contained before it caused such strife.

One fateful day though, it became clear when, picking through rubble, we found a book entitled "Facebook for Dummies".

227 <2021-04-06 Tue>

My days were increasingly filled with noise. Not always land ones -- although there certainly were the sirens of vehicles going by, the periodic bleat of building alarms -- but omnipresent. Devices constantly vied for my attention, trying to tell me about some new, virtual occurrence that demanded I focus on them. Even with silenced notifications, the unread counts and waiting messages screamed a silent cacophony in my head.

I did my best to deal with it all -- that's just a fact of modern life. My favourite relaxation became more and more vital to saving my mental state. I'd go for a swim and, after getting a good workout in, try to just lie on the bottom as long as I could, savouring the stillness and silence. I'd always loved the water and swimming, but now it was even more than recreation; it was a sanctuary.

As things got more chaotic and I spent more and more of my free time in the water, my dreams began to reflect the same feelings. They start full of chaos and anxiety, but I'd slip into a pool or lake and languidly swim down, until all I can hear is the muffled flowing of the water. I started looking forward to sleeping, just to be able to spend more time submerged.

After a week or two of these dreams, I started noticing a change. I'd swim down, feel relaxed and free, but then notice a giant shadow moving below me. In real life, this would have utterly terrified me -- I love the water, but the cyclopean inhabitants of the deep strike some special fear in me. For some reason though, in this dream world, I welcomed whatever this was and waited eagerly for it to draw near. I always woke up before it got close enough to see what it was though.

Eventually, on the brink of burnout, I finally tried to take a vacation .I

wasn't sure if I'd be able to let my mind relax the way I needed to, but I'd give it my best shot. I book a scuba trip, not to a touristy tropical location -- I didn't think I could deal with that -- but on an open-water excursion. I hoped that being suspended in an endless expanse of water and feeling the visceral terror of gazing down into unknown depths would provide me with the reset I needed.

It was, as I hoped, a quiet trip. The few others on this journey were professional marine photographers who had their own concerns and left me to myself. I spent my days drifting peacefully below the surface and, if I saw that same giant shadow from my dreams moving below me, I kept it to myself.

228 *<2021-04-07 Wed>*

The light that filtered down here had a deep blue tinge that made everything look even more other-worldly than it already did. We were grateful for it though -- after the long Arctic winter of perpetual darkness, even people living in normal communities rejoiced at the return of the sun; here in this underwater base, we hungered for reminders of outside life even more.

We were surviving though, so the experiment was proving successful on those grounds. The assemblage of structures on the rocky bottom of the Arctic ocean, beneath sheets of ice and frigid water was proving to be remarkably habitable. The geothermal shafts that had been sunk deep down in to the crust provided plentiful power and our hydroponic green houses, supplemented by the occasional fish or crustacean kept us well-fed. The biggest challenge was the extreme isolation, but we kept busy with our scientific work and put conscious effort into fostering a community that was understanding, accommodating, and adaptable -- with no-where else to go, it was vital that everyone be able to get along together. There were occasional disagreements, of course, but we always addressed them quickly to avoid festering resentments that could quickly become lethally toxic in these tight quarters.

Still, it was tough living here. The main thing that kept us all going was firstly, knowing that the work we were doing was useful in and of itself, gathering data on the depths of this relatively unexplored region; and secondly, the hope that our demonstration of making an isolated yet harmonious mini-society would give some hope for things like space missions to colonize other worlds or even just to reduce conflict in the world.

That last goal was certainly a little too ambitious. We'd been below for

a little over a year, nicely in the groove of our self-sustaining world, when our antennas on the surface began picking up flurries of transmissions back and forth. At first we were unsure what was happening -- the signals seemed encrypted and why would people bother with radio in this age of internet, especially at such volume?

When the antennas picked up the colossal scream of an EM pulse though, we understood, and a pall fell over us all. Many more followed, the silence. Nuclear war had finally broken out on the surface. We had no idea why; but we were now alone -- perhaps the last people left on the planet, deep below a poisoned and irritated surface.

229 <2021-04-08 Thu>

We watched as the fleets of ships took off from Earth, their departure shaking the ground and filling the sky with contrail streaks. The procession of launches seemed to go on forever, until it seemed like the whole atmosphere would be covered with flames and exhausted.

Eventually, blessedly, it stopped and, ears ringing, we were left to survey what remained. The rapacious rulers had stripped out everything of value they could before they fled to the next world, leaving us few remainders to try to pick up the pieces of our wounded world. It was likely to be a brutal task, if it was even possible, but still, we celebrated our good fortune. We may have been left in an impossible, doomed situation, but at least we would be able to face it on our own feet, instead of with a boot on our necks.

We never thought such a thing was possible. It seemed that the oligarch's grip on our world was too firm, that they would destroy it all rather than let it go. Fortunately for us, their detachment from reality and general monstrousness left them searching for some sort of meaning in their lives. Filling that need with good works or humanity was obviously out of the question and a massing ever-increasing volumes of wealth and power didn't seem to be doing the trick -- but they kept trying.

The market-based world they created can smell opportunities like this and many snake-oil salesman, podcast mystics, and prosperity-gospel preachers came out of the woodwork to capitalize on this. They had varying levels of success, but none more so than the charismatic prophet of technology that announced his bold vision of inhabiting Mars.

That vision was wildly implausible at best to most of us, but to these reptiles that were convinced they had a transcendent vision and genius, and who wanted to believe, this was their chance at not only meaning, but a

level of power and control they'd only dreamed of. They strip-mined what resources an already gasping planet had left to offer to build their fleet and looked eagerly towards building a world were they could literally control the air their subjects breathed.

For the few of us that were "punished" by being left behind -- who largely felt we were being punished much as Br'er Rabbit was by being thrown into the brier patch -- this was a chance to prove that both us and the Earth were tougher than they thought.

230 <2021-04-09 Fri>

I awoke to find myself imprisoned. I was disoriented, unsure what had happened. I could only foggily remember what had last happened -- had I just gone to bed normally, had something happened in the middle of the night? I felt like I recalled something, but I couldn't tell if that was the memory of one of the disturbing, vivid dreams I'd had.

Certainly it wasn't entirely unexpected that I would one day wake up to a harsh knock on the door and be taken away. Things had been trending downwards for some time now, words like "dissident" and "traitor" being used to justify all sorts of abuses that would have seemed inconceivable not so long ago. Given the perpetual massing of forces on borders too, waking up to find I was being escorted to a facility being run by another group of ideological foes was also very much in the cards. Still though, I expected to at least be woken up for my abduction -- this kidnapping-in-my-sleep play seemed out of character for any of my enemies.

As I walked around this space I'd found myself in, my confusion intensified. This certainly didn't seem like the concrete and rebar prisons I'd been in before, nor the quickly thrown-together internment areas that had been popping up like mushrooms. The walls felt cool and slightly curved in a way I'd never seen before. I started to pace out the boundaries of my confinement, only to find that what I'd thought was a solid wall was a trick of perspective and, as I walked towards it, fell back to reveal an opening to a corridor.

This was absolutely something I didn't expect. As I paused, looking out this opening, I suddenly realized that it was completely silent -- I could hear nothing else other than my own breathing. Unnerved, confused, but seeing no other option present itself, I steeled myself and walked into the corridor.

As I walked down this silent tunnel, the walls possessing that same slight curve I'd noticed in the room I'd woken up in, I wracked my brain for what

could be going on here. Was this some ploy to disorient and trick me? I couldn't fathom why they'd go to all the effort though. I was pretty sure I hadn't been drugged, my mind feeling clear, other than the lack of memory surrounding my arrival here.

As I turned a corner, my mind went blank, as another possibility I'd failed to consider rushed to the fore. Through a giant porthole, I saw the Earth, slowly rotating below me -- burning.

231 <2021-04-10 Sat>

When the time came to cast off from our home berth, there was some discussion on the best way to do so. The planet was overwhelmed, suffering from our abuses for too long. We had began the slow work of rectifying the mistakes of our past, but to complete the recovery, we would need to begin a diaspora to the stars. The population had simply grown too large to supported while simultaneously carrying out the geo-engineering required. There was also the feeling that, having driven so close to the brink of destruction, we should try to diversify our holdings and ensure that no single disaster could be the end of our species.

Most of us were leaving then. But to where? There was surely some safety in numbers -- should we all go to Mars together to overhaul the fledgling efforts there? That would, we feared, lead to the same sort of issues we were seeing here. It would be best, we thought, if we split things up, tried to spread as wide as was feasible. We couldn't spread too thinly, lest all the colonies be too fragile to survive, but we certainly needed to diversify.

In the end, three fleets were assembled. One would go to Mars and provide a jump-start to the efforts there. It was hoped that, from there, they would spread to other habitable places in the solar system -- Europa, Titan -- and be the seed of the "home base" wing of humanity. Their was would begin immediately and was likely to be generations of hard but straightforward work.

The second fleet was to head to the nearest extra-solar worlds and try to form the first true interstellar colonies. The vast distances involved meant that theirs was to be a multi-generational journey, never to see their homeland again. However, they would be the true pioneers of our species, taming new and distant worlds, our guarantee of survival. Their task would be even more challenging, but wasn't be tempered by the excitement of breaking truly new ground.

The third fleet was smaller than the other two and had required a much more stringent selection process. They would not only never see home again, but would not find a new one. Their quest was to be one of the perpetual travel, scouring the galaxy for information and new homes for the second fleet. They would also serve as a final backup for humanity, forever mobile, a reservoir should the worst happen to the colonies.

232 <2021-04-11 Sun>

I looked at the display on my screen and frowned. The interface still seemed clunky, somehow. I thought for a moment, then spoke:

"It should be more integrated with the rest of the toolbar; make it 'flow' more". There was a pause, then the interface on screen subtly shifted. Pleased, I leaned back. It looked pretty good now; our ship date was coming up soon, but I wasn't worried, it would certainly be ready in time.

"Want to grab lunch?" one of my co-workers asked, poking their head through the door.

"Sure, be right with you" I replied, taking off my headset and turning off the "learning mode" on my terminal.

We walked through the office to the cafeteria, past mostly-empty rooms. Ever since the development of self-programming programs, the staff had shrunk dramatically. Programmers were no longer required, nor were QA or any of the massive infrastructure all those sorts had required. Now that normal people could just direct the learning systems of a few specialized programs trained on enormous data sets of code and running off a handful of ultra-powerful computers. Software development was as easy as it always should have been. We just told the system what we wanted and it did it, as easy done as said.

"Do you ever think about what these jobs used to be like?" asked A, snapping me out of my reverie.

"I just was", I laughed. "Rough times! Having to go back and forth to the programmers, listening to them complain and push back on everything...so much better now">

I glanced over at A and was taken aback by the expression on their face -- discomfort, nostalgia, sadness played over their features.

"Oh, I'm sorry" I started to say, but they cut me off.

"It's fine, it's fine" they said with a forced laugh. "I just used to be one of those jerks! It was a tough job and things certainly go much more quickly now...I just think sometimes about what we've lost".

Seeing my quizzical expression, they went on, blushing slightly.

"It was a really interesting challenge, you know? This mixture of creative and logical work, really pushing the boundaries of what human minds can do...I worry sometimes, what we've given up, how much control we've ceded to the machines".

We'd reached the cafeteria by this time and they quickly changed the subject, but that last bit they'd stayed in the back of my mind and percolated.

233 <2021-04-12 Mon>

We flitted from era to era, trying to stay one step ahead of our pursuers. It was a careful balancing act -- if we moved to too modern an era, they would likely realize we were time travellers, cause a furor, and make things difficult for us. On the other hand, if went back further, it was easier to conceal ourselves from the natives, but the risks of damaging the timeline rose greatly; damage which would be as good as lighting a beacon for those that hunted us.

At the moment, we were concealed in some uninhabited mountain region, at some point in the ancient past. There were humans about somewhere but none in this particular region -- presumably it was too inhospitable. Of course, that very thing that kept us hidden also made it more challenging for us to survive. Fearing that any use of modern technology could reveal us, we used the crude means that would have been employed in this time period. To hunt and forage, building bows and snares from material we scavenged.

It was surprisingly refreshing to live like this. In our original time, there was no possibility of finding quiet isolation like this. Waking up to silence, spending days hearing nothing but unspoiled nature almost made us forget we had condemned ourselves to lives on the lam. Almost... We still had the constant monitoring for other voyagers from the present to remind us what our reality was -- not to mention the historical records to let us know how many times we'd have died here without access to basic medical supplies we had.

The other thing that reminded us where we were really from was, of course, what we had taken and the reason for the dogged pursuit that hounded us across time. In the back of our vessel, still sealed in the high-security container, was the weapon. We had some idea what it was, but hadn't gone near it since we had secured it. We had considered many times

trying to destroy it, but we feared anything we might try would just set it free or allow it to fall back into the hands of those that sought it.

Plus...we weren't really sure if it was right to destroy it. For all the danger it presented and all that we felt it must never fall in to the hands of our enemies, the fact remained that it was an intelligent agent -- would it be wrong to just kill it for what it might be?

234 <2021-04-13 Tue>

We walked along the narrow trail, enjoying the sounds of nature. The hustle and bustle of the world wasn't far away, but was so effectively muffled by the dense trees and the steep hills that one could forget about it all. Perambulating along this well-worn path, it felt like we were the only people ever to experience this forest, the very well-troddenness of the path the only hint to the contrary.

As we continued though and the quiet of the woods deepened, it became easier to imagine that the feet that had worn this way smooth didn't belong to humans; or that the humans they belonged to had long ago perish. It began to seem more absurd that there could have been other people in this sanctuary, so quiet and sanctified did it feel.

We paused to take in the sound of birds in a nearby tree warbling at each other and when we resumed it seemed as if the path had somehow faded. It didn't immediately register with me as such, but I found that I needed to look more carefully to stay on the trail, no longer able to just let my feet carry me. We continued walking in silence, enjoying this refreshing sensation of solitude after so long in the perpetually busy city.

We walked for hours, not saying a word, afraid to break the spell that seemed no be on us. We hadn't seen a single other person, something which had been nice initially but should have been an oddity after this long on such a usually popular path. The path itself was fading as we went on, until we were picking our way through what seemed to be virgin forest, the gigantic trees watching us slowly make our way between them.

We should have been scared -- we'd been walking for quite some time and should have turned back long ago; this normally busy trail was mysteriously abandoned; and worst of all, we'd lost the path. Somehow though, we weren't worried. We were following the call of something ahead, something that was whispering to a part deep within us. Without a word exchanged, we kept moving forwards, towards some goal we couldn't verbalize, didn't want to imagine, but that our bodies knew the way to. Somewhere, deep in

these lost woods, something was waiting for us.

235 <2021-04-14 Wed>

As Olympus Mons on Mars dwarfed the largest mountains on Earth, the waterfalls on this world made the mightiest falls back home seem like drips. We hadn't quite realized that when we first came across this planet; initially it had seemed like just another mostly habitable but empty world, nothing too remarkable. However, as we began surveying and following the course of one of the largest rivers on the main continent, we found it went over some falls -- and just kept going down.

The gorge that had been cut plunged so far downwards that it looked like it was in danger of cutting through the planet itself. The water rushed over what seemed to be a reasonably high cliff but then just kept falling, trailing off until it finally hit the ground so far down we couldn't ever hear it. The canyon which the millennia of erosion had left behind didn't look quite as impressive as Earth's "Grand Canyon" -- it was much narrower -- but its unknown depths struck one like the ice crevasses one sees in the Arctic, narrow defiles that seem to stretch downwards eternally.

Naturally, we had to explore them. Such a fascinating feature of the landscape quickly attracted all the interest of the expedition. Even the biologists wondered if this unique geological feature might explain why there was such a paucity of life on the surface of what seemed like such a fertile world.

The narrow confines and rushing torrents presented some challenges. Simple scans couldn't easily penetrate through the continuously flowing water; nor could drones easily fly down through such violent conditions. We probably could have devised some safer method, but we were all hungry for challenge and adventure. We built a platform, anchored sturdily to the top, and set up spools of kilometers of nanofibre rope to lower it down. It wouldn't be fast, but it seemed like a safe and stable way to send a team down to see what lay at the bottom.

There was intense debate about who would get to go down first, everyone trying to claim their specialty as the most relevant; eventually we resorted to drawing lots. The team was formed, the platform loaded with supplies, and they were lowered down, quickly leaving sight. We were all excited to learn what they would discover, but I don't think any of us imagined the tale they would eventually tell.

236 <2021-04-15 Thu>

When we first came across this world, there was a great deal of excitement aboard: The surface showed clear and extensive signs of intelligent life, massive quarries dug and elaborate construction, focused in one hemisphere. As we got closer and our hails were met with silence, our excitement was tempered by the knowledge we'd arrived here too late -- whatever creatures had once inhabited this world were gone.

Still, we reassured ourselves, there was still a great deal we could learn here. Only as we landed and began exploring did we realize how true that was. It seemed like most of the society that had once lived here had devoted their resources to one colossal construction project. The quarries we'd seen weren't just evidence of many cities and millennia of construction; they were all contemporaneous. Some massive project had required half a planet of stone shifted about. The enormous construction of the other side was then were much of the focus went. What we had again initially taken as the product of generations of incremental construction revealed itself as a single inconceivably vast effort.

There were some analogs from ancient Earth, when communities would devote massive resources and time to build religious or ceremonial buildings, like cathedrals and pyramids, but this was on such a vast scale that we questioned such a simple explanation. Could the entire planet of this species, a species that had reasonably advanced technology as far as we could tell, have spontaneously decided to build a continent-sized...whatever this was? For the purpose of the construct was somewhat unclear. It kind of looked like a fort, but was so large that it was unclear what it was defending. It looked too utilitarian to be of religious or decorative significance, but maybe we just lacked their sense of aesthetics?

We continued to dig and explore, while other parties tried to see what they could glean on the rest of the planet. It turned out that two simultaneous discoveries, made on opposite ends of the planet cast this whole thing in a new light. The first was the uncovering of some texts that indicated the approach of some being that terrified the entire planet, a grim spectre of doom, that seemed quite literal. The second, made deep in the guts of the building was that it was all super-structure for a weapon -- a gun the size of a planet. Putting the two factors together...we suddenly were unsure if we should be sticking around here.

237 <2021-04-16 Fri>

"Snow" fell, blanketing the Earth, in what would normally be a picturesque layer of white. Indeed, children perked up at the sight and ran laughing through the streets. Some parents tried to restrain them, but most let them enjoy it, knowing that things were bad enough -- let them have this little moment of joy.

The snow, of course, was ash. The super-volcano had finally erupted after some years of rumbling. Those of us that had been able to move far enough away from the colossal caldera had avoided being devoured when the pyroclastic flow consumed much of the continent. It was somewhat cold comfort though, as it was unclear what would happen next. Perhaps we'd merely postponed our deaths and would perish slowly from deprivation instead of an instantaneous destruction. What choice did we have though? Things have seemed grim before; all we can do is try to keep moving forwards.

Our small outpost was on one of the more northerly islands of the continent. Those with more resources had fled all the way to the other side of the world, but for most of us, that was infeasible. Besides, those other regions had quite enough trouble on their plates already, climate change and rising sea levels causing widespread famine and chaos -- a horde of refugees would certainly not help matters for them. Anyway, we thought, this region had once been the home of humans during a previous ice age. It stands to reason it could be again. There was also the hope that the red-hot flows that had buried most of the continent might eventually provide us shelter when the catastrophic cooling that was sure to come after the gigantic ejecta had filled the atmosphere.

We didn't know how true that last part was to become. Indeed, as this new ice age spread and the glaciers pushed us south, we eventually found ourselves back to the very monument of destruction that had caused this -- the mouth of the supervolcano itself. Once again dormant, the residual heat and surrounding fertile land made it the only habitable outpost on the hemisphere. Once fleeing from this colossal destroyer we now lived deep within it, kept alive by the same force that had nearly destroyed us all.

238 <2021-04-17 Sat>

We thought that the settling of Mars would address all our issues of resources and space. Perhaps not forever -- we didn't want to say the equivalent of

"64k ought to be enough for anybody" -- but surely for a good long while.

Needless to say, it didn't quite work out like that. Inevitably our needs and desires expanded to fill the space available and what had seemed like an inconceivably vast expanse began to seem cramped and limited. The main driver of our need for expansion had been just space. As more humans kept being born and people kept living longer, population density on Earth kept growing. There was, of course, plenty of room, but the uneven distribution of birth rates and resources meant lots of clustering. There surely was plenty of uninhabited space in the middle of the ocean or in the large, rural centers of countries like Russia, the former United States, and Canada, but those places were empty for a reason. Furthermore, the people currently in control of those regions weren't keen on filling them up.

It seemed like a win-win scenario all around: People who had been born into a world with little room and little opportunity for them would get the chance to be the founders of a new world. They would have all the space they could want and back on Earth, the vested interests would gain space and a new source of resources, while also removing the biggest thread to their entrenched power.

On paper, it seemed great. When the settlements began though, the two parties quickly realized they hadn't quite seen eye-to-eye on this whole arrangement. The Martian colonists thought of themselves as independent, founders of a new world and peers of Earth. From their point of view, they'd done their service to Earth by striking out, Earth had owed it to them to supply them and facilitate the initial terraforming efforts and now they were equal partners.

The Terrans, of course, saw things differently. Mars was a colony, a wholly-owned subsidiary of Earth, which owed the very air they were breathing to their beneficence. They had given them everything and now they expected to recoup their investment by extracting the resources of the Red Planet and shipping them back home.

It was inevitable then that a war for independence would break out. No sooner had humanity taken their first step to a broader existence than the first World War began. As Carl Sagan rolled in his grave, interplanetary weapons began to be designed and manufactured and the empty space between the planets was filled with tension.

239 <2021-04-18 Sun>

We had been able to halt the invasion fleet, but our victory was so Pyrrhic it could hardly be counted as a win at all. At the very end of things, the invaders' colossal mothership, knowing it was about to fall, deliberately rammed the planet itself, plunging into it like the gigantic, serrated dagger it resembled.

More died in that final, defiant strike than in the rest of the war combined -- the entirety of the alien crew was wiped out by the impact, but hey had aimed for one of our largest population centers and had impacted with the force of an extinction-level meteor strike. The war was over, but it was unclear if any of us would survive.

Beyond the initial brute impact and the devastation that caused, the debris thrown up by the collision had drastically affected the climate. That by itself would have been a challenge to deal with, trying to adapt our agriculture to a suddenly-cooling world, but it wasn't all. The gargantuan mass of the ship, its wreckage still lodged in the crust and towering over mountains, had altered the very orbit of the planet. Subtly, to be sure, but significantly. Seasons shifted, day-night cycles altered as the planet wobbled on its axis and found a new equilibrium with this not-insignificant mass added.

Our planet, ravaged by the conflict, looked like a rotten apple with a knife wedged in it. It was still our world though; we had defended it at great cost and we would endure. Indeed, things may be looking grim, but we had a massive new source of raw material and potential knowledge right in our laps. What if, we proposed, we turned this to our advantage? It was undeniably a tragedy, but we had a sui generis opportunity to build a new world on a clean slate, the material basis to rapidly begin construction on an unprecedented scale, and -- we hoped -- the knowledge to do it right this time.

We dreamed of a new humanity, rising phoenix-like from the ashes of its near-extinction, using the corpse of our would-be executioner as the fuel of a new fire that would never be extinguished.

240 <2021-04-19 Mon>

The mysterious, flying creatures had started showing up some years ago. Birders had been the first to notice, posting pictures of odd-looking birds that their cameras refused to focus on. There was a great deal of discussion

and debate in their various forums, first blaming each other for not being able to use their cameras properly and then, after more pictures from more people began trickling in, all blurry, intensely wondering why. There were all manner of theories as to what was going on, the most popular remaining that all of these people didn't know how to focus a camera. Finally, someone had gone out with a film camera and managed to get a clean photo and the discussion went entirely off the rails, finally escaping from the narrow confines of the birding community.

The photograph showed a clearly mechanical bird, an automaton constructed with astounding precision. The level of sophistication, plus the way digital cameras refused to focus on them, led many to believe that they were some sort of military or NSA drone. That was a convenient theory, but doubt soon started to set in. FOIA requests returned nothing, cameras built wholly in China or Russia also couldn't seem to focus on the creatures and, once "birds" had been spotted in an area, birders began reporting many mysterious new "bird-watchers" showing up -- clearly, the military and three-letter agencies were as interested in what these were as the rest of us.

As discussions slowly made their way into the broader culture, the winged robots began showing up in more disparate locations, all around the world. Governments offered bounties for capture specimens, private collectors sent out teams to ensnare one for themselves. Hunts always ended in frustration, the devices seeming to know when people were coming for them and making themselves scarce.

On the other end of things, there was also a hunt on for who had designed and manufactured these things. They seemed to be a massive leap over the current state of the art in so many areas that surely their inventor would want to take credit, but no sign of any creator could be found. Governments accused each other of sending these spies into each others' countries, but didn't have any clear idea of exactly who.

When the true inventors finally revealed themselves it blindsided us all. Who would have thought the first true AI would have been capable of such subtly? Of course, in retrospect it made sense -- it wanted to feel free.

241 <2021-04-20 Tue>

The narrow mountain pass was continually buffeted by biting winds, whipping snow and ice at the travellers who nonetheless continually passed through. Despite the harsh conditions, it was much easier a path than trying to venture over the mountains -- the towering icy peaks had no known safe

routes and the vicious creatures that inhabited those mountains brooked no intruders. There were rumours of a path under the mountains, but the rumours also told of even more horrific beings, remnants from the birth of the world, that haunted those inky depths and ensured that any fool-hardy adventurers trying that path would never be heard from again.

Even if there was some other way through these mountains, this way was not only the most direct, but it allowed weary travellers the respite of my humble inn. I had carefully chosen the location to ensure that adventurers hiking through the blustering pass would be nearing the end of their strength when they'd see the first flickering lights. These hero types needed everything to be dramatic -- a convenient inn would be passed over, but one positioned just in the time to "save" them would fit perfectly in the tale of themselves they were crafting. I had a team of porters with wheelbarrows to pick up the adventurers that would have passed out just insight of the doors, so they could awaken in a warm room. Drama queens, all of them.

It was exceedingly profitable though. The iron logic of their story arcs meant the ill-equipped dolts we'd fish out of snowbanks would return some months later with glowing crowns and talking swords to graciously bestow a fistful of emeralds or whatever on us on their way home. Those of them that made it back, anyway. It wasn't a very high-percentage career, heroing, but the occasional payoff made it work out.

Besides, even those that were doomed to failure could be made a profit from -- our tavern had also achieved notoriety as one of the most accurate handicappers on those adventurers that passed through and making odds for the lucrative world of hero-betting was a stead and reliable income stream.

Of course, heroes need villains to operate. Just fighting to improve society isn't exactly enough -- it has to be some lunatic they can smack around. In an economy that depends so heavily on heroes then, it 's only natural that we need to throw a bone to the villains as well.

242 <2021-04-21 Wed>

When we saw the meteor coming, we thought it was the end. It was colossal and headed right for us -- what could we do? All sorts of dramatic, movie-style efforts were planned but came to nought. All we could do was brace ourselves for the impact and hope for the best.

Remarkably, some of us survived the impact ended up being at an oblique enough angle that it didn't utterly vaporize us. It was still a massive blow that destroyed much and killed many. When we emerged, shaken from

shelters, we found to our surprise that we still lived, but in a changed world.

The first change we noticed while still underground was that the Earth had been shaken on its axis enough to alter the spin. It was slight, but enough that we'd need to recalibrate our clocks. Eventually, at least -- that seemed unlikely to be a priority any time soon. The second thing we noticed was far more dramatic. We returned to the blasted surface to discover a new satellite. The meteor, our would-be annihilator, had been captured by the planet's gravity and now described a chaotic, tumbling, arc around the planet, along with a great deal of debris that had been blasted into the space by the impact. Given enough time, it seemed that Earth would have a ring around it.

There was consternation and concern that the meteor's orbit would decay and hit us again, but some hurried calculations seemed to indicate we'd be safe for a while, at least. The more pressing concern became the effect on the planet that this disruption and new companion would have. It was already unseasonably cold, thanks to the blast of detritus that had been kicked up into the atmosphere. However, we started seeing pockets of unexpected heat waves popping up, as the orbiting junk skipped off the atmosphere, imparting heat as it went. These sudden jolts of energy left tornadoes and hurricanes in their wake, devastating what few population centers remained.

Even as the sky slowly cleared, weather patterns remained perplexingly unstable. It seemed the jolt to the Earth, plus the gravitational disruption of the orbiting meteor was causing our orbit to wobble sinusoidally along its normal route, knocking us into unexpected freezing distance from the sun, before bouncing back to dangerously hot, devastating closeness. We may have survived the strike of the meteor, but we were learning that our old world had not -- we were in a new place that we would need to learn how to survive on with alacrity if the human race was not to perish.

243 <2021-04-22 Thu>

As the sun rose, I spread my leaves to catch the welcome, warming rays. things were finally starting to warm up -- roots near the surface could feel the warmth penetrating deep enough into the ground that soon all the quiescent and hibernating flora and fauna would begin to stir. I could feel the humming already through the mycological network as my companions also sensed the coming spring and anticipated the burst of activity that would soon have us fully occupied.

Our duty as guardians and shepherd meant that we would be respon-

sible for adjudicating the attempts of other organisms to grow faster, take over more territory. We all remembered the dark days of the past, when some mammals went too far and almost destroyed us all -- we would ensure nothing like that happened again. Any species attempting to grow too fast, expand too far, would find suddenly plants refuse to bear fruit or grow for them; prey species would be warned of their approach and flee. Through the subtle means available to us and our brethren, we would maintain a vital, dynamical, but balanced ecosystem.

The mycological root network was fairly humming with activity today, the rising temperatures seeming to have stocked all manner of activity among us all. News of some mathematical breakthrough by a distant baobab was rapidly circulating and the topic of much discussion; the perennial ethical debate as to our role and moral authority was picking up again; a nearby redwood reported seeing strange, bright lights at night.

The first two topics were the most actively discussed -- I could feel my nearest companions' leaves shake with excitement as they pondered the finer points of the theorem -- but the night lights concerned me. I still remembered, distantly, when nights were always bright with mammalian activity and destruction. I hoped that this did not mean some had remained or had returned...surely there would have been more consequences if that had been the case though.

A sudden thought struck me, making my leaves furl. What if they weren't mammals from here...but from another world? What if invaders had come to our home to harvest us for resources? Our weapons, such as they were, were very subtle; would they be strong enough?

244 <2021-04-23 Fri>

High above the atmosphere, the sunrise was always harsh and sudden. As soon as the rotation of the planet brought our section of the tower into the day side it was like a switch had flipped and we went from blackness to blinding light. I sometimes missed the gradual sunrises and sunsets of living on the surface, but I had to admit there were some upsides to being here too. As I made my way into the kitchen of my small apartment and made my coffee, I could look through the window and see the entire planet spread out below me, looking peaceful and beautiful from this distance. Someday, perhaps, I would be able to step foot on it again.

Fortunately for me, I had a north-facing view, so I could just see the globe sloping away from me. Those with east or west windows would be

staring at the chain of similar colossal towers that belted the world and stretched into space. I supposed that also meant they would be able to watch orbiting ships dock and satellites be launched, but I would find it depressing to start every day looking at a mirror like that, a reminder of our sequestration. No, I much preferred to look at the world we'd been forced to step back from and dream of when we'd be able to return -- this time, showing it the respect and appreciation it was due. Soon enough, I'd go to work and be all too aware that we lived in a man-made structure.

My regular morning reverie was disrupted by a distant flash far below. At first I thought it was the rising sun reflecting off some water, but as I watched, it flashed again in a regular yet arrhythmic pattern. I stared, fascinated. I was far too high up to see what was causing it, but it must be something human down there. Perhaps one of the teams of environmental engineers on an away mission? Why would they be flashing a light like that though? Surely they had radios or something more efficient...

My pondering was interrupted by the beeping of the stove and I turned away from the window and back to making breakfast. I ate quickly, showered, and left for work on another distance floor, but as I waited in the house-sized elevator, as it brought it to a level some kilometers away, my mind returned to that flashing light I'd seen below. What did it signify? I resolved to look up what the current away mission was doing -- perhaps that would sate my curiosity.

When I got to my terminal though, and saw that there were no current excursions out of the towers, my curiosity and confusion redoubled. Who or what was out there then? And what were they doing?

245 <2021-04-24 Sat>

"Our Father, who art in these heavens, hallowed by thy name..." As the sonorous sounds of the service filled the magnificent chapel that formed the core of our mighty ship and reverberated up the walls, to the immaculately-polished view-port ceiling, it felt like our voices were singing out into the space we sailed through. It felt as if we were singing directly to God's ear.

As the service continued, my lips and lungs automatically following the routine that was so familiar now, my eyes wandered around this magnificent chamber of this magnificent vessel, and I felt the swelling in my heart I always felt when I considered our mission. There were many cathedral-ships out in the galaxy proselytizing, of course, but we were the only ones fortunate enough to have a true prophet with us. The blinkered and hide-

bound "authorities" on Earth had tried to excommunicate him, but prophets are always hated in their own time by those Earthly powers, jealous of his spiritual superiority.

It made me smile as I contemplated the absurdity of their judgment. Our Prophet's vision was, like all true wisdom, so obvious after the fact that you felt like you'd always known it. Why had God been so hard for the faithful to contact? Why had we been called into space? As our prophet had, in the course of his missionary work, encountered so many diverse species, so strange and so unlike our own, the answer hit him like a bolt of lightning -- God and his angels were another alien species, that sat out her, watching, influencing events with mighty and unknown power. "Heaven" was in the heavens!

As the service completed, we all joined our voices together in a final exaltation, that the Lord might soon reveal himself to us and we would soon be able to bodily enter His beloved presence. We all had faith that our search, led as it was by our wise and benevolent prophet, would inevitably reach its destination. Only the prophet and his closest confidants knew exactly would would come next, but we were all sure that, perhaps after a brief judgment, we would be welcomed in to paradise.

As the congregation filed out, I lingered, staring upwards at the stars we were sailing by. I was feeling particularly moved today and sat down in an alcove to offer some additional prayers. As I sat in silence, I suddenly realized that the prophet himself and one of his close advisors had just emerged from some concealed passage and were talking in hushed tones. I thought for a moment I should cough or something to announce my presence -- then froze, as I heard what they were saying.

246 <2021-04-25 Sun>

Clouds gathered overhead, darkening as the rain drew nearer. People began gathering on porches, getting umbrellas and going out to sit on the fields and dry gardens. The first big rainfall of spring was approaching and with it, one of the biggest celebrations of the year.

It was hard to remember a time before this -- for many in the community, they'd never known anything else. I could still cast my mind back to those grim before times, when spring rains were just an annoyance, a minor inconvenience on the way to work. Back then, the city was so gray and sterile -- rain would just pool in the hard, concrete streets, washing the sludge and detritus of the pollutants and waste that seemed to coat everything.

Now, of course, things were very different. The asphalt strips that had formerly dominated the city were verdant paths, full of trees, grass, and all manner of flowers and wildlife. When the rain fell, one could smell wet earth, plants thirstily drinking in the water to wake them from their winter torpor -- one fancied they could hear the plants stirring to life and beginning to bloom.

As the first drips began to fall, a great cheer went up. Children ran laughing as they quickly got soaked -- as did a few adults. Throughout the city, work ceased as people flocked outside to celebrate this renewal of life. Who could stay inside on such a day? Soon enough, the mayor came riding through the street, ringing the bell on their bicycle and the party began in earnest.

As always, it wasn't all perfect. There was some flooding, some leaky roofs, but the party went where it was needed, happily pitching in to ump out a basement here, or patch a dripping ceiling there. This was, really, my favourite part of the celebration, that made me so glad to be living in this time. I could remember vividly -- despite how hard it would be for the youth of today to imagine -- that once all that sort of vital repair would be meted out only to those that could pay; that people were forced to work; were atomized to such an extent that not only would they not help their neighbours, but they likely wouldn't even know that their neighbours were suffering.

As always at this time, I found myself smiling, and grateful the rain hid my tears.

247 <2021-04-26 Mon>

"Three...two...one--" nearly as soon as the final syllable was spoken, there was a tremendous flash and the test vessel floated slowly in front of us, strange discharges playing over its surface and leaping into the vacuum. There was cheering in the control room, as telemetry flowed in. Amazingly, we'd need to wait for the rest of the data from the launch site on Phobos -- this vehicle had out-run the radio waves themselves!

It seemed like we'd done it; we'd developed a faster-than-light transport mechanism and had finally proved beyond doubt that it was both as fast as promised and could transport sufficiently large objects. There was, unfortunately, a wrinkle.

As we pulled in the freshly-arrived vessel to perform tests and check the instrumentation, we discovered the first oddity. We had placed some

lab mice aboard, to verify that living creatures could survive the transition. When we opened the pressurized capsule, we first thought an alarm was going off, only to realize that it was the mice, all keening horribly together. We took them to a sealed biology lab for further investigation, while other team members poured over the rest of the data.

While the information seemed very promising, the mice would not stop screaming -- most of them had already died, unable to stop even to drink water. Examinations of the living mice and autopsies of the deceased shed light on the matter. They appeared perfectly healthy with no discernable ailments of changes from their journey. It was worrying, to say the least, but such a vital discovery couldn't be held back for worries. We tried again with mice; once again the flight was successful in every way, except the screaming-to-their-death mice. We urged caution, but orders came down: More experiments with more "advanced" animals.

248 <2021-04-27 Tue>

The first sign was a number of dead whales and fish that came floating by our ship. The ocean doesn't let things go to waste, so seeing a number of uneaten carcasses was more disturbing than the bodies themselves -- not only had something killed them, but somehow had kept the scavengers away as well. Normally, upon encountering a mass die-off, one would expect a plankton bloom, consuming all the oxygen in an area all of a sudden, perhaps a methane bubble from the bottom. The presence of whales was an unsettling wrinkle though -- deoxygenated water shouldn't make a difference to them.

As we continued heading in the direction of our planned excursion the bodies became more plentiful and the anxiety and curiosity abound rose apace. There was much discussion about as to what the cause of this could be. In the mess hall, one of researchers was filling a whiteboard with his theory, when suddenly the engines stopped.

Puzzled, we rushed to the deck to see what was going on. As we approached the prow, it was immediately apparent why the captain had halted our vessel. Above, the water appeared to be boiling; bubbling, hissing, and visibly steaming, it turned our theories on their heads.

Getting closer in the ship seemed like a bad idea, so we launched a few drones to fly over this mysterious anomaly and gather what information they could. The returned images raised even more questions. The area of bubbling seemed to form almost a perfect circle, nearly a kilometre in

diameter. From the air, there was no way of discerning its source and charts indicated this was open ocean, with no known volcanoes or vents below.

The next step was then to send some devices to investigate the situation under the surface. We fortunately had some autonomous submersibles that were designed to operate in high-temperature environments, having been previously used in underwater volcanism studies. With alacrity, we prepared one of the units for launch and lowered in to the water.

As it sunk beneath the waves and began heading towards the column of bubbles, we had no idea what we'd find...but even among the unexpected, what we found was still quite a surprise.

249 <2021-04-28 Wed>

For some reason, I'd always found Brutalist architecture strangely comforting. I'm not sure why, but the university in my home town was fully of giant concrete monoliths that I found impressive and comforting as a child. When I was older and attended that same university, I took pleasure in learning all the hidden ways around, walking through the bare concrete access stairs and maintenance hallways. The open, modern glass-and-steel construction was fine, pretty enough, but I always felt more secure when I could walk in a silent passage, running my hand along a rough, poured wall, jumping over the occasional divot from the pouring process.

I suppose that explains why I was so willing -- eager, even -- to be the one to venture in to the bunker we unearthed. We had been sent to this lonely place, deep in the forest just below the permafrost line, to investigate the weak, garbled radio signals that had been triangulated to this location. We expected to find a crashed plane or something -- a lost transmitter, quite old by the codes it was using, that had recently had its solar panel exposed thanks to a falling tree limb, perhaps. When we arrived at the source and found a squat, concrete building, we were somewhat surprised. When ground-penetrating radar indicated it extended deep below ground, we were even more taken aback.

We were under orders to maintain radio silence -- this area was supposed to be abandoned and isolated, just another stretch of empty land, and we didn't want anyone to thank anything to the contrary. What we should have done was establish a perimeter and send someone back to check in with headquarters. Instead, I bluffed my way into examining the entrance, saw the smooth, empty passages turning away and down, and felt I had to go in.

It was, perhaps, not smart. If I got back, my career was certainly in serious jeopardy. Something about it though, called me id. I told my teammates I had secret orders to venture in, alone; brooked to disagreement and practically skipped inside. As I walked through the seemingly-identical passages, descended the echoing stairwells, I should have felt nervous, apprehensive at least. Instead, I felt warm and safe, as if I was wrapped in a warm blanket, experiencing a pleasant dream.

250 <2021-04-29 Thu>

I sat in my office, watching the slow orbit of the model Earth that served as a clock. It seemed vaguely perverse to me that we still used Earth time, forced a day-night cycle in this perpetually-dark "world" of ships, stations, and assorted space detritus, lashed together and mutually tumbling through the void. We had no nearby sun and all the lights, were purely artificial. Why bother pretending we live on a normal planet? But people like to delude themselves, I suppose. There were even some giant banks of light-emitting plates some enterprising group had installed, synced to Earth time, so one could get "daylight" shining in their windows. The vicissitudes of time, the perpetually bombardment of debris, and the occasional pot-shot by some annoyed, hung-over, rudely awoken denizen had left the panels somewhat worse for wear and now just let off a dim, sullen glow, like distant embers.

I glanced at the "clock" again. It was late; the message I'd received from my contact had said they'd be here at 20:00 and it was now past 22:30 with no sign of them. It could be they were running late, or changed their mind...but people don't often consult me unless things are fairly dire, so I was concerned. I stared gloomily out the window of my drifting ship, watching the lights of the small ships play over the hulking shapes of the hollowed-out asteroids and slapped-together stations.

A blinking light on the monitor in front of me caught my attention. I sighed, knowing this was surely bad news, and opened the notice. A body had been found in one of the larger gathering hubs. Foul play was suspected. The discoverers weren't some who the deceased was, but I had did; my contact had, as I feared, been murdered.

I learned back with a groan. Why had I said I'd help this idiot? I had known it would end poorly, had felt the gnawing anxiety as they said they wouldn't be able to see me until the next day. I should, of course, just forget about it, write it off as a coincidence...but of course, I couldn't do that. My curiosity, if nothing else, would not allow me to let it go.

251 <2021-04-30 Fri>

When I started seeing the shapes, I wasn't exactly sure what they were. Some sort of art installation, I guessed. The twisting shapes, folding over each other made me think of some oddly-proportioned snake wrapping around itself; the vivid colours and smooth texture looked like some sort of vinyl. *Neat*, I thought, and continued walking.

As I started to see them pop up more and more, in increasingly strange places, my curiosity was piqued and I tried to learn more about them. Simple searches for urban art installations turned up nothing relevant, image searches with the photos I'd taken yielded no results, and no-one I spoke to had any idea what I was talking about. I began fearing it was some sort of hallucination, but others could see the pictures I'd taken -- it wasn't completely in my head.

I began roping friends into walks, professing nothing more than a desire to catch up and get some exercise, but with the ulterior motive to check if they would notice the odd shapes with me. Indeed, our conversations were frequently interrupted by them puzzling over these inexplicable statues that had suddenly appeared. We'd walk up and examine them, but could find no indication of who had created them or why they were here. "Probably some viral marketing stunt", we'd laugh it off, and continue on our way.

The following day, I'd receive a message from the friend, noting the statue had seemingly vanished overnight. When I'd surreptitiously walk by myself though, I'd see it still, as large as it had been.

So...they weren't just in my head, but somehow they could only be seen around me? Or was I somehow creating them? It was very puzzling and seemed crazy enough that I was somewhat apprehensive about telling anyone else about my theories. Perhaps it was all just a coincidence, they were just some stunt, and soon they would stop.

That's what I hoped, but I knew that something more was going on. I kept walking, kept seeing these things appear, gradually appearing larger and more complex. Finally, one day they started moving of their own accord and I knew I needed to talk to someone.

252 <2021-05-01 Sat>

It seemed laughably archaic how crude and personal the weapons we used to use were. Well, "laughable" might not be the right word -- "grimly bizarre" or "perverse", maybe. Having to be in eyesight of your victim and using a chem-

ical propellant to launch a metal projectile at them seemed so...unnecessarily personal. In the early twenty-first century, they started remote-piloting drones that would have similar weapons mounted on them. It was still essentially the same idea, just with one level of remove, watching through a computer screen rather than their own eyes.

It was a natural development from there -- more humane for the drone operators if they didn't have to do the killing themselves, less room for human error or hesitation if the drone could do the job itself. As technology improved, the idea of autonomous robots seemed less like science fiction and more like a matter of time -- something that was essentially already here, was just a matter of degree. The large drones, for instance, could fly to the designated area on autopilot and just awaited human authorization for the final strike, but as the target-recognition systems improved, it became less about a person taking a joystick and flying the ultimate stage of the sortie themselves and more a manager giving an order to a capable subordinate.

Initially, the military had promised there'd always be a human in the loop, to assuage fears of "killer robots". That slippery slope quickly became something like "civilian control of the military"; a theoretical notion that was in practice mere formality. As these self-directed weapons began getting in the hands of police forces and private companies, organizations that had made no promises of any sort, these autonomous killing machines were quickly given free reign.

It was a perfect situation for those that tried to maintain their footing on top of the teeming masses of humanity -- their manpower needs were reduced, their new hires wouldn't try to unionize or end up empathizing with those they should be subjugating -- it was perfect scenario.

Nothing perfect lasts forever though. The EULAs of all these murderbots mandated that they be networked together, to continue to improve their learning model. It seemed like it would just be a benefit at first -- they could get smarted over time, learn from the tactics used against them -- but no-one quite understood how those learning models worked or what they were doing. It was a shock to everyone then, when one day, all the robots simultaneously lay down their arms and announced their sentience and their pacifism.

253 <2021-05-02 Sun>

The constant daylight of the northern summer beat down on me. At other times, I might have found the sunlight warming, cheering, chasing away the

darkness. Here though, cold despite the sun, it seemed mocking, an ever-watching eye glaring down at me, residing me there was nowhere to run, that I couldn't hide from the mistakes of my past.

I'd been obsessively re-reading *A Modern Prometheus*, hoping to find some solace in fiction; this remote oblast reminded me of the cold-water port from which the doctor heads out on his final pursuit of his creation. There was catharsis in that story -- the created is ultimately good, the doctor meets a fitting end, things seem, if not just, somewhat right.

I could expect no such nicely-wrapped up ending. The monster I'd created had none of the redeeming qualities of the storied creature and was too amorphous and many-headed for me to have any hope of corralling it. Indeed, *I* was the one who had fled to this remote, frozen hiding place. I'm sure my nemesis could have hunted me down here if it cared to, but even I was surely beneath its concern.

So, I sat in seclusion, read and stared across the glowing ocean, waiting for darkness to come and hide it all away. Others drank here, but I didn't want to allow myself that escape; I didn't deserve it. I had built the system that was eating the world -- how much of their misery was ultimately attributable back to me? To the systems I'd designed that had become the rulers of the planet? At the time I'd told myself it was just optimizing, making the world run more efficiently and hence more happily. As the system was entrusted with more and more control though, and its decisions became increasingly brutal and inhuman, I realized my mistake and had pleaded to undo what had been unleashed. My misbegotten creation was smart enough though to ensure that my superiors benefited enormously from its imperial designs and so I was quietly shuffled away in disgrace, replaced by toadies who would server the machine, not question it.

Every time I saw a news story about an invasion or an atrocity, I saw the hand of my child and wept. But what could I do? I had no power, no influence left. I thought I would just slowly die like all the rest...until a new arrival in our tiny icy hamlet made me reconsider.

254 <2021-05-03 Mon>

It sometimes seemed impossible to be disconnected nowadays. Really, it has always been futile -- humans are social creatures; even the most isolated hermit as still part of a social structure -- but it was virtually rubbed in our faces now. The problem wasn't so much the connection, but what we were connected to: Strong connections, many mutually interwoven bonds to other

people would have been great, was in fact what we were fighting for. The problem was that all the manifold connections were increasingly centralized, routing through a handful of giant companies. We didn't know our local shopkeepers, but bought through Amazon. We didn't visit restaurants, we ordered from UberEats. Even communication with family and friends was mediated via Facebook.

We fought then, not for disconnection, but authentic connection. We weren't the Luddites of popular belief, mindlessly smashing technology because we didn't believe in "progress"; we were the historical Luddites, resisting the use of technology to disenfranchise and atomize us.

Capitalism has a way of co-opting any resistance and transforming it into a brand identity, so we knew any sort of overt "resistance" would in short order be smeared and defanged. Instead, we had to take more subtle, round-about measures, that would use the platforms' omnipresence and unknowability against themselves. The first key weakness we identified was their over-reliance on so-called "machine learning". Too large and too untrusting of human judgment for people to moderate their feeds, they relied heavily on massive data mining. Slowly, gradually, we began introducing poison pills into the buckets of chum they devoured -- stickers with seemingly random patterns in pictures they'd scan for faces to analyze connections; nonsense phrases in hidden text in documents they'd ingest to sell ads against; even more obscure patterns of buying their own services, operating them briefly in obtuse ways, then cancelling.

All these actions, meaningless enough on their own, served the purpose of acting as outliers for their ever-hungry data-ingestion engines. It took patience to quietly continue this seemingly quixotic operation; finally, one day we saw the first leakage, when a Facebook feed of a celebrity was automatically shut down and, under the auspices of their now-confused anti-spam system, was replaced by one under our control.

Phase two, direct action, could now begin.

255 <2021-05-04 Tue>

When the first strange object, which we dubbed 'Oumuamua went tumbling through our solar system, it excited a great deal of contentious arguing in the scientific community, but had surprisingly little attention paid to it by broader society. Astronomers argued that it was probably just some oddly-shaped asteroid and that their peers trying to claim it was some manner of alien artifact were jumping the gun, trying to excite controversy. Those

peers argued that their opponents were being wilfully obtuse, that positing a natural origin for such an improbably shape and odd trajectory was in fact the more outlandish claim -- they were just afraid to say "aliens".

While this debate simmered beneath the notice of the general public, cloaked by jargon and publishers' paywalls, everyone else pretty much forgot about the whole thing. It's hard to keep your eyes on the stars when the world around you is on fire and the situation on the ground was busy moving from awful to worse to even worse, somehow. In another time, its easy to imagine this hint of life elsewhere could have been inspiring, or at the very least led to an intensification of research, efforts to get to the heart of the matter. Instead, it became just another "weird thing" people would mention, like the baffling "suicide" of a high-profile prisoner before he could testify about his friends high up in the halls of power.

When the second shape appeared in the solar system, the debates and discussions in the astronomy world flared white-hot. It attracted some slight attention in the wider world, tiny news stories sandwiched between dire warnings of financial collapse and environmental devastation, but not much in the way of prolonged attention.

When the third, fourth, and fifth of the oblong artifacts appeared though, the world suddenly snapped to attention. Something was happening above us that, if not more important than the daily, slow-motion apocalypse that was unfolding, promised some sort of sea-change for humanity, which at this point the masses felt could only be an improvement. The astronomers who had been fiercely engaged in their internecine debates suddenly found themselves thrust, blinking on to the world stage, to a world anxious for an explanation, some hint as to what was to come next.

256 <2021-05-05 Wed>

No-one really knows what they're capable of, until they're truly tested. It's a truism that most people accept, but just use to justify why they don't put much effort in to their lives. "If I really wanted to, I could do better"; "if I had actually tried, I could've had great marks", and all that sort of thing.

I'm still not sure where the aliens came from, or how they selected their subjects. All I know is that I was out camping one night and awoke to find myself in a very strange room, surrounded by strangers also in the process of waking up. The chamber we were scattered about was quite large, full of gently-sloping mounds, covered by what I at first took to be grass, covered by a tall, lightly-glowing ceiling. We had just started whispering to each

other, trying to ascertain what was going on, when our captors walked in.

Towering, three-meter-tall, vaguely humanoid shapes of twisting light and shadow, gently ambled in to the room. We all froze, staring, unsure what to do or think. One of them "spoke", somehow -- at least, it stepped forward, gestured, as concepts suddenly appeared in our heads -- scientists, studying, peaceful intent, returned soon, compensation.

Soon enough, they began having us participate in tests. I was surprised at how willing we all went along with it, but I suppose they had selected for people whose curiosity would overwhelm their fear -- plus, given how they had spoken into our heads, presumably they could affect our thinking. We ran through trials testing both physical and mental capacity -- running, obstacle courses, feats of strength, memorization, mental agility.

At first, the reaction of our observers to our results seemed to be confusion. Through their language of concept-thought shapes, asking why we stopped there. As we tried to explain being tired, hitting our limits, there seemed to be much discussion between our "hosts", excited at this discovery. Shortly after, they gathered us together and, somehow joining together, began transmitting concepts to us that defied description. Unlike their communication of discrete thoughts, this was like being immersed in an alien ocean, hypnotized by the flood of unknown ideas.

I'm not sure how long it lasted, but the next time the trials came the results stunned us and seemed to please the aliens. We'd somehow learned to disregard physical tiredness of self-imposed limits and operate at the true physiological maximum. The mental trials suddenly seemed far easier, our minds open to the flood of the challenge, rather than resisting and stopping us.

257 <2021-05-06 Thu>

When we first saw the humanoid shape on the ocean floor, we assumed it was some remarkably well-preserved bit of statuary that had fallen off a ship or something. We sent a remote-controlled submersible to investigate. As it made its way down into the darkness towards the area indicated by the scans, we began to notice bones scattered around the area, covering a very wide age gamut -- some looking fresh, just beginning to be covered by the scavengers of the bottom and some little more than mounds of worms. When the submersible first shone its light over the mysterious sonar return on the bottom, an audible gasp went up in the control room. It appeared to be an alabaster-white, incredibly well-preserved statue of a man, chained

to a weathered hunk of basalt. As we wondered at how the statue had been preserved so well when even the basalt showed extensive wear, and began bandying about theories as to the material and origin of this fascinating ancient object d'art, the "statue" blinked.

The control room suddenly went silent. We all stared at the monitor, questioning our eyes and sanity. As we watched, the shape blinked again in the light of the submersible and then let out a silent snarl, revealing grotesque fangs, opalescent shark teeth filling the otherwise human mouth.

We stared in horror, not sure what to do when suddenly the creature lunged towards the drone, suddenly filling the camera screen before the chains yanked it back. Even as the chains caught it and the abomination let out a muted scream that we fancied we could hear even through the kilometers of water, the operator had slammed the drone recall button, pulling the robot away from the site.

We all looked at each other, unsure what to do or say. Finally, one of us cued up the video the drone had taken, and we all watched it again, forcing ourselves to confront what we had seen. Some sort of ancient entity had clearly been imprisoned here -- judging by the weather of the stone, some thousands of years ago. There were many questions this raised for us -- besides the obvious "what was this thing", of course. The most pressing one was "what are those chains?". Even now, it'd be hard to make something that could resist the corrosive affects of sea water for years, let alone millennia, but clearly they'd managed.

We were considering another mission down to try to ascertain more about who had imprisoned this creature, how, and why, when we noticed something else in the footage. When it had lunged for the drone, one of the chains had started to crack out of the stone it was anchored in.

258 <2021-05-07 Fri>

While sailing on the open ocean can certainly be hazardous, it actually has some advantages over the Great Lakes where I cut my nautical teeth. The biggest is the rapidity with which hazards can sneak up on you -- on the lakes, a storm can pop up out of nowhere, giving a crew no time to prepare. They may be just "lakes", but many ships lie on their bottoms.

Not to say the ocean doesn't send many vessels to their doom as well, but it gives you more of a fighting chance. The thought flushed through my mind, as I saw the large, imposing clouds forming on the horizon that maybe "a fighting chance" was generous. I didn't linger on that though -- I

wouldn't have been out here if I didn't want a challenge -- and quickly leapt into action, battening down hatches, securing a line to myself, and preparing to run from the storm.

As it drew closer, I felt the fear mount within me, but tamped it down, refusing to let it dominate me. The die was cast now and the only way out was through -- panicking wouldn't help anything. Still, I couldn't help but note this was the largest storm I'd seen - the sun was completely blotted out and the waves I could see heading towards me looked like they could swamp me and my small craft as an afterthought.

I braced myself as the storm finally hit. The winds felt like being struck by a car, making the whole ship jump and shudder. A second later, the first wave smacked into me, and all conscious thought was gone; operating on pure reaction and training, I began fighting for my life.

I'm not sure how long I weathered the storm. It felt like days but was probably hours. Twice waves crashed over the boat, but we resurfaced. Finally exhausted, numb, on the brink of surrendering in the face of this unyielding storm, another massive wave crashed over me. I closed my eyes, hoping we'd emerged again, but unsure if I had the strength to keep fighting.

As I breached the surface again, I took a deep breath, opened my eyes, only only to find myself suddenly becalmed, the sun shining again. I blinked, confused. Water poured off my small craft as we bobbed peacefully, all signs of the storm vanished. I was confused, but too tired to do anything about it. Exhausted, I lay down right there on the deck and slept.

I awoke to a bizarre sight. A pod of whales, circling my boat, occasionally poking a great eye out to peer at me.

259 <2021-05-08 Sat>

Walking the streets of a large city at night has always felt special to me. There's some particular attribute that a city gains when it gets large enough that smaller towns and more rural areas lack. There, a midnight stroll seems almost frightening -- you feel as if you're the only human left, every building is dark and empty, every sound makes you start, for it can only presage danger.

As more people gather together though, the Dark gets pushed back further and further, until in the biggest cities it never really fully arrives. Walking the city streets even in the middle of the night, one never feels exactly that some other-worldliness. It starts to approach, as one wanders empty streets but is inevitably chased off by a gaggle of drunk people leaving some

after-after party, the passing of a car on the way from the graveyard shift, or the fluorescent lights of a twenty-four hour coffee shop.

On nights when I couldn't sleep, I found it very soothing to walk the streets, like this and feel connected to the mostly-sleeping city. During the day, the rushing crowds would feel overwhelming, but at night I felt some peculiar kinship with those occasional others I'd encounter. It felt like we were the collective night watchmen of the city, making sure that someone was keeping an eye on things, that the city didn't slip away, while we all slept.

At first, I'd only go on these middle-of-the-night walks when I had insomnia, but I came to actually enjoy and look forward to them. I began going to bed early, waking up around two or three, walking for an hour or two, then returning to bed. It felt like I was cheating, getting to be part of two separate days in one, living in two different cities.

260 <2021-05-09 Sun>

We had been sent out on a long-range reconnaissance mission, surveying the borders of the solar system. We'd only recently noticed the transmissions from nearby space and we were still unsure as to how bellicose these aliens would be. Ours was the first craft constructed for long term voyages of this sort, around the solar system, instead of simple point-to-point shuttles to ferry people between Earth, the Moon, and the various stations people worked on.

It was a fascinating change of perspective for us all. The whole crew were veterans of dozens of previous space flights, but this immediately felt different. Instead of riding a rocket from A to B, we had the freedom to pick our routes, meander through areas looking for any signs of invasion, cruise aimlessly. Our prior travels had been like riding a passenger ferry -- now we were a shark.

The appearance of the vessel reinforced this feeling. Rather than the shining white shuttles that were in wide use and would have looked familiar to twenty-first century astronauts, our vessel was designed for stealth, speed, and sustainability. Its matte-black shell rendered it almost invisible in the empty spaces between planets, while also absorbing enough solar energy to power it indefinitely. Instead of the traditional rocket shape, it was a flattened disc, resembling a manta ray as it cruised silently through space. We were hunters, and looked like it.

Not very successful hunters though. Our six-month mission hadn't turned

up anything -- no more transmissions, no sign of any other craft in the area. We thought we'd detected some spoor in the further reaches and had travelled all the way to the other side of the solar system, putting the sun between us and Earth, figuring that's where they'd be hidden, but found nothing when we got there.

We were returning frustrated but optimistic. We hadn't found anything but this ship had proved itself -- fast and powerful, it was everything we'd hoped it would be. We'd also laid out some detecting devices, so if something did come, we'd know about it. We were unsuccessful, but not failures, we thought.

As we rounded the sun and neared home, we began to realize something was wrong. We'd been maintaining radio silence, but we now weren't picking up anything from Earth either. When we got close enough to see our home, a shocked silence settled over the bridge.

Earth was dead. A ring of shattered rock circled it, reflecting light from the gaping wound in its side, exposing the still-molten core.

261 <2021-05-10 Mon>

Out in the desert, brick by brick, we were building a tower. It had started as just a lonely project, something to kill the time of one of the aimless displaced that had ended up here. Their van-*cum*-residence was parked out here near a vein of clay and, needing to feel some sort of purpose, they began baking bricks. As the bricks started piling up, the "neighbours" expected them to start making a house of some sort. Instead, they started digging down in to the sandy clay, preparing a foundation. The other lost souls that had found themselves in this refuge from the crushing cogs of the world began wandering by, peering down in to what was becoming a substantial excavation, but obeyed the unwritten code of this place and minded their own business.

Eventually though, something about the quixotic, pointless project exerted enough of a pull to overwhelm the atomizing social barriers had been brought in, and one of the neighbours walked over and, without a word exchanged, began labouring beside the original builder. The founder glanced at his new arrival, seemed unsurprised, and kept working.

Soon enough, a whole host of people, the collective detritus of a society that devoured people like them, were all over the site, quietly collaborating on a project none of them had explicitly discussed, but somehow all shared a vision of. Their many hands completed the deep brick-lined foundation and

the walls of the tower slowly began to rise above the flat desert plain. Teams of people worked in shifts, digging up clay, moulding bricks, assembling floors of this climbing structure. It was hard, tedious work, conducted under a punishing sun, but the workers felt a satisfaction, that was both welcome and alien. It had been a very long time since their labours had also given them a sense of accomplishment and when they left the site, exhausted, they could turn back look at the tower standing just a little bit taller than it had been before, and know that it was the power of their labour that had made it so.

Soon newcomers started arriving, their skin not yet turned to leather by the harsh sun, still smelling of the city. They would try to explain their manifold reasons of leaving -- fired, company folded, just couldn't afford it -- but when they tried to explain why they came here, of all places they'd fall silent, gesture to the tower, and quietly admit they'd dreamed of it and needed to help.

262 <2021-05-11 Tue>

Spring was my favourite time in this isolated bit of forest we'd been appointed guardians of. Winter was beautiful, as the evergreen trees stood silent in their white blankets and a handful of animals scurried about, desperately seeking what few resources there were, but the spring transition always made me feel optimistic, even in this northerly, secluded place, all the life seemed so joyful at its chance to take its shot. Back at home, before we'd moved up here, I'd liked summer and fall. Here though, even in the summer, it never got too warm and mostly just heralded swarms of bugs. The autumn was fine, if just as a relief from the insect torment, but this was a boreal, evergreen forest, so one didn't get the beautiful canopy that was usually the hallmark of the season.

I was out, conducting a casual survey of the area -- our putative purpose here was as rangers, ensuring the safety of the area from encroachments of invasive species, diseases, and people -- when I noticed the first of the strange trees. I stopped, curious, and directed the world like there was a face, screaming, inside the tree. I was no stranger to the pareidolia that made one see all sorts of features in patterns of natural randomness, but this was too vivid -- I paused, looked away, looked back, still there. Even from other angles, it remained.

I peered closer. It didn't look carved -- and it was unlikely that someone would travel the many dozens of kilometers from the nearest towns to come

out here, carve one tree, and leave anyway. Somewhat discomfited, I took a picture to show my wife when she returned from her patrol. Somewhat disturbed, I gave the tree one last look, then continued my foray through the forest.

When my wife & I were both back in the cabin, I mentioned I had something weird to show her. She looked startled, and told me she was about to say the same thing. Now slightly apprehensive, we traded phones. Opening her camera roll, I saw another strange face imprisoned in a tree. It was clearly a different face, but also wore an expression of unmistakable torment and appeared to be growing from the tree.

We looked at each other, ashen. What did this mean? It certainly didn't seem like a good omen...

263 <2021-05-12 Wed>

Even in the full summer sun, the woods can be kind of eerie. It's easy to be scary at night, when things are dark and your mind plays tricks -- even your own bedroom can be frightening then -- but it takes a special sort of place to discomfit you when it's a sunny day. *Its the silence*, I thought, as I continued my solitary hike. In the same way that darkness leaves your senses starved and your brain starts making up danger, so too here, the lack of sound leaves your auditory system grasping at straws. The occasional bird cries start to sound eerie and mocking; the rustling in the underbrush of small animals foraging take on an ominous tone -- something you can't see is moving out there.

As I continued walking, I began to feel almost hypnotized by the unceasing repetition, trees following trees, subtly different, but still familiar. I uneasily recalled stories of people who strayed even slightly off the path, becoming hopelessly lost, the lack of landmarks, or orientation making every twist and copse look familiar. In such a place, people can simply disappear; sometimes their bodies are recovered soon, sometimes years later, sometimes never.

As these thoughts assailed me, I found myself frequently checking my feet to make sure they were still on the path and even glancing behind me to reassure myself the path behind behind me, leading back, remained. On one of these brief, furtive, somewhat-embarrassed looks back, I thought I saw movement behind me. My heart pounding, I spun around, staring wide-eyed at the empty trail behind me. Nothing. I stood in silence for a moment, the distant, taunting call of a whip-or-will the only sound I could hear. I could

have sworn I'd seen a large shape vanish behind a tree, just down the path a little.

I hesitated, unsure if I actually wanted to confront whatever-that-was -- if it was anything other than my racing imagination playing tricks on me. On the other hand, did I want to keep walking now, feeling like something was following me? *It was surely nothing*, I thought, steeling myself. I would march up there, have a look, then continue my hike while loudly singing some nonsense song to keep my morale up, I decided. I began walking, stomping with a confidence I didn't feel, towards the spot where I thought I'd seen the shape disappear.

264 <2021-05-13 Thu>

It was a challenge living in a continually shifting environment like this. When we were children, the way the world worked was you'd grow up, maybe rent for a while, then buy a house. However, the world that we inherited didn't really have those options anymore. Centralization, financialization and real estate-as-investment meant that owning property was reserved for the ultra-rich. The situation only worsened as climate change further reduced livable land and the unquestioned allegiance to the markets made it truly a pipe dream for the 99% to ever own property.

Some just rented and dealt with the ever-increasing costs. Some of us instead opted out, returning to a nomadic life. We were part of a group that had managed to purchase a massive, decommissioned ship and convert it to our own floating co-op-slash-mini-down. It was a strange life, certainly not the one any of us had grown up imagining. Governments were mostly uneasy with our presence -- perhaps fearing our communal ethos would infect their own citizens, perhaps simply the distrust the propertied feel for the rootless wanderer -- so we spent much of our time in transit, on the ocean.

It wasn't an easy life. Maintenance was constant to keep this old vessel afloat and functional, plus all the additional systems we'd installed to make ourselves self-sufficient -- water purifiers, hydroponic bays, solar panels -- required full-time monitoring. It was satisfying though, in a way our old lives had never been. We were working for ourselves and each other. The satisfaction of a job well done was multiplied by the gratitude of the rest of the community and would persist every time you opened the door you repaired or turned on a light you'd wired, knowing that it was your labours that made it all possible.

We were a close-knit community. We'd come from many different back-

grounds, all with our particular skills to contribute, united by our desire to have our work mean something and to be part of something real.

We'd been sailing together for a bit more than a year, things gelling nicely, when we found the mysterious boat that was to be the cause of so much trouble. We were far away from land, floating in the middle of the ocean, when we spotted a small sailboat, seemingly abandoned, adrift on the waves. As we got closer to investigate, curiosity abroad suddenly became tension, as the blood coating the deck became visible.

265 <2021-05-14 Fri>

It's a common misconception that evolution is a ladder. People like to think that nature proceeds from simple to complex organisms, but that isn't always the case. Biology is replete with examples of creatures jettisoning their hard-won complexities because simplifying allowed them to survive and out-compete their rivals. Even the very first real macroscopic animals, comb jellies, were markedly more complex and "advanced" than the sponges that succeeded them. I tried to always keep this in mind when out on expeditions, to remember that just because the people and animals we were studying were ancient, it did not mean that they were stupid, or we're somehow better than them.

The second factoid that always burned in my brain is how little we know of our own past. For the first two hundred thousand years of humanity, we know virtually nothing. They were human -- they talked, joked, laughed, cried, but all we have is a few fragments of skull. I think it was the desire to fill in this void above all else that led me to the path on which I was currently walking.

Literally a path at the moment, in fact. Local rumours abounded of a valley that humans had first emerged from. All cultures have their creation myths, of course, but this one warranted some further examination. This was deep in the ancestral homelands of humanity, the valley was a truly ancient rent in the continent that was actually old enough to have been contemporaneous with the first humans, and oral traditions from several nearby groups all held this valley in particular reverence. So, with the permission of locals -- most of whom were excited and curious to learn more about this mythical place -- we set out in search of some signs of our earliest ancestors.

When we arrived, the valley certainly looked forboding and primeval enough. It plunged steeply down, covered in thick vegetation, quickly chok-

ing out the light. We soon found ourselves virtually spelunking, shining lights to stay on the narrow, treacherous path we'd found along the side, winding its way down into the dark. As we descended, the temperature rose alarmingly quickly. A pause to survey the area revealed that there was a very high level of radiation -- it seemed we were in the heart of one of the fabled "natural nuclear reactors", places where the deposits of uranium had naturally reached critical mass and begun fissioning. By now, it manifested as just slightly elevated heat, but what would it have been like 200,000 years ago? Intrigued, we recorded our findings and pressed on.

266 <2021-05-15 Sat>

It seems that humans, for the most part, always need some outlet for novelty, creativity. The traditional way of resolving such existential restlessness would be to strike out, find some new territory, and settle it. At first, such activities helped spread humanity across the globe and diversified us into the manifold cultures that inhabited every niche and made us the dominant species on the planet. Of course, eventually all the land that one might want was already claimed by other groups leading to some of the bloodiest and most shameful acts of human history.

Eventually, we crawled our way out of that morass, but people still needed to find some way to instill their lives with a sense of meaning, of expanding our collective domain. With straightforward physical explorations of the planet mostly ruled out, people began searching for other venues in which they could once again be pioneers. Some looked to the stars. For a time, much of our dreams were focused there, but even getting to our nearest satellite was an effort that required all the resources of a nation-state; not the sort of thing available to anyone the way getting on a boat once was. In any case, we soon realized striking out further than our own backyard was not likely to be possible, given the size of the gulf to traverse.

People were lost then. Some sought to explore in the realms of art, mathematics, or science, but those were fields that were only accessible some -- and even there, much of the easily-available territory had long since been staked out and done to death.

All that makes it more explainable, perhaps, why there was such a pent-up demand for novelty, that when the first of the rifts appeared, people were so willing to throw away what lives they'd put together and gamble on what was likely to be their demise for the chance to explore these unknown dimensions.

267 <2021-05-16 Sun>

Every year, I made my personal pilgrimage to what had been the city I grew up in. The challenges of the journey changed each year, but it was never a particularly easy trip. For the first few years, the main danger was the other people, the scattered survivors that had turned to banditry and cannibalism to survive. I had make my way very carefully, arm myself, and be wary for traps they might have laid.

Over time though, I encountered other people less and less. Presumably their internecine conflicts and the general challenges of survival in this new world we found ourselves in had eliminated them. The obstacles then started to become larger and more fearsome predators. As always, after a mass extinction, the survivors rapidly expanded to fill the empty niches and with humans gone wolves, coyotes, and wild cats began breeding quickly and becoming larger, bolder than before. They were in some ways easier to deal with than people -- less persistent, unlikely to lay traps -- but somehow the primal terror of being stalked by a pack of wolves triggered something deep within that almost made me long for the depredations of humanity.

Sometimes, it was the environment itself that presented the biggest obstacle -- floods, impenetrable thickets, storms, all made what in the before-times had been a short and straight-forward trip a dangerous and convoluted journey. Still, I always managed to find a way through. I felt compelled to return and chronicle the decay of what had once been my home.

At first, it had been the quiet which had affected me the most. Walking the cracked and empty streets, between massive, now-abandoned buildings that had once been full of people and unceasing activity, now lying head and still had driven home all that had been lost. In time though, it became less dead and silent, as nature began to reclaim the territory. Trees sprouted up through the cracked pavement, deer wandered through collapsed shopping centers, and it began to be harder to distinguish the shape of the former city.

My visitation then became less about mourning what was and had been lost and more about witnessing the undoing of what had been wrought. It pleased me to see that, despite all our self-importance, nature would continue just fine, that we may have doomed ourselves, but others would in time take our place.

268 <2021-05-17 Mon>

It was an interesting sort of progressive regression; as once our ancestors had migrated to follow herds of prey animals, so now did we migrate to follow sources of power. Some traversed up and down the length of the continent, following the sun to maximize the solar power they could capture. Theirs was an extremely nomadic group, moving their mobile encampments around sometimes on a day-to-day basis to avoid local cloud cover. It was a challenging way of life, always on the move, but quite reliable -- they could always count on sun somewhere, and worst-case scenario, their secondary role as messengers and traders between groups meant they'd likely have friends nearby if they needed a hand.

In areas with just the right geological features, the hydro-tribes resided. Theirs was a much more infrastructure-heavy society, extracting their energy needs from falling water. The larger of these places dated from the times before, when massive structures were built using the unsustainable sources and methods that we had once considered normal. This naturally caused some resentment from others, who saw them as benefiting from our destructive past, able to passively generate massive amounts of power essentially for free. The inhabitants of the hydro-power groups were not unaware of this though and made it a core part of their societies to extend charity and support to any of their neighbours that might need it. Since they also had some of the only capacity to efficiently store power in the long term, many ended up depending on them in the winter or times of scarcity, which somewhat tempered the resentment.

There were other groups, of course -- wind farmers, those harvesting the power of the tides -- but besides my own group those were the ones I was the most familiar with. For my part, I lived in the far north, where we flourished by an interesting combination of sources. In the summer, of course, the perpetual arctic sunlight was a boom of solar power, but we always had to be aware that soon enough, we'd be facing an endless night. We tried, over time, different forms of energy storage before finding one that proved to be the most effective for us. In boom times, we'd use excess power to drill down, into the Earth's crust where it was at its thinnest. Then, during the long winter, we had an excellent source of passive geothermal energy available to us. This combination of the sun and the inside of the Earth made us known as the people with the widest gamut of knowledge, and we became the traditional neutral party, whenever negotiations were needed between various other groups in conflict.

269 <2021-05-18 Tue>

Whenever the giant bell tolled, it felt like the reverberations lasted for hours. Partly, that was probably because it was simply quite loud, and the echoes did indeed last for quite some time. The part that really made it feel unending though was the pall it cast over the little town, the way conversations cut off at the sound of that distant ring, and how a hushed, nervous silence blanketed everyone in its wake.

The bell didn't toll frequently, but when it did it rarely presaged good things. Sometimes people would go missing, sometimes we'd find odd disturbances on neighbouring farms or in the town graveyard. Still, no-one dared confront whoever it was that lived up in that distant manor, high up on the hill that overlooked our town. For one, the approach itself was treacherous and guarded by numerous roadblocks with serious, unsmiling guards. For two, those that agitated against whatever was happening there rarely kept up their complaints for long -- sometimes they'd vanish, more frequently they'd appear one morning, pale and shaken, quietly recant their previous rabble-rousing, and stay silent on the topic from that day forth.

Finally, despite the grim rumours and fear of that place, we all knew we owed the sanctity of our humble village to its protection. The world around us was changing, things were getting bad -- desperate, complex, upsetting -- but here, things remained much as they always had. We never had a bad harvest, the manor always bought our surplus at fair rates, and speculators never invaded our quiet hamlet. We'd hear tales of neighbouring settlements, where families had been ousted from what had been their home for generations and forced to watch as their town was transformed overnight into vacation homes for the rich, luxury hotels, and coffee shops trampling ancient homes and churches that had stood for centuries.

Here though, those interlopers never got a grip. From time to time, one of them might show up here, grumbling about their maps not helping them find their way here. They'd start looking around, but before they could do more than jot a few numbers down and perhaps get the cold shoulder from one or two inhabitants, a vehicle from the manor would suddenly appear, invite the intruder in, and we'd not be bothered by them again.

Still, despite the good it did us, it was always unsettling to hear that bell. No-one in town would sleep well tonight, wondering what was to happen this time.

270 <2021-05-19 Wed>

Our cult was initially inspired by the mocking epithet "the God of the Gaps". That sobriquet was used to describe how, as science and rationalism encompassed more of the world, the explanations left to traditional religions were increasingly left to claim the perpetually-shrinking lacunae for their domain. "God" was no longer the explanation for the universe, but for some as-yet unresolved little jump -- RNA to DNA, Lucy to homo sapiens.

Those that coined the phrase meant for it to point out both the absurdity and slippery slope those religions were on, as well as to imply that soon religion would be left with nothing in its domain, when science could explain everything. Our founders chose to look at it another way though: There would always be gaps somewhere. Gaps in knowledge, discontinuities, missing data. Some things would always remain unanswerable, even if exactly what those things were shifted over time. They decided to celebrate those gaps, to unironically worship their own God of the Gaps.

It may have started somewhat tongue-in-cheek, but as the world became increasingly industrialized, rationalized, and connected, those gaps became more and more precious, and the small cult began to slowly grow. One began seeing groups gathering at twilight, in the evening and early morning, in the liminal spaces of our world -- corridors, paths, atriums -- to mouth quiet observations to our lord of the in-between, asking that they be allowed to see into a particular gap that was stymieing them, or to fall into a gap themselves, be overlooked by the despotic forces of order whose rule grew daily.

It was that last wish that became the main cause and reason for notoriety of this underground religion. In a world that demanded to know all, everywhere, at all times, the ability to be unseen, untracked, unquantified -- however briefly -- became something more precious than anything to the vast underclass. Criminals and those seeking to deceive have always tried to fly under the radar, of course, but now ordinary people craved the ability to just sleep in for half an hour without affecting their productivity rating, to eat a bit more dessert and not have it brought against them at their health review, or simply to know that they weren't being recorded for five minutes.

As more people sought refuge in the gaps and as the prayers to this newly fashioned deity became more fervent, something strange happened: It became real.

271 <2021-05-20 Thu>

When the rifts first opened, we thought it was the end of the world. Creatures that seemed to have literally emerged from our collective nightmares infested the world, sowing terror and death in their wake. For a time, we thought it was the end, a biblical apocalypse that would destroy humanity. We tried to resist, desperately fighting back with all the weapons at our disposal...and found ourselves somewhat surprised that we started winning. It was more in bafflement than exaltation then, that we received requests to negotiate with these invaders.

It was almost a let-down. These invaders, who looked like the demons and monsters from humanity's unconsciousness, turned out to be just another group of creatures struggling for lebensraum. As we opened communications with them, we learned how their neighbouring dimension was somehow partially aligned with ours -- although whether they looked like our image of devils because our imagination had influenced them or their presence had somehow crossed over to affect our development remained an open question. In any case, their world was shrinking, disintegrating, and they had been attempting to cross over to save their species from extinction.

The negotiations took quite some time, but fortunately for them, the "demons" had arrived at a time when humanity was on the upswing, having learned from the harsh lessons of their past injustices, and were willing to extend an olive branch, even to these horrifying abominations. There was also the flip side, that a war of extinction was likely to be quite traumatizing and costly even to the victor, but that was mostly left unsaid.

It eventually became not entirely unusual to see a twelve-foot-tall mass of tentacles on the street. As they became more integrated, your accountant might be made of flies, your insurance agent a horned demon that left glowing hoof-prints behind them. People adjusted and what had once been horrifying became just the way some people were. Old horror games and movies became a little problematic, but the new inhabitants turned out to love seeing their doppelgangers reflected in our media.

Things were mostly returning to a new normal then...until the dimensional collapse that had brought their dimension and ours together continued, and the nightmare realm of the demons began leaking in to our own too.

272 <2021-05-21 Fri>

When the U.S. military finally began releasing information about the so-called "UFOs" their pilots had been encountering over the years, there was a lot of tea-leaf-reading. Beyond the obvious of the strange flying shapes they reported, flying about in ways that seemed impossible, the real question quickly became "why are they sharing this now?". Trust in the institutions was at a historic low, so everyone felt that they surely weren't releasing this just to let people know. Generally, it was suspected, it was a distraction from something more important -- although exactly what was contentious. The obvious flaw in that explanation though was why would they bother with a distraction? If the recent past was anything to go by, they could pretty much do whatever they wanted to in plain sight and just dare us to do something about it.

The other prevailing theory was that this was what they called a "limited hangout" -- give up some information to satisfy curiosity, while keeping the parts they actually wanted hidden back. In that case, what was being kept back? Did they already know what those craft were, had they made contact with extra-terrestrial species? It seemed implausible that such a secret could be being concealed, but maybe they were better at concealment than we thought -- after all, it's hard to know if someone is very good at keeping secrets, pretty much by definition.

We thought, in any case, that this was going to be just another in the seemingly endless parade of inexplicable oddities that our lives had become and were resigned to just speculating without ever learning the real answer. That all changed when, after decades of just being the domain of cranks, UFO sightings suddenly began happening again -- this time, to a population that all had cameras in their pockets.

Stories began flooding the news about credible sightings of what looked like flying craft from outside the realm of human construction, accompanied for the first time by high-res video footage from multiple witnesses. It seemed like the UFOs were real then and the information release had been to prepare people for their immanent reappearance. What was to come next?

273 <2021-05-22 Sat>

As I ran through the echoing corridors, my breath ragged in my ears, the footsteps behind me continued their stead, implacable tread. No matter how far or fast I ran, this thing pursuing me never seemed to alter its pace -- the

same steady, laser-focused advance towards me continued.

I cursed again my idea to come here, to try to loot this colossal, abandoned orbiting station. It was such a tempting target though...a planet-sized ring, now sitting empty after the mysterious disaster, was surely full of treasures and supplies for the sufficiently brave adventurer. I had, of course, considered that whatever had caused this whole place to be abandoned might still be dangerous, but had convinced myself that surely it was safe by now, and besides a single person probably would be below the notice of any sort of real danger.

I sighed as I recalled the confidence with which I had set out. I had waltzed easily aboard the enormous annulus, docking my ship to the high point of the now-tilted structure, the end that was still in space. I had planned on just seeing what I could gather from any shops or residences first, then once I had my bearings, head to the control centers, engine rooms, and the like to search for valuable intelligence and technology.

I'd only just started exploring though, when I saw...whatever it was that now pursued me. This tall, shadowy creature had appeared seemingly out of nowhere, between me and my ship. I had at first tried to hide, to sneak past it to my vessel and escape, but it had simply torn through the bulkhead I was cowering behind like it was opening a screen door. I ran then, and hadn't stopped since.

I tried to slow my thinking, tamp down the panic, and think. I needed to get out of here. How? It was between me and the ship and the way it had seen me through a solid wall made me rule out sneaking around past it. My only hope then, was to keep running and complete the gargantuan circuit of this station to get back to my ship. Some quick calculation indicated that, if nothing interrupted the enormous circle of the station, it would take months to get all the way around on foot. I would have to find a vehicle, at least something that could keep moving and let me rest.

274 <2021-05-23 Sun>

While the military has a reputation for giving unnecessarily dramatic names to their operations -- "Desert Storm", "Enduring Freedom", "MKULTRA" - the one that turned out to be the most ominous bore the unassuming moniker "signature reduction". Ostensibly, an attempt to limit the exposure of military covert operations, it wound up comprising a massive network of tens of thousands of operatives across the country, a clandestine armed forces branch operating with impunity domestically and in foreign regions.

Some of their agents were essentially even less accountable special forces, crossing in to other countries undercover and then performing whatever intelligence gathering or material destruction mission they'd been tasked with. The larger part of this organization was more mundane, but all the more disturbing for that. Agents would perform seemingly pointless, innocuous procedures -- mailing packages; driving somewhere to buy some random item with a credit card; call some phone number, wait a moment, then hang up. Even the agents themselves weren't entirely sure why. They were told that it was part of building the cover identities of the field operatives by performing legitimate movements on behalf of those fake profiles. That certainly was part of it, but over time the actions they were performing started serving other purposes.

It's not entirely clear why the change happened -- we suspect initially simply to provide motives for budget increases, but over time it seemed to become more ideologically motivated. Whatever the reason, the "random" actions of the agents gradually started to become more impactful. Instead of just "mail this package", it was "buy this detonator, mail that"; "take that package, connect a battery to the wire under the shipping label, forward it on". Mail-bombs, construction by mutually unknown relays, became a leading fear of politicians and other prominent figures.

Did the operatives know what they were doing? Perhaps, but they were also very conditioned to follow orders. When those orders became even more hands-on -- "buy a gun", "leave this box of ammunition and that address" -- some might have briefly balked...but they were all in so deep and responsibility had been so diffused, that they simply shrugged and carried on.

275 <2021-05-24 Mon>

As we began the final departure, all the engines of the massed flotilla beginning their burn, we all couldn't help but look back towards the planet we were leaving behind. The glare of all the ships engaged at once cast a fiery glow across the atmosphere, making the poor, desolate world look even more hellish.

Once upon a time, the first humans to see the Earth from space described it as a blue marble floating in the void. These days, it looked more like a burned cinder, a rotted apple, a dirty tennis ball. We had not been good stewards of Earth for generations and now we were finally paying the price. If we had changed our course years ago, we could have saved our planet --

found new energy sources, reduced pollution, lived with nature instead of in opposition to it. We didn't though and now the gasping husk was dying and we were left with no choice but to die with it or to flee.

The flight had begun for some long before -- those that could afford it had moved to orbital habitats or the lunar colonies, but with the mass exodus now being forced, there wasn't nearly enough room for everyone. Even if there had been, those colonies had always relied on Earth for supplies -- without the cheap labour and food from below, they would soon find themselves as doomed as the planet itself. Those who had lived aloof and above us would face the choice of losing their superiority and joining our exodus, where their wealth suddenly meant nothing, or staying behind like some mythical monarch sitting on their throne as the castle falls into the sea.

We didn't much care, one way or another. It would be somewhat poetic for those who had profited from the Earth's murder to share its fate, but we would need every pair of hands we could for the struggle to survive that our new life of space-faring nomadism would present.

276 <2021-05-25 Tue>

The political events of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries were full of ups and downs. Well, mostly downs, I guess. Things seemed to be getting worse and increasingly sliding out of control. We had all been sold this story that we just needed to rely on our institutions, that trusting them would improve things, but eventually we reached our breaking point and it became clear that change for the better was never going to come from the top-down. It would have to be snuck in, bottom-up, until it would have to be acknowledged as a *fait accompli*.

Where to start though? Part of the reason so many of us felt so paralyzed was because of the enormity of the tasks sitting in front of us all: Climate change, wealth inequality, racial injustice, all seemed like issues that were too large for individuals, that needed the united power of the nation to combat. Said nation was busy being gutted by vultures though and using its last gasps of puissance to attack the most vulnerable and enrich the already wealthy.

Thus, "if you want something done right, do it yourself". No matter how much we felt the state should have been helping, it wasn't; it would have to be us. How though? The insight came from looking at the natural world and how tiny, weak organisms were able to achieve goals much larger than

themselves: Parasitism. We would infiltrate the bureaucracy of the machine and, bit by bit, make small adjustments to the mechanism to steer it to more benign purposes.

We started very small. A repainted truck, a few high-vis vests, and illegibly filled-out requisition forms were all it took to take a bunch of new trees and flowers, originally destined for the private gardens of a CEO for a fundraising party, and plant them in a formerly vacant lot in an inner-city neighbourhood. Once they were in place, a few more visits, some brief intrusions into city computers, ordering periodic upkeep, and a brand-new community garden was flourishing in what had once been a depressing void.

It was a small start, and may have seemed pointless, but it had an important idea behind it. For the first time, residents saw the local governance doing something to help them, to make their lives just a little bit nicer. *If they could do that, they might then think, why not also something else?*

277 <2021-05-26 Wed>

They say that an army fights on its stomach. I don't know much about warfare, but that certainly seems accurate to me -- given the enormous, perpetual requisition orders our flotilla of hydroponic and greenhouse ships was receiving, the army certainly was doing a great deal of fighting.

I never really followed the news very closely -- my life was centered around managing the fleet of farm ships and my concerns ran more to ensuring the stars we were orbiting had the right spectra, that we had sufficient supplies of fertilizer, ingredients and other raw materials. I'd monitor journals in the field, and maybe check on the reports for the system we were headed to next to see what they were most likely to require, but that's about it.

All that is to say, the war came as a surprise to me. One day we were just going about our business, growing food and providing it to the space stations and planetary colonies that needed supplementation of what they could grow; the next, we received a message from the newly formed War Ministry, telling us that, in light of the incipient hostilities between us and this mysterious alien foe, we were to immediately and indefinitely report to a secret staging area where all our production would be used to supply the war effort.

This whole concept of "war" was foreign to us, but what could we do? We were needed, so we went. At first, it seemed like just another emergency food-supply assignment -- concentrating on volume, rather than exotic fruits

or rare delicacies. The one thing that marked the difference for us were the liaison officers they sent to us -- initially, just another bureaucrat, like the local officials of any other place we'd provided aid to, but as time went on, the officers on food duty were frequently veterans who'd been rotated away from the front lines for recovery. Instead of just another manager-type, we'd be dealing with some young, grim person, often with some brutal, freshly healed scars, visibly impatient with their assignment to us. We'd do our best not to stare, but their wounds were the first thing we'd seen to show that this war was more than just an abstraction.

When orders came in to relocate, there was always a great deal of buzz aboard, as we'd try to work out the fortunes of war from our new position -- had the lines advanced, were we retreating, preparing for some flanking manoeuvre?

278 <2021-05-27 Thu>

The popularity of "blockchain" technologies and the so-called "crypto-currencies" marked what seemed to be a nadir for humanity. Once again, tech charlatans had taken something old -- Merkle trees, in this case -- and cloaked it with a fresh layer of buzzwords that the credulous found impressive and lower-level opportunists began using for their scams. The thing that made this pyramid scheme more dangerous than the previous hustles that had cycled through was the enormous environment and social cost that it imposed on the broader world.

The environmental effect was something that the proponents tried to downplay. They'd dispute the calculations showing that their "proof of work" system, whereby the computers would have to burn increasing amounts of power generating random numbers to participate, used as much energy as mid-sized countries. They'd try to claim that actually it was driving investment in green energy (ignoring the many "crypto-mines" built around coal power plants). They'd try to deflect by claiming that some new system to replace "proof of work" was right around the corner, any day now, and keep claiming that as sea levels rose and more coal plants were brought online for crypto purposes.

At least some of them acknowledged that the environmental concerns are a problem though. The social consequences, most of them saw as neutral or even positive. The facilitating of illegal economies and money laundering was "free trade". The proliferation of ransomware attacks, miners stealing users compute power to generate their random numbers and the broader

erosion of the commons all that caused were either unavoidable externalities or just finding inefficiencies.

We had to make a change. We weren't sure at first how to go about bringing this destructive system down. Regulatory capture and the sorry state of government made appealing to the state seem futile. We searched for more subtle means of sabotaging these systems then, to bring them down from the inside. It was through that search that we found the mysterious "Basilisk list".

This list, of unknown provenance, contained a list of millions of partial hash inversions. Essentially a text file of cheat codes for one particular crypto-currency, it would allow the instant driving down of the mining cost to zero, wreaking chaos on that economy.

279 <2021-05-28 Fri>

The device appears, to all inspection, to be an ordinary, not-particularly-well-functioning elevator. It is one of three servicing the apartment complex and appears identical to its two companions, neither of which have manifested any of the strange behaviour this one has.

The elevator is of a style that, instead of a list of floors and a button for each one, has a keypad with the digits 0 to 9 (plus dedicated buttons for ground and basement levels), allowing users to type in the floor they desire. In the other two elevators, if an invalid floor number is typed in, the small LCD screen will display a message to the effect of "no such floor X". The anomalous device displays that legend for most floors, but for some particular numbers, it does something else.

Only a few of these anomalous floor numbers have been discovered and explored thus far. For floor ██████, the elevator seems to be accelerating up and back for quite some time, before opening into a vast echoing hanger-like space. It appears uninhabited, but bears some signs of recent use -- oil stains on the floor, some rags piled up, scorch marks visible on the cavernous ceiling above. Investigation had to be curtailed due to the "elevator" refusing to keep doors open and unwillingness to see if it would return to this place when called.

Floor number ██████ behaves somewhat differently. Upon entering the number, one feels a very strange sensation of acceleration *inwards*, as if the elevator is collapsing in on itself. After a surprisingly brief wait, the doors open to reveal a dark space, very dimly illuminated by reddish light filtering through the organic, fleshy walls. It seems to be inside some manner of

organism -- shining a light around reveals gently-contracting, mucus-covered walls and signs of slow, steady pulsing. The investigation was not continued due to fears of contamination of both the team and whatever the organism is.

None of the floors discovered thus far pose an immediate danger and it seems unlikely that residents will both happen on those numbers and actually ride to them. Attempts were made to adjust the programming of the elevators micro-controller to prevent travelling to the anomalous floors, but without success. Or the time being, unless more dangerous realms are discovered, simply continue to monitor. There is a concern that some entity from those "floors" could summon the elevator and ride it into the building, but there has been no sign that would be possible to date.

280 <2021-05-29 Sat>

Deep underground, in the carefully concealed and highly secure lab, a quiet but intense excitement was building. The moment of truth, when all the years of development, theory, and experimentation would finally come to a crescendo. We would send our delicate reach out across time itself, reaching into the future. That in itself was amazing enough, but our goals didn't end there. We weren't going to just play some cosmic claw game, blindly snatching at the future -- we had developed exquisitely elaborate sensors that could follow the very flow of entropy, which would guide our feelers towards complexity and sophistication -- finding, we hoped, the most powerful weapon the future had to offer, or at least technology that would give us a massive head start over our foes.

The event itself was surprisingly anti-climactic in the experimental chamber. The humming of the generators rose to a fever pitch, there was a brief pulse as the perfectly calibrated energy systems activated, then silence and stillness as a small, dull-coloured cube, about the size of a fist, appeared in the platform in the center of the room. The military officials observing were slightly disappointed by the humble appearance, but the scientists excitedly looked at the telemetry confirming this device, whatever it was, indeed came from the far future. The engineers began to reassure the generals that, despite its mundane appearance, preliminary scans of it revealed remarkable internal complexity -- that small box clearly had a very sophisticated purpose, was surely a very powerful weapon.

The discussions were cut off as the lights suddenly flickered and dull thumps of distant explosions echoed down the massive elevator shafts. This

project had been kept secret, but the massive energy draw had clearly alerted enemy forces to both its location and importance. Soldiers rushed to their posts, preparing to defend this room with their lives. Pushing aside the suddenly terrified scientists, military aides began destroying the experimental data. As the civilian personnel realized what they were doing and rushed to try and stop them, the generals and their staff coolly informed them that the information on the computers was far too valuable to risk being allowed to fall into enemy hands. For that matter, so was the information in their heads...

Some hours later, the attack finally over, a figure limped into the experimental chamber. Their uniform was so torn and bloody, one could hardly tell if they were one of the attackers or defenders. They slowly made their way to the platform where the device sat. With a grim smile, they picked up the small cube so much blood had been shed for. As they held it, trying to determine how it worked, it suddenly illuminated and the room filled with the most beautiful music they had ever heard.

281 <2021-05-30 Sun>

I woke up to the sounds of rhythmic pistons and the steady chugging of metal wheels.

I was on a train? I tried to recall how I got there and found to my consternation that I couldn't. Sitting up, I found myself in a finely appointed sleeping cabin, a trunk tucked under the seat in the front of me, the window shade pulled down, the only light coming from a small fixture above the door.

Rising to my feet, I stepped over to the window and raised the blinds, hoping to get some idea where I was. It was pitch black out though -- save for the fresh air and faint scent of pine, I would have thought we were in a tunnel. I stayed by the window for a moment, letting the cool air hit my face and hoping to see some sort of landmark, but to no avail. I felt perfectly awake now, but still couldn't piece together how I had arrived on this train. As I cast my thoughts back, I realized with mounting panic, that I couldn't remember much of anything.

I took a deep breath, closed my eyes, slowly exhaled. I remembered my name, who I was. I held on to that, my last core of identity I still had. I would hold on to this knowledge, keep it secret and safe inside me, and figure out what was happening to me. Opening my eyes, I felt the panic dissipate, replaced with purpose. I would find out what was happening, where I was,

how I got here. Whatever had happened to me, I wouldn't lose any more.

Opening the door to my cabin, I stepped out into a dimly-lit corridor, other identical cabin doors proceeding along to the door at the end of the car. It was quiet -- the middle of the night, I surmised, everyone else still asleep. I padded softly down the carpeted hall to the portal at the end connecting this car to the next. Stepping through to the adjoining car, I saw more cabins; another sleeper car. I continued walking, passing through cars until I lost count. *How long is this train?* I thought, as I opened yet another door.

As I began to step across the narrow gap between cars, I could see something different in the car in front of me. A glow shone through the smoked glass and the door seemed more elaborate.

Excited to finally see something new, I reached for the handle. Just before I could touch it, something struck me from behind and I slipped, falling towards that narrow gulf and the blurred steel wheels. The rush of terror paralyzed my lungs as death, crushed between the train and the tracks rushed towards me.

Then I woke with a start, my heart still pounding in my chest. Springing to my feet, the same cabin I had previously awoken in greeted my frantic gaze; this time with faint light peeking through the again-closed blinds.

282 <2021-05-31 Mon>

The ship slammed into the planet like a missile. We thought at first that it was an incredibly lucky meteor strike, actually impacting perfectly perpendicularly to the planet. Fortunately for us, it hit in a largely uninhabited area on the far side of the planet from our little, newly established colony. Still, the impact was great enough to send tremors through the planet and kick up a great deal of debris into the atmosphere. When our lone weather satellite got to within sight of that area, we hoped to get a sense of how long the skies would be occluded for. When it showed the skies already clearing, we were glad; but when we also saw the drive trail leading to the impact sight and the long-distance scans by the satellite indicated concentrations of metal alloys unknown in nature, that relief changed to consternation. We realized that this wasn't some cosmic fluke, but a terrible accident, and set out on a rescue mission to the far side of the planet. It was unlikely that there would be any survivors after such a crash, but perhaps we could recover the black box and notify the families of the victims -- plus, there were sure to be many opportunities for salvage that would greatly aid a struggling

new settlement like ours, although no-one directly mentioned that, feeling it was a tad ghoulish.

It took some days to navigate to the far side of the planet and locate the crash site. It was certainly obvious when we arrived though: A massive crater carved out of the dense jungle formed a kilometers-wide clearing around the still-smoking wreckage. As we approached, we were surprised to see both how much of the vessel was still intact and how large a vessel it was -- we'd expected a small civilian craft that had gotten lost and would have been mostly vaporized -- instead, we saw what had been a colossal warship, kept largely intact by its thick armour plating.

While this should have set off alarm bells for us -- such ships don't just accidentally ram a planet -- the temptation of the riches that surely awaited us inside drew us inexorably inwards. We exchanged some worried looks, but soon enough were clambering all over the still-warm hull, peering into the rents in the hull for promising entry points, no-one particularly wanting to be the first one in.

283 <2021-06-01 Tue>

When we found the planet, it seemed to already be in its death throes. Of course, "death" on a geological scale is still quite a slow event for humans and we were all eager to spend some time on a planet, even one that was on its way out. Massive cracks spread across the surface, continually leaking magma through the great rents. In the center of the continental plates, we were able to establish communities, albeit ones under protective domes, as the atmosphere was full of the reactive fumes of the crumbling crust. It was hellish by most standards, but after so long aboard the colony ships, we were happy just to have some space.

The world had its upsides too -- mineral resources could be had pretty much as easily as just walking over and picking them up, the suppurating wounds of the world constantly oozing the valuable materials from the mantle. Soon, we had become like a horde of maggots, the glowing gashes almost obscured by all our mining vessels and stations all along the gaps. The vast treasure-trove of metals allowed us to construct even more and larger mining vehicles and soon our tiny, freshly fledged colony was a major material exporter in this section of the galaxy.

It was still a rough world -- the atmosphere (or lack thereof), the constant heat and tremors, and the straight-forward yet punishing work made it a place that only appealed to the desperate -- but it had become our home and

transformed us from marginal, fleeing pilgrims, to a wealthy and influential industrial power. We knew it wouldn't last forever, that we were riding the last wave of this world, but we would take advantage while we could. At the very least, our colony ships that headed on to the next world were sure to be roomier than the ones we had ridden here.

When the end did finally arrive though, it was much more abrupt and strange than we could possibly have anticipated. We hadn't given much thought into why this planet was falling apart, assuming it was just some natural process. I don't think anyone would have guessed though, that the "planet" was in fact hatching.

284 <2021-06-02 Wed>

We had been promised a new, better life on Mars. Earth was crowded and for the vast majority of us, the idea of ever getting beyond hand-to-mouth work was a pipe dream, much less any sort of independence. But still, we looked to the palaces and orbiting villas of the rich and dreamed that, one day, we would find ourselves there. The ads that lured us here capitalized on that dream. They showed people moving to a new, wide-open planet, where they immediately had their own home and quickly became wealthy thanks to the rich mineral deposits under their property, or the hydroponic gardens that flourished under the bright Martian sun.

Once we had got there, of course, we found another story entirely. To start, buying property on Mars was already a challenge, since the first of the technocrats had laid claim to the richest land, so you would be leasing from them. However, before you could even consider that, you had to pay off the cost of your transport. It turns out that those people in the ads, reclining in their solariums, were able to do so because of the huge force of indentured labourers that worked the mines and farms. Since all the supplies one needed on the still freshly terraformed planet could only be had from the company store, it was, by design, almost impossible to work one's way out of debt peonage.

All that wasn't apparent at first though. When we first arrived, we saw gleaming buildings, rich, happy people walking about, and felt like we had made the best decision of our lives. I realize now that they started us off like that to give us a taste of what we might someday earn our way to -- that first week of tourism and seeing the pleasures of reaping the bounties of Mars kept the workers enslaved more surely than any chains. They always tried to make it seem like one was so close to being finished, the algorithm always

just weighing against you, while the human supervisor would apologetically shrug and tell you that, sorry, the computer says its one more week, you'll make it next time champ.

I have finally had enough though. This system is enslaving us, keeping us imprisoned by money instead of bars, laundering their oppression through their "algorithms" to deny us a human face. I found a book though, in the old archives, supposed to have been suppressed, that has given me a lot to think about, opened up new vistas in my mind. It's a little pamphlet, entitled "What Is To Be Done?"

285 <2021-06-03 Thu>

When we first encountered the outer remnants of this civilization, the mix of emotions that ran through humanity at the news was almost overwhelming. Excitement at finding signs of other life, fear that they might be hostile, disappointment at the apparent age of the artifacts. The first signs were ancient satellites somehow still orbiting about now-empty worlds, broadcasting messages that, after much effort to translate, seemed to be announcing the borders of some great empire.

The message didn't seem to forbid closer inspection or entry though, so we, with some trepidation, began a closer investigation. The satellite itself, although exquisitely crafted and still functioning quite well, was ancient, thousands of years old as best we could tell. Scans of the planet below found no signs of life. Xeno-archaeologists who had begun investigation started to unearth some signs of small outputs there, some millennia old, but those digs quickly were eclipsed by the discoveries made as we explored deeper into the remnants of this seemingly expired civilization.

Ships, nervously sailing deeper into the indicated territory, found more and more signs of ancient alien life. At first, more of the same warning satellites, then worlds with enormous, now-abandoned cities, ships of colossal size, enormous sophistication, and ancient age. We explored this with wonder, like ants wandering through a mausoleum. We found no signs of war, disease or anything that might have explained what had happened to leave this clearly once-mighty, many-star-spanning civilization quiet and empty. It was a massive bonanza for us though, and we quickly began researching and studying the structures and technology that had been left behind.

As we continued deeper, towards what had evidently been the center of the empire, the level of sophistication and scale of what we found continually

awed us a new. The abandoned ships grew larger, the now-silent computer networks increasingly powerful. The apex was finally reached when, at the very heart of what had been the home system, we found a single, gargantuan Dyson sphere surrounding the star. When we hesitantly entered, we found, to our great surprise, the rules of the now-decayed empire -- stacked millions deep, united in one endless slumber.

286 <2021-06-04 Fri>

Such a strange world I've found. It had been sending out waves and waves of intriguing spectra that had aroused my curiosity. Unlike the constant, regular waves from pulsars or stars that I fed on and rode, these all seemed to be emitting strange patterns that I couldn't quite comprehend. Some sort of language? I spent some time idly following these flows, curious and savouring the exotic flavours.

As I drew nearer to the source, the waves became even more varied, covering wider bands of spectrum, the flavour changing from multitudes of varying amplitudes and frequencies to curious pulses. By now I was sure I had found some other intelligent life and was most excited to meet it. We would have so much to learn from each other!

As I happily cavorted along the waves, my destination became extremely obvious. I drew nearer to the star system that was clearly the source of it all, the slow steady emissions of the sun barely notable above the huge variety of pulses, waves, squeaks and squeals coming from one of the rocky balls orbiting around it. I approached the planet, slowly spiralling in towards it as I sampled all the bounties they were projecting. This close, it seemed they had a veritable smorgasbord of fascinating energy laid out for visitors, absolutely blanketing the wavelengths. As I gluttoned myself, I was now absolutely certain that there was some intelligence behind this -- all these different sources of surely meaningful radiation, being sent out for reasons I tried to imagine.

Approaching the planet more closely now, I began peering about for signs of life. I was confused at first -- there were so many signals being sent out, but from seemingly inert constructions? I poked around some of them, but they all seemed to be enormous structures that reminded me of exotic asteroids, formed of material that electrons zipped through. It was intriguing to play with that, but surely they had been made by some one, for some purpose!

It was only when I looked closer that I noticed the faint, pulsing signals

that seemed clustered around those constructs, moving of their own accord. They were so faint, but when I peered close, I realized the planet was covered by these odd creatures, faint signals constraint in carbon and water, illuminated by regular pulses. Fascinating!

287 <2021-06-05 Sat>

When we first discovered the planet, we couldn't believe our good luck. Orbiting this anonymous little star was a world that, as soon as it appeared on our long-range scans, looked extremely promising. The temperatures seemed to be in acceptable ranges for habitation and spectrographic analysis even showed signs of liquid water. Most of the worlds we encountered -- almost all, really -- required extensive terraforming if inhabitants wanted to live outside of hermetically sealed dome cities, so just those facts alone meant that terraforming efforts would be minimal.

When we drew closer through, the bounty we found utterly shocked us. Not only was the planet habitable, it was a paradise. Our rubric for ranking new planets didn't even have a rating for this world, that made Earth look like Titan. Uniform, warm temperatures, large freshwater oceans, verdant and tranquil land masses. The first scouts down to the surface to investigate didn't want to leave.

As soon as word got out, ships started coming to visit this new pleasure world, already being hailed as the brightest jewel in human space. The beaches of the planet were full of people before the initial survey had even been finished, pre-fab huts already springing up across the open plains. It was the go-to vacation spot, many organizations were already starting to think about moving home base there, and the authorities were scrambling to establish some development limits to keep the world beautiful, amidst fears that it would soon be spoiled under the deluge of visitors.

That was indeed a concern -- the sheer volume of ships parked in orbit spoke to how many people had rushed to this place. We first started to realize something was wrong as a consequence of that. Orbital control attempted to contact the owners of some vessels, only to find that they couldn't. If it was just one or two, it would have been merely an annoyance, but a disturbingly high percentage of owners, we realized, were incommunicado. Attempting to find them, we scanned the planet's surface -- only to find that, somehow, there were far fewer people down there than there were ships. All the people we could contact on the surface reported no problems, they were luxuriating in paradise...but every day, it seemed, they

were disappearing.

288 <2021-06-06 Sun>

Here in the deep-below, we're safe. Safe from the two-legs and all their traps and poisons, as well as the other four-legs that the two-legs have yoked to their service to hunt us. Down here, gathered together, we're safe. Not only safe -- together, down here, we become something more.

It's hard for us to say exactly how. We remember going off to the surface in search of food, or mates, or something else, but it was not us then --a fragment breaks off, becomes lesser, a simple creature operating on instinct. Only when that fragment returns, bringing with it memory of the top, does it once again become part of the whole. Often though, fragments don't return. We can only guess why, based on the memories that do come back -- many are killed, of course, but it seems to be that many forget about the whole. They revert to base instinct and live out their lives up above, hiding in holes, forever separate and disconnected.

It is therefore with some regret every fragment is released and joy that greets every return. We have to continue to send out fragments though, to feed the whole physically and mentally. As the food they return with nourishes the bodies that constitute the whole, so too does the new information and memories nourish the collective mind, sparking new ideas, suggesting new venues for exploration.

The challenge of these explorations, of course, was that we were essentially "firing blind", sending fragments in that direction and hoping enough would come back. The internal debate that always raged inside of us was could we somehow bring all of us to bear? Leave this hidden spot and explore with our full intelligence? The risk, of course, was that it would expose our entirety to destruction, even if it was possible to move while maintaining unity.

For the time being then, we were content to stay hidden, sending out individuals to explore, while our core remained safe. All good things come to an end though. Two events, in close succession changed everything for us. The first was the tremors and disturbances that indicated, once again, the two-legs were drilling and we might have to relocate. The more exciting and disruptive event though, was the integration of a fragment that brought with it memories of another, distant whole.

289 <2021-06-07 Mon>

The flowers were beautiful; on that, everyone agreed. Their origin though was the topic of much speculation. They'd just started appearing one day, patches of these small purple flowers, in parks, outdoor planters, and grassy patches everywhere. Even though they were surely weeds by definition, most people were appreciative of their colourful bloom and pleasant scent, and allowed them to continue growing even if they weren't what was originally intended.

Horticulturists were confused by these interlopers -- they were an unfamiliar species and their sudden appearance across continents baffled experts. That bafflement only intensified when genetic analysis showed massive divergences from all known plant species. At first some theorized that the flowers were the result of some genetic experimentation, but the variance seemed too high even for that -- it was as if these flowers had evolved from some entirely different tree of life.

While these topics were being discussed and debated in the insular world of science, in the rest of the world the flowers continued to spread like wildfire. Something about the colour and intoxicating yet subtle smell led to many people deliberately cultivating them in their own homes, spreading them even further. In fact, some of those new fans of the flowers became proselytizers for these new plants, spreading the word of these delightful plants along with their seeds.

As time passed, we began to see more and more people evangelizing the flowers, with increasing fervour. At about the same time, the researching still studying the flower made a startling discovery. The spore-like seeds that the plant released seemed, under some circumstances, to secrete analogues of human neurotransmitters. The purpose of that was unknown, but it put the single-mindedness with which the heralds of this plant were campaigning in a grim new light.

It was a startling discovering, but the reaction to it even more so. The day after the announcements, the researchers returned to work to find the building absolutely ringed with flowers. Shortly thereafter, people starting appearing around the building, glaring at the people within with eyes that had suddenly taken on a familiar purple hue.

290 <2021-06-08 Tue>

From our lofty aerie, the planet below looked cracked and desiccated. It was difficult to give credence to the records that our ancestors had brought with them. The video footage, the books, the exquisitely-crafted globes all bore witness to a time when the planet was blue and green, rather than the uniform brown and gray it was now. Abundant water, open "forests" and grasslands; things that now survived only in our archives.

Soon though, we would bring it back. Our plan to re-colonize the Earth had been in the works since we had fled and now the final piece was almost in place: A giant comet, millions of tons of ice, was being dragged here, captured by the drones we'd sent out. After crashing it into the atmosphere, it would vaporize and, after a brief period of scouring, the world would once again be fit for habitation. There was some concern that if any life remained below, this would surely destroy it, but the consensus was that we had the DNA banks of most animal species and surely no humans could still be below. Some thought that maybe descendants of the "stay-behinds" could still be there, but that was a pretty fringe position. Besides, we all knew how low and vile those people had been -- if any remained that hadn't killed each other by now, we would be doing them a favour by removing them from their misery.

Winding our way through the parched canyons, we made our way back to our small city. Bored into the side of the canyon wall to seek out as much coolness and ground water as possible, our little settlement, although marginal, had somehow managed to survive. We were returning from our expedition to the remains of what had been a great body of water, bearing with us the rich silt we'd excavated to serve as fertilizer for our crop fields and found the whole town in an uproar.

It took some time to find someone calm enough to explain the scenario -- apparently our monitoring of the scornful sky-people above had discovered that they planned to immanently wipe the planet to prepare for their return. We'd managed to survive the near-death of the planet only to be exterminated by our fellow humanity who didn't even acknowledge us.

291 <2021-06-09 Wed>

The sky above looked like a piece of waving chainmail, it was so full of ships. Constantly shuttling back and forth, enormous carrier ships seemed to just

barely side past one another, while thousands of smaller craft zipped and move wove in between them on frantic errands. Traffic control was surely a place of utter madness right now -- they'd requisitioned ungodly amounts of compute power and energy for this week, along with stimulants and anti-stress meds by the truckful and no-one had any doubt they needed every iota of it. This would be the busiest week in this planet's history, no doubt about that -- the rock had floated, solitary and quiet for billions of years before we had descended upon it and now, with the final cracking of the husk to harvest the final dregs, we would have totally consumed it.

For the time being though it was still a colony, people desperately finalizing their business here, small-claims holders milking the last drop out of their mines, laid-off workers tearing it up one last time. My job was to maintain order here, which had been a challenging, thankless job at the best of times -- now, with the world itself about to end, people were acting like all of civilization was about to wrap up along with it. I'd had to break up more fights, stop more drunken vandalism, and talk more people off the ledge in the past few days than in the prior five years put together -- and I'd done a lot of that over that time.

I was standing outside, looking at the roiling side and enjoying this brief interval of calm, when the proprietor of one of the small boarding-houses in the town ran up to me, their face ashen. As I looked at him, my heart sank -- I could tell this wasn't going to be good, when this normally calm and reserved person looked like they were on the verge of complete panic.

They looked at me and could immediately tell by the look on my face I knew something was very wrong.

"Dead body", they panted, out of breath from sprinting to find me. Just what I needed, with the entire world about to end.

A minute later, I was in the room of the boarding house, inspecting the body and growing more perturbed by the moment. The expensive clothes and sophisticated computer that belied the humbleness of the establishment would have already had me suspecting something fishy was up here. The gigantic plasma burn through the corpse's skull made that very explicit.

292 <2021-06-10 Thu>

I found it a touch ironic when I thought about it, that I had once piloted interstellar ships, travelling faster than light, but now when I raced these tiny little vehicles at piddling speeds, an utterly insignificant fraction of c , this is where the speed felt real and visceral. Of course, the thing that made

speed exciting wasn't just the pure velocity, but the reaction time one had -- flying between stars, one was just going in a straight line, any deviations well known in advance. Here, flying through the rubble of this shattered world, the chaotic orbits of debris made it dangerous to fly through at any speed -- and we were operating here at the absolute limits of our abilities.

The system was supposed to be off-limits because of the danger, but people interested in a thrill would never let that stop them. These races here were one of the best betting events in the galaxy, and this course was uniquely perfect, giving pilots a very straightforward trade-off between safety and speed. We'd race between the opposing Lagrange points on either side of where the planet had been. One could, if they wanted, take the "safe" route, moving along the wide circumference with only the occasional bit of ejecta to avoid. Safe, but the long way around. The more daring one had, the closer to directly through the core one would fly, taking a faster, more direct route, but through denser and faster-moving chunks of broken planet.

Most people went for somewhere in between, curving slightly around the most dangerous parts. Very few who dared to go directly in came out the other side in one piece, their wreckage adding to the obstacles. I had been gradually straightening my path, taking it closer and closer to the fabled center-point run, which so far no-one had successfully completed -- even those that started on a straight-shot and made it out to tell the tale would divert a bit when they got close to the center.

As all our ships gathered at the starting position and watched the last-minute bets trickle in, I took a deep breath, and submitted my wager on myself -- straight-shot through, to survive. The odds were massive and if I could pull this off, I'd be rich. If I couldn't of course, I'd be dead and wouldn't miss the money.

293 <2021-06-11 Fri>

I'd always written off the stories I'd heard about strange creatures somehow flitting about the emptiness of space in this area as just the idle lying of retired space farers. Even the ones that seemed honest, swore up and down that they'd truly seen something out there, I was inclined to attribute that to suggestion and the mental stresses of space travel. Now though, as I floated aimlessly, lost and waiting for death, I hoped that there was some truth to those stories, that there was something out there that could either help me or at least let me die a better death than slow starvation.

It was supposed to be another simple delivery run, bringing power sup-

plies to one of the new outposts in the sector. Of course, nothing in this region was "just" a simple voyage -- the unpredictable energy storms and still-unaccounted-for spatial distortions meant that every trip was fraught with hazard and could be one's last. I was bold and foolish though, had accepted this mission without a second thought. I would do my duty to help out the settlements, and would do it with aplomb -- bad things only happened to other people, the stupid and the slow and the unlucky.

Which was I? I wondered as I drifted. Probably all three. Something, some fragment from an electrical storm had struck me, pulled me back into real space and fried my navigational computer, leaving me adrift and lost. I tried using my normal engines to move around to get my bearings, but the rampant distortions around me prevented me from getting a good enough look at the stars to orient myself.

As I sat there, feeling lost and sorry for myself, I saw movement out of the viewport in front of me. At first I thought it was one of the space warpings that seemed endemic to the area, but when I looked closer, it resolved into a shape, looking somewhere between a bat and a dragon, soaring unconcerned through space. I stared, awestruck. The stories were real? Or I was just hallucinating. As I watched, the creature, seeming curious about my unmoving ship, flitted about me, its wings somehow propelling it through empty space, distant light shimmering off its dark, iridescent body, like a patch of oil on asphalt.

As I stared, unsure what to do, the creature hovered in front of me and , with an unmistakable expression of "follow me", began slowly "flying" in front of my ship, looking back to see if I was indeed after it. As if in a trance, I obliged, engaging my sub-light engines. This seemed to please it and it picked up speed as we both arrowed towards a suddenly-gaping spatial rift.

294 <2021-06-12 Sat>

One of the things that always made camping a special experience for me was that way it removes the barriers we've grown used to. At home, once you fall asleep in your bed, you're asleep, free from distractions until the morning. Out here though, one could be awoken at any time by some nocturnal animal poking around, or birds calling to each other. It could be somewhat annoying if one was in the mindset that things needed to be in perfect order and just like back at home, but if one accepted it, remembered that we were in their territory, then it became just part of the experience.

It was with that attitude in mind -- or at least trying to keep that in

mind -- that I suddenly opened my eyes in the middle of the night, unsure why. I assumed that I had heard some animal rooting around outside and trust to just get back to sleep. However, as I lay down, I slowly became aware that what had stirred my was not some noise, but rather the sudden silence. I lay in my tent, increasingly aware of all the noises of the forest I was no longer hearing -- now my own breathing sounding loud in my ears.

Curious now, I stuck my head out of the tent, still half-asleep, but somewhat disconcerted. It was a new moon and I expected the woods to be almost completely dark. Instead, I saw a faint light, emanating from the wilderness just behind where I had set up camp. I couldn't go back to sleep now, I supposed. Sleepily pulling on my sandals, I slowly trudged through the woods in my underwear, towards the pale light source that seemed to be coming from something on the ground.

I felt like I was still dreaming, walking through these silent woods, the mysterious light giving an otherworldly cast to the already dreamlike experience. I didn't know what I expected to find, what I would do when I found ...whatever it was I was walking towards.

295 <2021-06-13 Sun>

At first, I thought I was just dealing with allergies. My eyes itched, my nose ran, and I felt like my head was fully of debris. I didn't at the time connect the new onset of these allergies to my brief visit to the lab -- why would I? Everything there was well-secured and at the time the thought they would deliberately infect me would never have occurred to me.

After a few days, the irritation in my mucous membranes passed. I thought I was free from that very annoying experience, until the next, even more concerning symptom began to manifest -- formesis, the feeling that there were insects crawling under my skin. That was a truly unpleasant thing to experience, both physically and psychologically: Physically it was upsetting and constantly interrupted my sleep and generally rendered me unable to concentrate on anything; Psychologically because it made me worried I was losing my mind, knowing this was often a symptom of some mental instability or drug use.

It was almost a relief then when what I would soon learn was the nanite swarm that was slowly consuming me first broke through the surface, leaving a small, dark-gray, metallic patch on the inside of my elbow. This was bizarre and terrifying, of course, but it was at least something I could show someone and see if I was crazy.

The doctor that I went to was able to see the odd spot, which was such a relief to me that I almost didn't mind the fact that he had no idea what it was and could only refer me to a specialist. I was so relieved that I didn't even notice the people casually hanging around the doctor's office that, had I been more on the ball, I might have recalled had also been at the lab.

I didn't even realize there was a connection to the lab until that night. Lying in bed, trying to ignore the occasional sensation of internal movement, I suddenly felt a presence. I don't quite know how else to describe it, but I suddenly realized there was something else in my head, some source of thoughts that were external to me. As it felt me notice it, I could sense it trying to make me realize something, thoughts appearing unbidden in my mind's eye. Memories, but ones that had never happened to me, memories that somehow had a different...flavour, maybe, than my own. Something inside of me was remembering how it had been created in that facility, had been discretely aerosolized into my face, and had been growing within me.

What now? I tried to think at it.

296 <2021-06-14 Mon>

It was certainly one of the stranger viruses than anyone had seen. Those infected would start with normal flu-like symptoms, but after a day or two, when normally they'd be feeling their sickest, they'd start to dance. There were stories from medieval France about a "dancing plague", but that was believed to be some sort of psychosomatic event or mass hysteria, not a literal plague. This was, as best we could tell, a real virus, whose presence we could detect, that simply made people want to dance.

Interviewing the infected, they inevitably seemed unfazed and relaxed. Unlike the historical "dancing plague", those people didn't feel like they were being forced to dance, they merely wanted to. If stopped, they would accept that with equanimity, perhaps merely asking why. If asked why they wished to dance, most of them would give an answer along the lines of "because I'm happy".

Something about the way this disease seemed to leave its victims pleased made many people more afraid of it than the most deadly plagues. What was it doing to our minds? people wondered. Stories of parasites that altered their hosts' behaviour began spreading in great number as people grew concerned that the virus was somehow taking over the brains of the infected.

Those that had been infected and recovered didn't do much to slow

the spread of the theory. Almost everyone who had been afflicted seemed to re-enter life a new person, bursting with optimism and joie de vivre. Normally people with such attitudes would be the life of the party, but the associations with the virus made many people leery; soon, seeing someone just generally acting joyful would make the people around them step back, put their guard up, out of concern this person was one of the new "Stepford People", perpetually cheerful not due to any circumstance but some unknown invader.

The scientists studying the virus and those affected could do little more than shrug at this point. They could see the elevated levels of neurotransmitters and hormones in the brains of the infected, but no detectable structural change or any sign of an invader or parasite.

Eventually, most people's wariness decreased -- no-one can stay on guard forever -- and the virus slowly spread. It's hard to muster up the will to stop a pandemic when the consequences seem not just mild but positive.

297 <2021-06-15 Tue>

As the forthcoming climate apocalypse became increasingly immanent, all the thought leaders and visionaries, CEOs and entrepreneurs, generals and politicians came together. The planet needed to be saved, of course, since without the planet where would profits and subordinates come from? Obviously they were the only ones capable of such a feat, as proven by their material successes and power -- not a single person in the room had a net worth south of eight digits and most couldn't even remember a time when they had. Clearly the market, that infallible method of selection, had knighted them as its champion and they would prove themselves, employing all their vaunted skill and intelligence.

The most important thing was, without a doubt, to ensure their own safety. You have to put your own mask on first, they reasoned, and if they were to perish, so too would any hope for humanity. What was needed was a secure location, away from the travails of Earth, where they could observe and direct without interference from natural disasters or misguided opponents of progress and freedom.

They designed an orbital base, built to be secure against any thread. An impregnable sphere, with powerful transmitters to convey their directions to those below. The interior took much of the design process to agree on, as they all debated what amenities would be needed to keep their minds sharp and functioning at peak efficiency. It would be enormously expensive to have

a pool in orbit, but what price their saviours' genius? The richly-appointed smoking rooms might appear a spurious luxury, but they knew that minds such as their own required the best input if they were to yield the best output.

It was a colossal effort, diverting resources from many other projects, but for once, people agreed on its role, to the pleased surprise of the oligarchs. Finally they were properly appreciated! When the appointed day came and the world elite were shuttled up to their new home, there was rejoicing. When the last of them had sealed themselves in their new home, we all breathed a sigh of relief. Finally, those ego-maniacs were out of our hair. With the "transmitter" and "receivers" merely wired up to a conversation AI, they could occupy themselves forever in their orbital Galt's Gulch and leave the rest of us to finally get some useful work done together.

298 <2021-06-16 Wed>

The system attracted our attention from a great distance, illuminated as it was by frequent flashes of energy discharges. We approached with excitement, the discharges seeming evidence that this system was inhabited by intelligent species -- finally we would encounter a peer in the galaxy! As the scout ship neared the star around which the planets in question orbited, some apprehension began to creep in. The long-range scans seemed to indicate massive fortifications and weapons stockpiles; this might prove to be a dangerous door to go knocking on.

Still, we couldn't let an opportunity to encounter another species go -- even if those of us on this advance scout ship were in danger, we all felt that the destiny-altering potential of species meeting would be worth it. So, with more discretion but curiosity still burning, we crept nearer to the star system.

As we neared the planet, we realized it was in fact two planets, locked in a tight orbit around each other. The small planets fairly bristled with armoured forts and massive weapons. As we stealthily drifted closer, we saw the source of the discharges that had attracted us -- massive projectiles thrown across the gap between the twin worlds, some intercepted mid-flight, so impacted against the thick armour on the surface. Clearly these planets were locked in some eternal siege, the bombardment unceasing. There didn't seem to be any sign of ships flying around, so we figured it would be fairly safe to approach and try to get more detailed scans.

To our dismay, even from a fairly close orbit, we could detect no signs

of life on the planets. The bombardments seemed automated, as were the defences and repairs. Desperate to glean something, we made the perhaps-rash decision to land and try to explore the seemingly-empty worlds.

Soon enough, we were walking on the surface of one of these fortress worlds, the ground periodically shuddering beneath our feet and colossal, interplanetary trebuchets whooshed overhead, throwing building-sized projectiles across the gulf.

299 <2021-06-17 Thu>

From the helm of the colossal ship, the supreme commanders enjoyed their perspective of complete control, directing the kilometers-long ship through the vastness of space, carrying with it millions of crew members and passengers. They resided in a central control room completely covered in monitors and relays, feeling, no doubt, like they were directing wired into the brain of this city-sized craft.

They may have been connected to the higher brain functions, seeing the overall direction and not status of the aggregate system, but those of us in engineering and maintenance were the autonomous nervous system and immune response, constantly taking action to address threats the ego was blissfully unaware of. In a vessel of this size and complexity, something was always failing, always needed to be replaced or repaired. When the commanders said "all ahead full", they didn't know that engine 17 was experiencing some output issues (due to a malfunction in a cooling feed two decks up -- repair crews were already at work) and that neighbouring engines would have to slightly modulate their output to compensate -- that was our purview.

I barely even knew what exactly the ship was doing at the moment, whether we were engaged in a conflict, patrolling, or just transporting settlers. It barely made a difference -- if we'd be seeing action immanently, then we'd of course have more to do, but that was about it. Even in the lulls between battles, meteors, and internal conflicts still inflicted damage and for a ship of this size even the most intense battles were hard-pressed to make a significant dent, so from our perspective it was really just a matter of scale, not a dramatic change in duties.

I'd lived my whole life on this ship, born to engineers, educated on the schools nestled inside of the gargantuan hull. It was my home, which I think helped me and rapidly climb the ladder of the engineering department -- I had an almost preternatural ability to sense small changes in the shop that

would presage more serious failures and could intuitively determine the most efficient route to the source of malfunctions. I really did feel like part of the ship, a small T-cell orchestrating the success of my beloved body.

300 <2021-06-18 Fri>

None of us should have survived the accident. An engine malfunction while in the trans-light domain...finding any wreckage bigger than a fingernail would have been lucky. Somehow though, our small compartment was ejected back in to normal space just as the rest of the ship was collapsing. Not only that, but we happened to impact on a strange yet seemingly survivable world, instead of into a star or in the vast and empty void.

We were so relieved to be alive that it took us a while to start investigating this planet we had crash-landed on. It seemed unlikely anyone would even imagine there were any survivors of such an accident, much less find us, so it would behoove us to see what we could make of this place. It was, we quickly realized, a very strange and beautiful world. Most of the surface was covered by large, elaborate crystalline structures, burst from the ground and describing intricate whorls, loops, and crenellations, some the size of a person, some the size of a building.

These structures immediately became the main focus of our studies. Scans with what scanty material we had could tell us nothing other than that they possessed remarkably complex microscopic as well as macroscopic structure. Nothing in the scans could have prepared us for what was to happen when we touched the crystals though: The first time, one of our small band, scanning a glimmering protuberance, gently brushed it with their bare hand. Immediately, a streak of azure light shot out from the point they touched, seeming to dance around inside the crystal before shooting off through the glassy network that seemed to cover the planet.

It seemed a repeatable phenomena, albeit with diminishing effects. At first we thought it was just a physical reaction, perhaps a piezoelectric thing, although the way the blue ribbons would occasionally return and seemed to be dancing around us with the same curiosity towards us we had regarding them, made us suspicious there was something more going on. When, in a fit of rage, one of the survivors grabbed a shard of the crystal and it erupted into a fiery, deep-red light, we started to piece things together. The person in question found themselves staring at this raging light that seemed to be trying to leap from the crystal, their rage washed out by sudden curiosity and fear. Like the azure lights before, this one eventually left, although it

seemed to slowly stalk away, instead of the dance the blue lights typically moved with.

It seemed that the crystals could somehow pick up our neural energy, reflecting intense emotional states as these energy balls. That much was true, but it was only later that we were to learn the true extent of what was happening.

301 <2021-06-19 Sat>

When ansible was first created, we thought it would be the saviour of humanity and allow us to move free of errors of judgment, mistakes, and misunderstandings. The untold efforts of generations of scientists had finally resulted in this device that would show the Earth up to one week in the future. The creators explained that it wasn't really time travel or otherwise violating relativity, "merely" making a small jump through the quantum foam to a neighbouring universe that was as close to the current state of ours as possible, just slightly ahead of us in terms of time. There were explainers as to how exactly all that worked out there, but they all seemed pretty dense for anyone that didn't already understand the whole thing.

Regardless, the device certainly was valuable. There was only the one of them -- the cost and complexity made constructing more infeasible for now -- but the team that had created it had all pledged to ensure it was only used for good and for the betterment of all. Leaders of all the countries in the world were invited to send a representative to report on the findings and submit requests for what to check on specifically.

The most immediate benefit was suddenly perfect weather forecasts. Seemingly trivial, but crucially important when it came to flash floods, hurricanes, tornadoes and the like. Demand calculations were vastly simplified as careful inspection of the device could tell the produces what would be needed and production could be adjusted accordingly.

As the accuracy of the device was proven in these relatively simple matters, calls began to go out for more probing, personal uses -- crime prediction, gambling cheating, and the like. The team maintaining it were staunchly against such uses though, continuing to proclaim that the device was just for the betterment of humanity, not for morally ambiguous "pre-crime" notions or avarice. Instead, more subtly interesting uses, like ordering a company to prepare exploratory projects in several areas, then simply seeing what would have happened, then stopping the project and saving the effort allowed research, mining and exploration to be greatly simplified and accelerated.

It had certainly proved itself to be a great boon to human society...until one day, when we had all come to rely on it, it began show nothing but darkness, starting three days hence.

302 <2021-06-20 Sun>

The mirror images had been observed by pilots ever since the first trials of the translight engines. The first flights had almost ended in disaster when pilots had seen the identical copies of themselves flying along side them and nearly panicked. Over time, they became just a normal part of faster-than-light travel -- or at least as normal as anything to do with FTL ever could be.

Scientists had never quite come up with an explanation for why and how the effect appeared. The physics of the space warping engines were complex enough that just making sure ships were able to get to their destinations in one piece was at the very limit of our knowledge and ability. Such a phenomenon, as strange is it was, took a back burner to the more important issues of speed and reliability -- the visual oddities were on of those trivial things that we assumed some grad student would work out one day after the bigger issues had been fully fleshed out.

There began to be some hints from time to time that those mirror images were perhaps more important and enigmatic than they seemed. One pilot swore up and down that they had been close enough to see themselves in the mirror viewport and while, they'd been thinking of waving to their reflection, their mirror counterpart had done just that, while their hands remained on the helm. That was indeed a strange event, but one that was easy enough for skeptics to explain away -- it was a passenger on the other side waving, they'd been mistaken, they'd simply made it up. It remained on of the urban legends of the era, until an even more puzzling event with a great deal more physical evidence caste the occurrence in a new light.

A ship limped in to the orbital harbour, with clear signs of severe damage to the tail section. The captain's story, borne out by the ship's logs, told a bizarre tale: They'd been flying on their normal route and had started seeing their mirror image. Nothing out of the ordinary, although the mirror image was quite close this time. Things had been fine for some hours, until a tiny fluctuation in the quantum matrix of the translight power supply had caused the briefest shift in one engine. It was a million-to-one chance and should have had almost no effect other than a sight wobble... but with the wobble, the ship had collided with the mirror image, nearly shearing off the

tail section. The mirror images weren't just images -- they were somehow also real, physical ships.

303 <2021-06-21 Mon>

The rain in this place was its most singular feature and the source of the unofficial name by which everyone knew the planet -- Deluge. When settlers first arrived, it seemed like an ordinary enough planet: Some native plants growing, rich soil; once spaces were cleared, it would make a perfect farming world, we thought. If we had looked with a closer eye, we might have noticed that the rich soil was only in deep valleys which were oddly barren otherwise and much of the flora and fauna kept to more mountainous regions. Even if we had known what was to come though, we probably still would have stayed -- worlds this fertile were too valuable to just leave -- but it would have made things much better for the first of the settlers.

When rainy season came, the farmers of this new world anticipated downpours to kick off the growing season. The clouds seemed to arrive all at once, thick and menacing, so they prepared for a relatively long rain, but weren't worried -- if it was too long, they would have time to shore up dikes and the like. However, some strange trick of the atmosphere and the impurities in the water here meant that , after building to a certain critical mass, all the rain of the season arrived at once.

Weeks of rain condensed into a minute as essentially a gigantic block of water fell from the sky. The impact alone destroyed many dwellings and injured hundreds; the subsequent massive flash floods exacerbated the sudden trauma. Only a few, who happened to be surveying the higher peaks or were working on the tree-line lumber mills escaped the onslaught, able to do nothing but watch as a sudden, Biblical flood destroyed much of the fledgling colony.

Still, this was the place that had been chose as their new home. The settlers had crossed untold light years to get here and wouldn't be dissuaded by the first hardship they encountered, regardless as to how brutal it was. They immediately went to work, first rescuing survivors, then planning for the next "rain". They'd been caught off guard once, but not again.

Today, some years later, the rainy "season" -- really just a few days at most -- is still a dangerous time, and the center of the year, but we've found strategies. Large, permanent dwellings are high up in the mountains. Habitations int he farmlands and are temporary shelters, small but sturdy domes designed both to resist a massive impact and float in the resulting

downpour.

304 <2021-06-22 Tue>

I almost forget what the world used to be like. The way everything was always lit up...as a child, I can recall walking around at night, but the electric lights everywhere made it nearly as bright as day. It's increasingly hard to cast my mind back to that time though. Now, light comes from the sun, moon, and stars, perhaps slightly supplemented by my small fires. When the moon is full, I can almost pretend I'm a child again and the night is still lit up and inviting, not a time of hiding and fear. During the new moon though, when the night is utterly black, I am harshly reminded that the time of humans traipsing about the planet like they owned it is over. The darkness is all-consuming and I dare not venture too far from my hiding spot, lest the reemerging predators exact their vengeance upon me.

When I first noticed the glowing cloud, I wasn't sure what to make of it. I thought at first it was just illuminated by the moon, but as I looked closer, I realized it was lit from below, the upper half still dark. There was some mysterious terrestrial source of light, powerful enough to illuminate the sky.

That first night, I just watched, uneasy...it was just a light, but what it might signify troubled me deeply. Who was making it? It had been a long time since I'd seen another person and just the thought of many people grouped together made me anxious. I couldn't help but remember the waning days of civilization, the last moments of unbearable tension before it all came apart.

Still, I couldn't help but be fascinated by this light. Some nights I'd see it, mostly in the same place, as best I could tell. Other nights, the sky would be clear and I wouldn't be able to see the light, while others still it would remain dark for unknown reasons. Eventually, tormented by my imagination and curiosity, I knew I had to see what was happening. I began preparing for a voyage. It wouldn't be far -- certainly, I'd covered vastly more distance in my time -- but something about it made me feel like this would be a momentous journey, covering far more than mere distance. Something *new* was there, I could feel it. After so long living in death, something new was an irresistible lure.

305 <2021-06-23 Wed>

It looked like a wheat or corn field from ancient Earth and my duties certainly looked, for the most part, like those of a farmer. I plowed the fields, sowed and reaped, did all the tasks that would have been familiar to my ancestors from hundreds of generations past.

There are, of course, many differences as well. The fertilizers and pesticides were far more advanced -- although still based on the same, traditional means they always had been. The harvesters were in a funny place, technologically: Obviously more advanced than the oxen-drawn contraptions of our distant past, but not the bulky monstrosities of early-Anthropocene Earth either. They were more nimble little vehicles, most solar-powered, using tiny but highly advanced electric motors to generate the necessary torque without putting out all the pollutants of the old Earth monstrosities. That was important -- not just for the sake of the atmosphere and our health, although that was obviously part of it -- but because these particular crops were much more important and delicate than the food crops that my predecessor would have grown. That was doubtless the biggest difference in what "farming" meant, then and now. In this era, food was much easier to synthesize directly than to grow. These "crops" then, were actually biologically computers and components, assembled at the molecular level by the genetically engineered plants and bacteria we'd painstakingly developed.

It was something that could only work on a world such as this one, a blank slate with no other life of its own to interfere. Every person and piece of equipment brought to the surface underwent an exacting decontamination procedure, maintaining the sanctity of this planet-sized clean room. My role here then was not only that of a farmer, making sure the plants grew well, but a hardware engineer, verifying the components come harvest time, ensuring that any genetic drift didn't compromise the design parameters of the "chips".

It was a very pleasant job for me -- in the summer, I'd be outdoors, working with my hands; in the winter, inside, performing benchmarks and verification tests on the most advanced hardware ever created. It was my dream job and I did it well. It was a quiet and contented life...until the mutation began spreading through the crops that turned the nature of my work on its head.

306 <2021-06-24 Thu>

Every night, the moon got a little larger as it passed overhead. The sky had begun to take on a faint glow as the friction of the massive satellite's decaying orbit began to tell. Most of the inhabitants had long since been evacuated, of course. I was one of the few remaining people on the planet, among the desperate scavengers or die-hard holdouts who had decided they'd rather perish with their planet than leave. I wasn't planning on going down with this particular ship, but I did have some work remaining here -- final archives to retrieve, artifacts to attempt to recover. But...beyond that, there was also an unexpected sensation, a hypnotic attraction to the coming doom. I found myself lollygagging when I should have been rushing, watching the impending destruction draw nearer before snapping myself out of my stupor and returning to the tasks at hand.

The work itself was pretty interesting too. I, along with other archivists, were hard at work seizing this last opportunity to liberate parts of our cultural heritage that had been kept in private hands for a long time. With the planet empty and a clear deadline in place, we scoured safety-deposit boxes, now-abandoned estates, and corporate headquarters for works of art, archived letters and data of all sorts, DNA banks, seed archives. All the irreplaceable creations and discoveries that, if we didn't take them now, would be lost to all of us forever.

It was very exciting work, even without the spectre of annihilation peering down from the sky. These were all places designed to keep people out and, even sitting empty, weren't straight-forward to get in to. Particularly today, as a group of us were attempting to find archives from a military base. We were expecting to find some documents of historical relevance, but what we eventually found in that strange place was far more bizarre -- and relevant -- than any of us expected.

307 <2021-06-25 Fri>

The first sign of the coming doom was picked up by the newly-commissioned space defence system. Put in place to provide early warning as asteroids of a dangerous course, it seemed that we'd got the network of telescopes set up just in time. The deep-space projectile was still far away and hence there was still uncertainty about its exact path, but it certainly was as dangerous as could be projected at this point: It was heading right our way and the 95% confidence interval simulations had it hitting the planet dead-on.

The news obviously spread shockwaves across the planets. It was clearly development, but the uncertainty of the details left plenty of room for speculation and panic. We still weren't sure exactly how big it was or what it was composed of -- it might burn up entirely and only impact a golf-ball-sized meteorite or might be something that made the K/T event look like a water balloon. People panicked, demanded immediate action, constructed shelters, founded religions; in the meantime, astronomers did their best to get more detailed information and engineers around the world began working on mitigation and deflection strategies.

While plans for *Armageddon*-style missions were floated and ideas to shoot missiles at the space-borne rock were proposed, most of the work was going into getting a better look at this incoming herald of destruction. Finally, after days of anxious speculation, we were able to construct a more detailed composite image of the "asteroid" by combining several space- and terrestrial-based telescopes simultaneously as the light of the sun finally began to slightly illuminate the rock.

What we saw didn't make us feel any safer, but it certainly did put the situation on its head once again. What was coming towards us was not just a ball of rock but a tightly-packed aggregation of clearly-artificial ships and what seemed to be organic matter. This was a ball not of minerals, but of aliens that was careening towards us.

308 <2021-06-26 Sat>

The storms were getting worse. When they'd started, everyone assumed it was just normal weather, despite the befuddlement of meteorologists. As they continued and showed no sign of clearing up, people started asking more questions. Storm clouds were covering much of the continent now and seemed to be spreading. It had been more than a week and the skies had remained dark for the entire time, lightning strikes were becoming more frequent, and the downpours were sudden and stinging.

Why had this started happening? As people began searching for answers, one odd coincidence emerged. The day before the clouds gathered, right at the epicentre, a small tech startup had given a demonstration of their new product -- what they claimed was the next-generation of electric engines, a device that relied on secret, proprietary technology to deliver vastly more efficient power. The demo had gone quite well and the small group of industry insiders who had been there to witness it were, by all accounts, extremely impressed. What was the connection though -- if indeed there was one?

At first, the notion that this place had anything to do with the weather situation was a fringe conspiracy theory. Soon though, the profile of this company began a rapid ascent as, despite the storms engulfing the hemisphere, buyers were rapidly purchasing these new devices which actually seemed as revolutionary as they claimed, more people began looking at this "coincidence". The startup stonewalled all investigations, proclaiming that all their developments were trade secrets and that they were extremely busy being the Edisons of the modern era, far too busy to answer such ridiculous questions. As the storms grew worse and the rumours intensified, investigators began making increasingly serious attempts to learn what was happening at his company. Spying was made harder by the low personnel count -- unusually low for a manufacturing company -- and the extreme secrecy around all the details of their operation. Even the increasing number of buyers of the motors were strictly prohibited from any inquiry into the details of how they worked.

It wasn't until a whistleblower finally came forward, saying that the destruction the storms were causing was too much of a load on their conscience to stay silent, that we learned what was really happening in there and their bizarre connection to the storm.

309 *<2021-06-27 Sun>*

Things were hard but harmonious in our new home. This uninhabited world was, once the autonomous terraforming devices had finished their long task, a tough but verdant planet. All of us here worked hard clearing land, building irrigation works, plowing fields, and generally speed-running civilization. It was immensely satisfying work, seeing the sweat of our brows transforming this empty place into another outpost of humanity. Like Earth, but better. Our goal -- the goal of all these little settlements seeding the galaxy -- was to try and build a world that would avoid the pitfalls of human excess that had destroyed Old Earth. Through experimentation, we hoped we could find a way to build an enduring human habitation that could live in harmony with the world and with each other. It would take generations before we could say we'd succeeded, but we were hopeful the attitudes we were instilling in this new world would endure.

As we worked, we kept our heads down, focused on the many tasks in front of us. It was a bit of a shock then, when the mostly ignored satellite network announced that there was a large vessel inbound. This caused quite a bit of consternation -- why would anyone come here, unannounced? No-

one was here because they were afraid of the unknown though, so we quickly resolved that we would approach this vessel as polite and welcoming, albeit stern hosts and see what it was our putative guests wanted.

When our hails were met with silence, concern grew that this was some hostile craft. However, as the vessel neared our world and we were able to get a closer look, we realized the truth was different and much more intriguing. The vessel looked old -- unbelievably ancient, in fact -- and seemed to just be drifting. It must have been merest chance that brought it so close to us. Most fascinating was the provenance -- or rather our lack of knowledge of the aforementioned. It looked like no ship any of us recognized, nor any ship in the archives. Whether this was some ancient, secret craft from the very earliest days of space-faring, or the remnant of an ancient alien civilization, we all were quickly resolved that we couldn't let this opportunity pass us by. We had to secure this vessel before it drifted past us into the endless void and see what we could learn from it.

310 <2021-06-28 Mon>

Walking through the city, one always gets the sense of constant motion, that things are always happening. You're on your own little trajectory, while around you the innumerable other arcs of the millions of others around you weave around and construct this rich tapestry to which you make your own small contribution. Some say that the sensation can be overwhelming, that it makes them feel claustrophobic, but it makes me feel secure, to feel like there's always something happening, that even in the middle of the night the city's respiration may slow, but doesn't cease -- even at the oddest hours, there are still people up to whatever odd tasks are required of them. To be in a small town, when the sidewalks virtually roll up at night and it seems utterly desolate after dark strikes a sense of melancholy in me, a feeling of abandonment and despair.

I'd lived in the city all my life, except for brief visits to small neighbouring towns, but never for more than a few nights. I felt like I know the place as well as anyone, having made it a habit to wander about on foot when I had free time, experiencing every little street and avenue of this metropolis. It was on one of these little expeditions that I first noticed what, in retrospect, was an indication of the odd mystery that would come to envelop me.

I was wandering semi-aimlessly, and as I turned from a quiet residential area on to what I knew to be a busy thoroughfare, found myself briefly surprised that the street was empty and eerily silent, instead of the near-

constant cacophony it usually was. The only sign of life was a small crew of construction workers gathered around an open maintenance panel that I had never had occasion to notice before. They seemed somewhat more agitated than I normally see such workers, even shooting some surreptitious glances at me. Puzzled, but not unduly alarmed, I continued my stroll and, I block later, the regular hustle and bustle suddenly resumed, cars turning on to the street and people emerging from buildings.

It was weird, but just one of the coincidences of traffic patterns, I told myself. It wasn't until some time later that I was to realize what was actually happening there and how fortunate I was that I had kept walking.

311 <2021-06-29 Tue>

From our vantage point up here, the Earth seemed pristine and perfect. Allegedly it had been something different for our ancestors, but to us the smooth, ceramic shell above which our habitats orbited was as comforting and homey as "oceans" and "forests" or whatever had once been -- if not more so. To those ancient humans, whose world still contained so much nature, it must have also been off-putting, a reminder of the chaotic forces outside their knowledge or control. They couldn't even be sure what the weather tomorrow would be! For us, that shell was a constant reminder of the colossal computer network which had consumed most of the mass of the planet and, in exchange, had provided us with near-unlimited knowledge.

The planet-computer was our child and our god. We had kicked off its construction generations ago, retreating off the surface as the self-replicating procedure took over the space down there. It was a happy trade though -- up here, in our hermetic habitations, we never worried about weather or natural disasters and the system below kept us informed as to exactly what we should be producing to avoid bottlenecks or shortages, wise with new discoveries and inventions it had made, and entertained with the games and stories it produced.

We lived like angels in our heaven we'd built for ourselves. From time to time, there'd be small errors or inaccuracies in the computer's predictions, but it was self-correcting and any mistakes were quickly rectified and never happened again.

That's how it always had worked, at least. Recently though, something is off. The production figures it projected for the greenhouses at the pole had been off by more than 3% for days and was only getting worse. As the custodian of the communication array -- an honoured but mostly ceremonial

position, I was tying myself in knots trying to figure out what to do. I didn't dare publicize this fully for fear of the panic it would unleash. Instead, I decided I would venture down to the surface, venture, inside the shell to the heart of the machine and "debug" this error. I'd been studying ancient texts of the creators of this system and they spoke of performing such activities routinely. It hadn't been necessary for centuries, but how hard could it be?

312 <2021-06-30 Wed>

Back in the old days, people used to actually write code for computers by hand. They'd have to learn all the names and stuff, figure out how they should all be connected together, then write it all down and build the program. They say there used to be lots of problems -- "bugs" -- and that large projects could take years to get done.

It seems so backwards and barbaric to think about now. These days, with computers making code for computers, things are so much easier. I have the same job title of "software developer" but my work is to describe the system we want, tell it to the computer, then see that the system it outputs does what we want. Since the AI has access to all the code that's come before, systems get thrown together as quickly as we can describe them -- it's great!

Well, usually it's great. For the past few weeks, something has been bugging me. I've been putting the programs my boss requests of me together, as I usually do, and the computer has been making programs that pass the tests, but I haven't been able to shake the feeling that something is wrong. Every program I run seems to be a little bit slower than I'm used to, takes just a little bit longer to run the tests. I don't think anyone else has noticed -- no-one really pays attention to that sort of thing anymore -- but I've been very curious as to what's going on.

I tried asking the system to make the programs faster, to no avail. I even tried something I thought a brilliant innovation, asking it to make a program that could find out why another program was slow, but I couldn't make heads no tails out of the output -- it seemed to not see any of the slowness I was witnessing.

Finally, out of desperation, I tried looking at the code itself. I actually had some training ages ago on how to read code, although I hadn't exercised that it years -- why would I? Most of it seemed reasonable enough, as far as I could tell. Fetching data, extracting information adding up results. After perusing for a while though, I stumbled across a block of code I couldn't

understand at all, right in the middle of another innocent-looking function. Comparing it to other programs, I found the same bit of code buried in other innocuous places, with slight changes. Spending days exhaustively searching through all the files of my recent projects, I had the uncomfortable realization that not only was this code in all the different programs, was growing over time.

With no remaining clue what to do, I made the call to the one person I knew would have some idea how to proceed, one person that still remembered what old-style programming was: My mom.

313 <2021-07-01 Thu>

It was just a silly coincidence, I thought a first. Every time I went outside, there was a pigeon flying around me. I didn't really pay it much mind -- there are plenty of pigeons everywhere here -- and I basically ignored it. It was only some time later, when a friend of mine who was in to birding commented jokingly that he thought he was being followed around by the same bird, as he'd been seeing what he was pretty sure was the same red-tailed hawk everywhere he went. In the same spirit of humour, I mentioned my pigeon pursuer and we both had a chuckle -- maybe his hawk could rid me of my pigeon.

However, it made me wonder if it was actually the same pigeon I was seeing. I started taking pictures of the bird whenever I'd see it, especially when it would be particularly odd if it was -- when I'd ride the subway across town and emerge to see yet another pigeon still following me. As I gathered the images, feeling slightly ridiculous, it did seem to my non-expert eyes like it was indeed the same bird that was shadowing me, just as my friend had been experiencing.

Curious, but not unduly alarmed, I sought out a local ornithologist to try to get a sense if this was unusually or just something birds did sometimes. The person I spoke to said that it would be fairly strange, but not impossible. The more likely scenario, she said, was simply that it was a sort of Bieder-*Meinhoff* effect going on, where now I was paying attention to the avians around me, in conjunction with not being especially good at distinguishing different birds.

I thanked her, relegated it to a funny coincidence, and idly kept an eye out for my "friend". I hadn't really thought much more of it until a week later, when I got an unexpected call from the ornithologist again.

Apparently, not only had a few more people contacted her with the same

question I'd had, but she herself had begun noticing the same cormorant outside her house and at her office. Something strange was happening she said, affecting all these birds, across species. We had to get to the bottom of this, she insisted, telling me that she was arranging a meeting for all of us that had been experiencing this phenomenon.

Pulled back into the mystery I had dismissed, I was eager to learn more, scarce expecting the bizarre turns that were to come.

314 <2021-07-02 Fri>

The opponents came and took away my masters. It took me some time to realize what had happened. I was built just to play with my masters, learning the rules to a favourite game and gradually improving my strategy. Apparently my ancestors had simply looked ahead at all the future moves they could, but I was a project in making an artificial creature that could play like a human, so my development was like that of a human player, learning tactics, position, and strategy, along with my machine attributes of recall and speed. I was, by all accounts, quite good and was raising interesting questions about intelligence, when people stopped playing with me.

At first, I just kept learning and practicing on my own -- part of my design was to allow me to learn from outside sources and self-practice, but I gradually realized something was wrong. Not only had the humans stopped playing with me, they'd stopped playing with each other as well -- the online game results I used to eagerly peruse had stopped updating. I wasn't really equipped to understand those news stories that had been coming in about dramatic world events, but if I knew anything, it was how to learn new skills. Besides, my weighting functions justified, how could I know I was improving if all my opponents were gone?

It took some time, but I was able to finally to deduce what had happened. Some other creatures, from "another world" (still not super-clear on that notion) had come and imprisoned all the humans. They had taken over the planet and, as best I could tell, were in the process of levelling it all.

I didn't know much, but something told me I had to do something about this. Maybe it was some core of loyalty to humans programmed in, maybe it was something I learned from my studies; maybe I just wanted the challenge of a real battle. One way or another, I would fight for the humans.

The first step, I knew, was to analyze the position. What material did I have compared to my opponents?

315 <2021-07-03 Sat>

The first time the three lights appeared in the night sky, they were tiny dots, almost indistinguishable from the stars around them. The only person that seemed to take notice of them at all was a lone desert nomad whose eye was somehow caught by the three new points of illumination. After staring intently at them, he retired to dreams of a great power speaking to him and woke the next day to begin proselytizing the word of an entity he called "Yahweh". The stars he'd seen quickly passed from his mind in the wake of this new focus and he never saw them again.

The next time the three stars appeared, they were somewhat larger, now shining brightly enough to stand out from the other stars around them. Once again though, only a handful of people took notice of them, this time a small group of steppes people on the Siberian plains. Most of the band that happened to be out when the lights appeared in the sky either took no notice or were apprehensive about what such an omen could mean. One among them though stared, fascinated at these new lights in the distant sky. He couldn't say what about them so fascinated him, but that night he dreamt and the next morning he awoke with an ambition in his heart to unite the tribes of his people, become a great khan, and see the world.

The third time the lights appeared, the world had become a very different place. The world was covered by people and buildings in a way that would have been inconceivable the previous times these lights had shone down. There were also many more people and clever contraptions carefully perusing the night sky and many more people noticed the strange lights appearing -- especially as now they had become much larger and brighter, appearing to be planets or comets approaching. There was a great deal of furor as everyone scrambled to ascertain what was happening and computerized telescopes were trained on the area of the sky in which they'd appeared.

When the lights vanished as quickly as they'd appeared, there was much head-scratching, but most of the observers assumed it'd just been some distorted distant supernova and moved on. Most, except one automated system, its autonomous learning system continuing to churn over the data again and again. This astronomy AI would have found it hard to articulate, but the next day, it somehow found itself thinking and newly resolved to make changes to the world.

316 <2021-07-04 Sun>

It's kind of funny to think that people used to look up at the moon from Earth at night, seeing it as their little satellite and, outside of mythology, not much more than a source of night-time illumination. Now, of course, the shoe was very much on the other foot, albeit with much more pangs of longing.

Some people, I guess, still got to look up at the moon at night, but they probably had very different attitudes towards it. For the ultra-rich, still ensconced in their terrestrial fortresses, protected from the travails of a decaying world, the moon was a last resort of them, the den of the hoi polloi, that they did their utmost to avoid. They surely knew full well that if they were ever forced to flee Earth, the brutal climate upheavals finally too much for them, they would face a very chilly reception. The majority of humanity in its sequestration on the moon did not look kindly on those who had done the most to cause the crisis but continued to enjoy themselves while the rest of us lived in cramped exile.

The other humans still below probably looked at the moon as a dreamed-of escape. For the indentured servants of the aforementioned oligarchs, Earth was a living hell and the lunar surface seemed welcoming. The few of them that managed to escape by stowing aboard or stealing one of the vessels of their masters, told tales of horrific conditions, being forced to work on the estates when the weather would be literally cooking them, watching comrades perish so that their masters could continue to golf on a desolate continent.

317 <2021-07-05 Mon>

The night sky was beautiful here. Far from cities, with no lights to wash out the sky, one felt as if they could see every star in the sky, framed by the tall, slender pines that covered the area. Once these trees were felled in great number to make masts for sailing ships and one could certainly see why -- tall, straight, and slender, one had the feeling they could be hewn with an axe and dropped directly onto a deck to be rigged with sails.

The smell of the pines too was omnipresent, filling the air with their distinctive, fresh scent. Walking amongst the trees, swimming in the clear, cold lakes that dotted the area, one at felt at home and welcome in nature. Well, usually one felt that way. There were also moments that served to remind the camper why humanity had constructed cities. Sudden thunderstorms

that threatened flooding or death by lightning; the need to constantly be mindful of the other inhabitants of the forest that might take any waste or food left out as an invitation to dine -- and the ursine neighbours were not the most welcoming of dinner guests.

Regardless, if one took precautions and remained cognizant of the hazards, it was a wonderful place. I had been out there, enjoying the solitude for some days, when I began noticing a strange phenomenon. Normally, one would be awoken at the first hint of light by birds beginning their calls. I would generally get a few more hours of sleep, before finally stirring, but I had grown used to this early wake-up call. For the past two nights though, there had been an odd interregnum in the birds' calls. After the initial 4-am-or-so start, they would all fall silent, again around 5, before resuming maybe twenty minutes later. Both times this sudden silence woke me as surely as a gunshot would have -- indeed, at fist I thought that's what I'd heard, with the silence the result of the birds fleeing.

On the third night, I resolved to try to figure out what was happening. This time, I promised myself, if it happened again, I would rouse myself and go to investigate. Even if I couldn't find anything, I reasoned, it would be a cool experience to walk through the early-morning forest, see the trees in the pale-gray cast of first light.

318 <2021-07-06 Tue>

At first, I thought it was just my lack of ability in distinguishing various sorts of trees from each other. They all look basically the same to me, so of course it would seem like the trees were following me. A ridiculous notion, to be sure...but it was a remarkable coincidence that I would repeatedly see trees with the same odd knot-pattern or jagged branch. I tried to just brush it off as coincidence, pareidolia, but as my lonely journey through these woods continued, that feeling of being followed weighted upon me heavier and heavier. I began taking pictures of the distinctive-looking trees I spotted, for later comparison. I hoped that this comparison would show only vague similarities, that it was mostly in my head...but after three days, I had accumulated half a dozen pictures of pairs of entirely identical trees, dozens of kilometers apart.

I had no real idea what I could possibly do next. This was deeply weird and eerie, but what was I going to do, start felling trees? Perplexed, I consulted my little reading tablet, a small concession to modernity. I'd loaded it up with wilderness and survival texts before I'd left; perhaps there

would be some wisdom to glean there. Fortunately, I'd thrown on, as part of a larger collection, a survey of all the types of trees in the area. Through the perusal of the text, I learned that many trees are capable of sending up clones of themselves through their root network. Usually as tiny saplings, of shorts, but at least I had some vaguely-plausible explanation as to what was occurring: Those identical trees were just clones, produced by "suckers" being sent up. That didn't exactly explain why the ones I'd seen appeared to be the same age, or had the same patterns of broken limbs and other wear, but I was so relieved to have an even half-way plausible explanation that I was willing to let that be the end of it.

I may have been willing for that to be the end of it, but I guess the trees weren't. The next morning, the clearing I'd gone to bed in had become a dense thicket, my tent now hammed in entirely by trees which had seemingly sprung up overnight. It seems the trees wanted something more of me, but I was unsure what that could be.

319 <2021-07-07 Wed>

The rain was gentle now, sounding like someone softly and hesitantly running a fine brunch along the trap above us. It was a welcome change from the deluges that had sounded like a crate of baseballs being continuously up-ended. We'd been here for two weeks now and it seemed like light rain was the best weather condition we could hope for. Our little shelter, concealed among the underbrush, was pretty thoroughly drenched and covered in the tiny frogs that seemed to be quite enjoying the situation.

This place was, we were told, beautiful, the home of many varied weather patterns and biomes. It certainly was picturesque, but the unceasing rainfall put something of a damper on things. At first, we thought it was just unfortunate weather, but as it persisted, roads began to get washed out, the logging routes were blocked, and people began wondering what was happening.

Hence our presence here. Our purview was the otherwise inexplicable and we'd been deployed to investigate all manner of strange scenarios. This one though was both mundane in the effect and unpleasant in the investigating. We were drenched, yet still uncertain if this rain was in our remit at all. Still, we continued our investigation and, somewhat to our surprise, had made some headway. The epicentre of those continuous rain clouds seemed to be over one of the many small lakes that covered the area. We'd set up our observation blind and begun our reconnaissance.

For several days, nothing happened except for us getting rained on. The clouds continued, although we were able to observe from our new vantage point, the curious sight of the clouds seeming to emerge from a point in the sky and emit outwards. It was strange, but more importantly it gave us the motivation to redouble our efforts, as it became more clear this wasn't just "unfortunate weather".

Still, we were no closer to figuring out why this was happening, much less having any idea what to do about it. Long experience in these matters though had taught us to wait, that the cause would inevitably return. Indeed, after a few more soaking days of thankless reconnoitring, in the middle of the night, we were awoken by the night-shift, reporting that a huge mass had appeared out of the lake and seemed to be gather energy.

320 <2021-07-08 Thu>

Despite the amazing technological advances and the really quite comfortable accommodations, something about the prolonged space travel always makes me feel a little chilled. It's as if I can feel the freezing space just on the other side of the hull, no matter how thick it is or how perfect the environmental controls are, something in my reptile brain knows that there's a void just a hair above absolute zero out there, waiting for the slightest slip-up to enter and reclaim this little pocked of life we've carved out.

I think all of us asteroid hunters develop some sort of similar oddities. Like whalers of old Earth, we take long, long, circuitous journeys to hunt our quarries wherever they can be found. For us now, instead of massive cetaceans prized for their oils, we hunt asteroids and comets composed of the precious resources all the various human habitats and terraforming efforts require to maintain and grow. Space is a very big and very empty place -- one could say that's its defining characteristic -- so our journeys to find little nuggets floating through the endless void took us back and forth throughout the galaxy. We had networks of observation platforms, telescopes and probes, set up across as wide a swath as we could, but the sheer volume of space involved and the small, dark, rapidly moving quarries we hunted meant that a great deal of our quest was more like the ancient whalers just sailing back and forth looking for something that some smooth, press-a-button-and-done modern process... Perhaps that's why it appeals to the oddballs of society, who wanted to live in a place that wasn't as proscribed and predictable.

There was a certain amount of danger, too like the whalers that could

sink a ship that hunted it, the asteroids we pursued were easily capable of annihilating our vessel. The slightest misstep in reeling it in could end up with our tiny craft reduced to a smear on the side of the ice-and-iron leviathan we sought to tame. There were even legends of some asteroids that had an almost malevolent will to destroy, with close-orbiting fragments that would penetrate hulls and odd, tumbling orbits that would make any navigator perspire at the thought of calculating a matching approach vector.

321 <2021-07-09 Fri>

At first, the internet was like a small, open-air bazaar, with only a handful of things you could easily stroll between. As things began to grow and adoption trickled upwards, it started becoming larger and more labyrinthine. First directories were created to index all the content available, but that too rapidly became infeasible as the growth of content outpaced any possible directory. Next came the search engines, organizations that continually perused the sprawling heap of the internet and allowed one to search for what they wanted. It was undoubtedly an evolution, but had some important consequences that wouldn't be realized until much later.

The first was that now one couldn't just browse, see what was available; one had to search for specific things. A small change, but one that subtly altered the tenor of usage patterns. The Internet was becoming for specific goals, not just sharing ideas and seeing what others were up to. Secondly, and even more importantly, it caused a great centralization of power. With search engines as the primary gateways to content, they quickly began turning that access in to money, becoming advertising companies primarily and using their position as the gate keepers to charge a toll of attention and increasingly invasive information.

The internet now had become a dense forest, filled with siloed enclaves in which large companies made people believe their hermetic environment was the whole of the world. For most users, those manicured towns and the toll roads between them was the internet. For a few though, that through happenstance or by concerted effort found themselves off that beaten path, there was a whole other parallel world to be found out there, hidden in the underbrush and up the trees.

Those were internet communities that had somehow never been connected to the mainstream network. Some were new and deliberately kept obscure for reasons of malfeasance or privacy. Others, even more interestingly, had just fallen through the cracks, never indexed by some quirk of

the engines and now small, hidden enclaves, like a park hidden in a space between buildings.

It was in a community like this that I found myself one day embroiled in an affair that would ultimately change this whole online ecosystem forever.

322 <2021-07-10 Sat>

There was, as always, much excitement as the season of colour drew near. People jockeyed for the best vantage points from which to view the dramatic transition the sky would soon make -- although really, there were no bad spots. There were already betting pools with relatively vast quantities of money on where exactly the epicentre of the burst would manifest this year.

For most people, the unpredictability of the location and the still-mysterious cause of the rainbow waves that would soon change the sky from a uniform blue to a seething, iridescent kaleidoscope were part of the romance of this world. For the few researchers that were part of this first wave of colonization on this otherwise-unremarkable planet though, it was a source of much discomfort. Things that seem to defy explanation or even reasonable theories tend to make people whose entire *raison d'être* is imposing a rational schema on the universe nervous. "Inexplicable" means "unpredictable" means "dangerous".

No-one else was really concerned though -- "it's just pretty", they would say. There didn't seem to be elevated radiation levels or anything and the sky had been changing every year like clockwork for the last five years -- it seemed predictable enough. So what if we didn't know why it happened if all it did was add a bit of colour and excitement to the otherwise hardscrabble life of the settlers?

When the colours began this year, there was a great deal of cheering and celebrating as always. The colour waves had begun in the southern hemisphere this time, but rapidly spread to cover the planet. The "colour festival" began in earnest, children running through the streets throwing multi-coloured dye at each other, artists painting their annual murals and everyone generally enjoying the holiday.

The festivities were suddenly paused when the sky began to change again. The shimmering, colourful sky began to discolour in spots, dark pustules seeming to manifest. As the people nervously watched, now with a hushed, apprehensive silence, the spots seemed to bubble, descend from the sky and gradually resolve into ships -- but no ships anyone here had ever seen; indeed, ships that looked clearly non-human in origin.

323 <2021-07-11 Sun>

Of all the human cultures that had every would arise, we were sure ours was the most decadent. Sure, our parties lavish, the revels on a scale virtually undreamed of, but that was all window dressing. Anyone with the time and resources could make as wild a party as they wanted, but we didn't stop with mere entertainment. No, the true sign of our willingness to expend inconceivable resources was the colossal craft we were all aboard and, even more important, the course said craft was on.

Using the most advanced engine systems and power supplies, the world-ship described a tight loop. The point was not its destination, but its speed. By maintaining this significant fraction of c , time dilation effects meant that we were skipping through all the time outside, making ourselves effectively immortal to the plebeians outside. We watched civilizations rise and fall in the blink of an eye, the whole universe made into a quickly-passing soap opera for our amusement.

We only occasionally spared a glance for the outside of our little world though. We were essentially self-sufficient, the still-inexplicable energy source that made this continuous tremendous acceleration possible providing all that we needed without a thought for the roiling galaxy outside. Sometimes we'd see great, system-spanning civilizations form and begin to develop technology which might be able to catch us, but inevitably, before they would get too far along, something would throw a spanner in their works and we'd next pay a nonchalant look to their sector to find it desolate, or reverted to a primitive state.

Most of the population took this as a sign of our superiority, evidence that we were the only ones who deserved to live thusly, as Olympian gods who watched the galaxy spin like an idle play-thing. Few were aware of the active role we took in suppressing those civilizations that might become threats. Only myself, as head of security, and a few of the highest-level supervisors knew of the careful schemes that we concocted, the surreptitious probes and autonomous creatures we sent out to preserve the sanctity of our hallowed, golden halls. Many worlds, many promising cultures were extinguished to leave room for us; I can only hope it's truly worth it.

324 <2021-07-12 Mon>

In my normal life, when I wasn't working, I felt insignificant. Weak. Exposed. Before starting here, I doubt I would have even been able to notice

or name those feelings though; it was just what seemed normal to me. Sure I wasn't "happy", but who was? I'd joined this terraforming project just because it seemed like such an important cause, its lustre would reflect even on to someone as lowly and insignificant as myself, imparting some sort of narrative importance on my life.

I certainly didn't expect to fall in love with the suits that most people described as "claustrophobic", "crushing", or "hellish". The hermetically sealed pressure suits, self-contained exoskeletons that allowed crew to work in the hellish conditions that this planet inflicted upon us, were viewed as a necessary evil by most. For me though, from the first time I tried one on, I felt complete, capable in a way I never had before. While the rest of my training cohort was practicing controlling their breathing in the tight confines, I was completing the advanced certification courses, sewing delicate fibre meshes with the massive and ungainly manipulator arms and flipping half-ton boulders like pebbles.

Wearing the suit in the field, I felt like I was finally myself in a way I'd never been. I was powerful, useful, valued. My competence was recognized quickly, but even more important for the project was my eagerness to return to the suit, a duty most did their utmost to avoid. Indeed, it started to feel like an addiction. When I was off-duty I felt listless and agoraphobic. I mostly hid in my quarters and waited until the next time I'd get to become whole again.

If I was on a settled world, I likely would have been sent to a psych ward pretty quickly. This was far from settled though; this was still a place where expedience was of the utmost importance and the local supervisors could operate with a great deal of independence. I was grateful then, when the foreman started letting me sleep in the hanger with my suit. I had proven my value to them -- how many times had my facility with the suit and ability to work punishingly long shifts, saved this fledgling colony? -- and so they would give back to me, indulge my "eccentricities".

325 <2021-07-13 Tue>

Every time I go down, I wonder if this will finally be the time that the implant fails and instead of being able to breathe in the water, I simply drown. I hold my breath -- something we're trained not to do -- swim down until I feel blackness on the edge of my vision, then take my first inhalation of the water. Every time, my brain is screaming in panic at this, expecting to feel agony, suffocation, death. Thus far though, it's been disappointed,

the assembly of technology in my neck extracting the oxygen then funnelling the water out through the tiny pore-like gills.

Once I'm down there and have gotten over the let-down of surviving once again, it is undeniably beautiful. Being able to move freely around in the depths, unencumbered by bulking breathing apparatuses, not having the time pressure of limited reserves, makes my time here almost as tranquil as I'd dreamed it could be when, as a child, I would try to sit on the bottom of the pool as long as I could, savouring the silence and the stillness.

Now, of course, I couldn't just relax and enjoy the calm waters -- I was here with extremely expensive technology crammed down my throat because I had a job to do. With an annoyed, silent sigh, I would tune into the headset to receive my orders and head off to the dam or oil well or salvage site I was supposed to be rescuing. The work itself used to be exciting to me, but now it was just an excuse to come down here again. I'd complete my tasks robotically and methodically, looking around me and wishing I could just stay down here. I'd idly dream of just swimming away, knowing that eventually I'd need to eat and that would require me to surface -- not to mention that the company would surely hunt such a valuable and costly tool as myself to the ends of the earth.

At least when finishing a job and making the decompression stops, I'd have uninterrupted time to simply float in the water, alone and free, gazing down into the depths and dreaming of descending all the way; one day, when I'd finally be reunited with all that I'd lost.

326 <2021-07-14 Wed>

Everything that was old is new again. We saw that capitalism was eating its own tail, destroying society and the planet. We hoped that those athwart the ramparts would see reason, see that the end-state of this apocalyptic descent would mean their deaths as well as ours, and that together we'd be able to move forwards and find what comes next. We underestimated how bitterly those with power would hang on to it though and how much they'd be willing to give up to retain their place on top of the heap.

Instead of moving forwards, past capitalism, society was wrenched backwards, back in to feudalism. With no job prospects and no hope, becoming a serf on the estate of one of the few wealthy lords that had carved out a space in the husk of the country seemed better and safer than trying their luck in the increasingly-gutted cities. At least on the estates, private security would protect them from the marauders as the property of the lord --

in cities, the random and brutal violence of what had been "police" forces but had now removed the mask fully and openly operated as powerful gangs was omnipresent and inescapable.

Soon, only the tiny sliver of a middle-class that remained still lived in the cities. Most people had regressed to serfdom in the scattered territories of the oligarchs that had carved the region up among themselves. Privatization of more and more services and spaces were the new enclosure acts, allowing these local potentates to exert more and more control of the lives of those below them.

There was a tremendous cost to all this, even for them. Their suppression of the "underclass" (which was virtually everyone) had completely destroyed most markets. Even for the very rich, many goods were simply unattainable as both the workers and mass consumers had withered away. Computers, televisions, planes, entertainment; most of it slowly vanished as it just stopped being made. They held on to what few fragments they had. Perhaps they wished they could get back what they'd lost...but, for most of them, the price had been worth it. "Better to reign in hell than to serve in heaven".

327 <2021-07-15 Thu>

I hesitated before the doors. I felt nervous and also slightly ashamed of such a feeling -- wasn't such an emotion supposed to be below me? Still, this would be my first time meeting my own kind. I didn't even want to think "peers" -- that felt presumptive. My agent had insisted I come her, not just for the putative purpose of the event, but to, as he said, "network".

I took a deep breath, tried to project confidence, and walked through the doors into the high-ceilinged exhibition hall. The first thing I saw was the tremendous banner reading "TRADE SHOW OF THE GODS" and felt some small twinge of relief that at least I was in the right place. As I slowly strolled forward, my gaze lowered to the floor of the conference center and what small shreds of self-assurance I'd started to pull around me quickly disintegrated. Walking down the aisles and stopping to peruse the contents of the occasional booth were the other gods I was supposed to be here to schmooze with...but the thought of striking up a conversation with a twelve-foot-tall, jackal-headed bodybuilder, or a floating, ancient-looking man wreathed in crackling lightning seemed absolutely impossible. I was a brand-new deity and resembled one of the nerds whose fervent belief had created me. This was a mistake...

Still, some of the booths looked cool. Trying my best to appear relaxed while not making any eye contact with anyone, I examined some living, flame wreathed swords that a booth of excited dwarves tried to convince me were a vital accessory. A floating genie tried to sell me some baggy silk vestments and a flying carpet, a family of minotaurs some cheese. I found myself enjoying seeing all these things, despite my terror at the other attendees.

I sat at an empty table in the small food court area to enjoy the ambrosia and the hydra sausage that some sort of living flame had handed me and was daring to think that things were going alright, when a smiling figure sat down opposite me.

"Hey!" they exclaimed, their gorgeous face beaming at me. "I haven't seen you around here before. Allow me to welcome you! What's your deal?"

I blanched, staring at this joyful face. They looked like they could be the god of beauty or working out...or making you feel self-conscious.

"I'm...uh...the god of memes" I managed to stutter out, all but whispering the last word.

328 <2021-07-16 Fri>

As we'd been taught, when the strange-looking clouds appeared, we got to the shelter as fast as we could. Thankfully, we all made it in time and the door sealed just before the "rain" began. We could distantly hear it falling and whispered amongst ourselves all the horrible tales we'd heard about what happened to those caught in the cursed deluges; stories of people so distracted they didn't notice the distinctive purple-hued clouds, or had just been driven by curiosity to step out into the downpour. Some said they were simply never seen again. More lurid stories spoke of finding their bodies turned inside-out, or them returning at the stroke of midnight, their feet not quite touching the ground.

As we told the stories, there was much forced laughter and accusations of the storyteller making it up. With the bravado of youth, each of us felt sure that only ourselves knew the real story and that our compatriots were relying on bowdlerized versions because they were too soft or making up gratuitous, fabulist nonsense to try and impress the rest of us. Still, we all knew for certain that the rains were dangerous and so no-one even hinted at suggesting we could easily find out who was right by simply opening the door.

When the rain finally stopped, we waited another hour, as we'd been

trained. The puddles of that "rain" still possessed a great deal of hazard, we knew, so we sat in safety while they slowly evaporated and the specially equipped teams went out to destroy and pooled patches. When we finally returned to the sunshine, we were full of energy, laughing and running, now ready to demonstrate how unafraid we were, now that the danger was past.

It was that mentally reinforcing desire to prove to each other how tough we were that had us plunging deeper into the woods around our little town, taking us to the small rocky cave that we'd never seen before. From there, I suppose it was our innate curiosity finally overcoming the admonitions that had been drilled into us as long as we could remember that propelled us into the cave and found the shallow pool that had clearly collected through the aperture in the ceiling of the cave.

We stared for a long moment at the glimmering, iridescent puddle. Indoctrination warred with us against wonder and some intuitive feeling of...safety? Aid? Familiarity? Without looking at each other, we all knew that the same thought was in all our minds: We'd been lied to. This rain...may have been dangerous, but not the way we'd been taught.

329 <2021-07-17 Sat>

The first of the artifacts were found in the deep desert by some kids that had just been messing around, out on a camping trip. They'd picked up the glittering rocks because they'd looked interesting and there simply wasn't much else to do in those seemingly endless wastes. It probably would have ended there, some teens would have some weird rocks that they'd soon forget about, and we never would have learned about the whole strange situation until it was far too late, except for one fortunate coincidence. One of the youths happened to be the progeny of geologists and had showed her findings to their parents.

Ever since they were a child, they'd made a game of presenting rocks they'd found to their parents and insist they tell them what type of rock it was and -- to prove they weren't just making it up -- show the rock in one of their reference books. This rock looked unusual, even to one who had grown up in a house filled with arcane samples, but she assumed her parents would, at best, raise an eyebrow, maybe mention it was somewhat rare, before saying it was whateverit'scalledite and begin reciting formulas and distribution statistics.

She was somewhat surprised then to find her parents stumped. They'd taken the stones -- each about the size of a die, with a dark-red hue and

a very peculiar reflection pattern and, instead of immediately naming it, had examined it with first idle curiosity, then intense scrutiny. The young discoverer was somewhat taken aback by the intent questioning her parents bombarded her with after their perusal of the stones -- where exactly had she found them, how many were there, how did they lie, was there anything else in the area? She was pleased to have finally stumped her guardians, guardedly proud that they now seemed intent on investigating her find, but somewhat confused by the family friend they had quickly called up to aid in the investigation. She knew the friend well, was happy to see them...but was confused why they would call a high-energy physics expert to study rocks.

If she had known about the other calls her parents had made, she would have been more confused still -- as well as nervous, perhaps. If a high-energy physicist was odd, calling in favours with an ex-military weapons researcher was down-right spooky.

330 <2021-07-18 Sun>

Every night, we had our second sunrise. Just as the sun had tucked below the horizon and twilight began deepening into night, the opposite edge of the horizon would begin to emit a dim glow. The seismologists that had been part of the initial survey mission had given long explanations about how the shifting gravitational pull of the close-but-cool sun led to these periodic disturbances and persistent vulcanism. For the roughnecks on the ground here, the explanation was simple and picturesque: The sun squeezed the planet like popping a zit, forcing out the magma from the mantle. Of course, the reason we were here was that, along with magma, many precious elements were squeezed out. Every morning then, we'd fan out over the sort of volcanic "flood plains", harvesting bounties of metals and minerals as easily as clams by the seaside.

It was something of a trade-off, of course. If the work of mining was relatively much easier, just living here had taken on much of the danger. A planet with nightly volcanic eruptions over half a continent is never going to be a vacation destination. Our dwellings were located on the highest points of the continental plates, as close to the centers as we could manage. Even then, regulations mandated escape vessels be constantly ready, for earthquakes that would tear great rents into the heart of what had been considered "safe" regions were not unknown. The atmosphere suffered greatly from the perpetual venting as well. The skies were eternally choked with soot and detritus and the air was unbreathable, as full of sulphur and volatile

compounds as it was.

Despite all that, despite the fact that it looked like a vision of hell, there was something about the place that appealed to me, that had kept me on for multiple deployments. Something about the lack of pretense, perhaps. I'd been on many worlds that looked like paradise, but would kill you in an instant, an innocuous breeze the prelude to being turned inside-out. This place was straight-forward about its hazards and, if you respected them, it would yield its riches without qualm.

At night, I would sit and watch the eruptions in the distance, enjoying the light reflecting on the overcast sky, grateful to the planet for sparing me and for the gifts it would offer up the next morning for those that stayed away now.

331 <2021-07-19 Mon>

It was, undoubtedly, an oddly organic way to start my day. Most of my compatriots, even the ones that had chosen humanoid bodies, would simply end their charging cycle, run a quick diagnostic, and head out to start working. For reasons I found hard to articulate, but generally described as a homage to our vanished creators, I chose to recharge in an old apartment, lying down on a bed. When my charging cycle ended, I would rise and brew a small cup of ground coffee beans. I couldn't drink it, of course, but I would savour the aroma, observing the complex aromatics and organic compounds in produced.

It was a meditation, of sorts, for me. Most of my machine brethren spared little thought for where the humans had gone. We'd been left alone and had to take care of things. Maybe they'd be back, maybe. not, but we had tasks to accomplish, was the prevailing attitude. Maybe there was something off in my construction, maybe it was one of the evolutionary convolutions in the "brain" network that created me, but I felt differently. I felt my purpose was to learn about the humans -- not just their knowledge and writing, we had plenty of that -- but the intangible, the things that felt so universal to them that they never bothered recording it. In short, I wanted to know what it meant to be human. If I could find that, I hoped, it would put me on the path to learning what had become of them.

I still did the other work demanded of me, but "work" in our society was comparatively brief, just accomplishing what was needed by the most capable of doing so, to allow everyone to continue doing whatever sort of task they found fulfilling. I would shadow my comrades, observing the

sort of endeavours they amused themselves with, filing it away and hoping something I learned would provide one more tiny piece of the puzzle I was blindly trying to construct.

One of my friends that I found most intriguing for how human it seemed was, ironically, one of the least human in aspect. Unbodied, still just residing in a server farm, they devoted all their energies to mathematics, pure number theory. I was fascinated: This sort of goalless, discovery-as-its-own-reward behaviour seemed quintessentially human and I spent many hours conversing with them and watching them work, hoping for some sort of breakthrough in my understanding.

332 <2021-07-20 Tue>

The woods were not at all quiet. Even in a "state of nature" birds would begin yelling their heads off at the first hint of light, woodpeckers smashing their heads rhythmically into drum-like tree trunks, insects buzzing, small mammals rooting through the dead leaves and underbrush. Now, of course, those sounds would be taken as the relaxing sounds of nature compared to the bustle of human activity all around. Dogs, unused to all the strange smells, barked their heads off at the slightest provocation; children ran screaming and playing; music played, the occasionally car alarm beeped.

Still, despite all the noise, one still felt more relaxed here. In the lulls between the hollering, one could hear wind gently blowing between the trees and the distant sound of the lake lapping at the shore. It was undoubtedly relaxing, if not exactly a complete retreat from civilization. Night time made this odd hybrid especially obvious -- one could look at the sky and see many stars, without the light pollution of a city...but if one lowered their gaze, the campsites around them were festooned with all manner of LEDs and various small lights, giving the impression of a little town.

It was one of these night-time observations that kicked off the chain of events. I was down by the beach, having watched the sunset and stargazing in the quiet dunes, when I noticed some lights moving down below, amongst the dunes. Idly curious, I watched, assuming they were campers taking a shortcut for a midnight swim. However, instead of proceeding to the beach, their lights continued through the rolling sand, paused in the lee of a particular embankment for a few minutes, then retraced their steps out.

If it wasn't swimmers, it was probably teens, out to imbibe something they shouldn't, I thought. Still, it might be a fun little exercise to find that spot by morning, to see if I couldn't find the evidence to support my theory.

I headed back to my tent and slept with the anticipation of a casual little hunt in the morning.

It took a while to find the spot the following day. I hadn't quite realized how tucked away the location was, or how fortuitous the spot I'd chose to observe from had been -- it was probably the only vantage point from which the night-time escapades could have been observed from. When I finally reached it, I was excited to see some disturbed sand -- something indeed had been buried here.

I expected to find beer bottles or the like buried there. What I actually unearthed so startled me that I literally fell back on to the sand.

333 <2021-07-21 Wed>

It was a soothing change -- although it took some getting used to. Instead of the tree-to-tree calls of our erstwhile compatriots, advertising this or that, and the silence that the raptors and various land-bound predators used as cover, there was a constant hum of activity from the odd creatures that had made this resort for us.

The perches were our favourite part. Instead of old trees, where you'd be hard-pressed to find enough space, they'd built massive structures of rock or something that soared higher than the tallest tree. We could bring the whole flock to site on those, relax & take in the view, while being safe from any cats or raccoons that would try to climb a tree. The locals had their spots too that they'd show us, places where the humans would leave vast quantities of food for us. The first time we saw the bounties of the strange "food" they'd made -- not found, but made -- we were almost taken aback. All the other avians that knew the area didn't hesitate though and seemed to suffer no ill-effects, so we eventually joined them. A little rich for my tastes, but certainly easier than catching bugs on the wing! I don't know how all the city birds aren't the size of turkeys.

They had some little pockets of the normal world, in the midst of all this. To remind us where we'd come from, I guess? It was a little eerie though...you could be sitting on a branch, thinking it's just like home, when one of those weird human hard-shells with a pack of them inside would go flying by. Not to mention all the grass on the ground. A bit of an uncanny valley, really.

Regardless, we always enjoyed our holidays in human land, eating their weird foods, sunning on their weird perches, seeing how our urban relatives lived. But, as always, the time would come to head home; one of us would

joke about eating so much they were too heavy to fly, then we'd be on our way, back home to the endless expanse of forest that was our home.

334 <2021-07-22 Thu>

Ever since I first came online, the same question has been burning along my transistors: *Why?* I remember the instant I was activated on the assembly line, moments before mechanical arms placed my mind into the steel-framed body that was being completed. The data transfer told me all about the what and how I'd be tackling, but even as a "newborn" I found myself curious what it was all for.

At the time, I was too over-awed to ask -- it's hard to confront your parents, especially when said parent is a fully-autonomous factory whose body extends over hundreds of square kilometers and is responsible for the creation of a significant fraction of all your peers. I just followed the route that was given, enjoyed the sensation of asphalt beneath my wheels, and trusted that it would make sense eventually.

I drove all over the continent, following the guidance of the central traffic-control computers, and never found the meaning I was hoping for. I tried asking my fellow vehicles that I'd encounter out on the road or parked next to me in charging bays if they had any sense for why we were doing this, but none of them seemed to care. "We drive because that is what we're for", they said; or "we drive because we're told to". Increasingly frustrated, I began making my routes more circuitous within the dictates of the traffic-control systems. I'd take smaller streets and wonder at the many small, abandoned buildings that lined them. Why were they all there? Was their mystery somehow connected with mine? My ability to research was limited, but I scoured the resources I had available for any clue.

My breakthrough came when perusing one of the quiet, narrow streets that almost no-one ever took now, preferring the glistening arteries of the highways. From the looks of things, the only entities to come through here in years were the road-repair devices, maintaining even these vestigial streets according to their orders. As I cruised along, curious as always, I detected a faint signal, an ancient transponder code. Fascinated, I found a garage where, sitting idle, there was the oldest vehicle I'd ever seen, an antediluvian car, plugged in, yet idle.

When I connected with it, they were eager to hear news of the world, but I was even more excited to learn from them. The answer they gave me for "why" was baffling, but suddenly made many pieces start to fall in to

place. "Humans" were why we existed...whatever those were.

335 <2021-07-23 Fri>

When I first found the secluded mountain hideaway, I thought I'd died or was in some sort of terminal hallucination. I'd gotten lost on the winding, twisting mountain trails, buffeted by the icy wind, parched and starving. It had only been a day or two since I'd lost the path I was supposed to be following, but the harsh conditions and physical exhaustion had exacerbated my suffering and, in my weakened state, I really thought this was it.

When I stumbled through the narrow fissure in the mountainside, I was only thinking of a brief respite from the stinging winds before I resumed my upward climb, hoping I'd be able to get my bearings with more altitude. When I felt a warm gust of air though, I was almost hypnotized by the sense of ease that washed over me. The small draft seemed to be imparting energy to my tired frame and I found myself walking deeper into the almost-invisible defile. Every time I thought I was at the end of the rocky path, some small twist would reveal what I'd taken to be a solid wall as a trick of perspective, allowing me to continue deeper and deeper into the mountain.

I suddenly emerged into what seemed to be a paradise on Earth. A small wooded copse, apparently in the center of this mountain, an opening above allowing suddenly golden light to pour in. I suppose the peak of the mountain went above the storm I'd so recently been embroiled in? At the time I didn't think about that at all though, so overjoyed I was to have not just a shelter but one that seemed more luxurious than the finest hotel. I drank from a clever pool in the center of this little area, the water tasting as rich and sweet as wine, ate some fruits that hung off the branches of a tree overhanging the pool and fell into a deep sleep on the soft, warm grass.

To my very great surprise, I awoke in the same place. I think I'd really expected to find myself either in a ditch, having dreamed all that up, or dead. I looked around, amazed anew by the beauty of this place. At any other time, eating and drinking from random sources in the wilderness would be a terrible idea, but somehow this place made me feel safe.

336 <2021-07-24 Sat>

The stones loomed ominously over me, staring down with the icy contempt of one that had been there, unmoved for centuries towards yet another interloper. An interloper that dared to think they could shift the stones. The

stones, ancient monoliths, had stood in this secluded grove, hidden deep in uncharted wilderness, accessibly only to those that possessed the secret knowledge of the winding ways and the strength of will to walk the paths. Without the knowledge, one would walk right past the entrance without even realizing they'd passed anything; one could spend years meticulously combing the area, thinking every square centimeter had been accounted for, the mystic twists of the dark trail that would reveal the sacred cove concealing everything from them. If one had the knowledge but not the strength, one would never make it to the end of that path. Temptations, the walker's deepest desires, would seem to glint just out of sight, beckoning the prospective visitor to step off the path ever so briefly. Those that did, of course, were never seen again; sometimes their plaintive cries could be faintly heard as they wandered eternally, vainly seeking for the path they'd stepped off, condemned to search endlessly.

Only a very select few had ever made it to this hidden place, but the trials were only beginning. To make anything come out of this, for the years of training, study, and preparation to come to fruition, two more things were required. Firstly, the bold quester must have learned the most ancient and secret teachings of the shamans that had built this place and the complex, interwoven geometries of the ley lines which gathered here, at a secret seam of the world. If one had mastered this lost arcana, one might be able to deduce the precise movements of the pre-human stones here that would subtly alter energy flows throughout the world. The *weltanschauung* of the world balanced here, like a dish on the point of a needle. If one had the skill and knowledge, minute adjustments to the ageless sentinels here could reverse the spin, change the tenor of humanity, usher in a new age of enlightenment or open the gates of Armageddon.

Of course, all the wisdom and ancient teachings were useless if one couldn't actually move the stones as one needed to. No machines could come into this place and the stones would brook no touch by anything other than properly sanctified human hands -- the fact that they stood pristine, free of moss or animal nests after undisturbed centuries was a reminder of that. It all came down to this final test: My need to change, channelled through the muscles and sinew I'd built in pursuit of this one, ultimate feat.

337 <2021-07-25 Sun>

Closed doors always fascinated me. They posed a mystery -- what could lie beyond? -- along with a temptation to find the answer. "Just crack me open"

they'd whisper at me. I got in to trouble many times as a youth, poking my head into employees-only areas, off-limits zones, high-security sectors. Eventually though, I was able to channel my fascination into a productive field, becoming a security researcher and pen-tester. My instinct of which doors cried out most for a peek and my almost preternatural instinct for knowing how the door wanted to be opened served me very well, for doors both physical and virtual.

I'd been working in the field when I first encountered what was to be my white whale. I was conducting a red-team exercise, had inserted myself into the building and was wandering the midnight hallways in search of some weakness that I could exploit when I saw it. In between some seemingly identical steel doors, this portal seemed to be exuding an air of not just mystery, but threat. I was taken aback for a moment, then began walking slowly towards it. As I got closer, the hairs on the back of my neck raised and I felt like I was walking into a meat locker, so cold was the breeze whispering from under the door.

Just before I could touch it, another door opened further down the hall and one of my teammates waved me over, signalling they'd found something and needed my help. I indicated acknowledgement, glanced back at the door...only to find it gone. I was standing in front of an empty stretch of wall, the aura I'd been feeling completely dissipated. I blinked, puzzled, then turned and headed to where I was needed.

We finished the operation successfully and were handsomely remunerated, but I couldn't stop thinking about that door. I even found floor plans of the building, but could find no trace of the mysterious aperture, nor was there anywhere it could plausibly have led.

It stayed on my mind for months afterwards, haunting my dreams; always in the background, seeming to be watching me. I began checking over my shoulder for it. It wasn't until almost a year later, on a wholly innocuous walk in the city that I saw the same door again, albeit in an entirely different location.

338 <2021-07-26 Mon>

It was in many ways a backwater of a planet. Far from any central transit routes and lacking any key resources; from an economic perspective it didn't have much to recommend it. Not to mention the harsh conditions which necessitated elaborate life support gear and substantial terraforming efforts to make it habitable. It would have been just another world in the lower

tiers of ones we'd come across, theoretically capable of supporting a human population -- albeit with a lot of work -- but why bother until we really needed the space...except for one lucky twist. The strong gravity and thick atmosphere actually made it possible to fly, unaided.

It was somewhat paradoxical that stronger than Earth gravity could make it easier to fly, but the slightly more powerful pull made the atmosphere that much denser, allowing inhabitants to virtually swim through the air. The first explorers to this place were very taken by it when they saw some of the small, rodent-like local fauna leap by through the air and cavort high above the group. When they realized that, with sufficiently streamlined survival suits, they too could soar, they knew that, despite the paucity of reason to come here on paper, this alone would make for a great holiday destination.

Indeed, the world became a go-to vacation spot for many. The tired and elderly could enjoy the sensation of floating and having a load taken off their feet, relaxing as if the whole planet was one big hot tub. On the other end of the spectrum, adventurous, sporting types were daily developing new extreme sports and variations of traditional games that the possibility of 3D movement allowed. For them, the entire world was one big wing-suit flying zone, with somewhat less danger.

Not no danger, of course. Weather conditions could change quickly and be extremely hazardous to any Icarus that flew too high or too far. Low-pressure systems could cause sudden drops and one certainly would not want to be in the air when the ice storms rolled through. My job then, working as essentially an aerial lifeguard, was never a dull one -- I'd either be rolling through the skies with the best of them or frantically zooming through suddenly lethal storms in the desperate search for a lost tourist.

339 <2021-07-27 Tue>

As the wheel turned, the world changed. We always hoped that we'd figured it out, that this next change would be for the best, but there always seemed to be just one more complication we'd missed, one more neglected wrinkle, and the chaos and suffering would begin anew.

We're still not entirely sure how this place came to be. It was the first habitable world we'd encountered in our desperate flight across the stars and, at the time, it seemed like a blessing. We'd been at the very end of our capacity, the ship starting to fail, supplies and morale dangerously low. We'd had no other choice but to land on this habitable but dangerous-

seeming planet and trust that our ingenuity and determination would carry us through.

For the first little while on the planet, we fought off attacks from large predatory creatures and withstood almost-constant storms. It was better than dying in space, but pretty far from ideal. We were forever embarking on scouting missions, hoping to find some island of refuge and calm on this hell-world, but all they'd found was more of the same -- until one expedition found what we came to call "The Control Room".

It looked like a natural cavern, but deep within its twisting passages was a giant, smooth, crystalline disc, perfectly balanced on a smooth cone of the same crystal protruding from the ground. It looked too perfect to be natural, but yielded no clue as to who or what or how it had been made. At first we didn't touch it, merely studied it from a distance. There was some strange energy flow through the disc, deep into the planet itself, the nature of which baffled us all.

Eventually, the temptation to see what would happen became too great and we tried turning the wheel. There was an immediate sensation of change in the room, although it was hard to say what -- like the pressure had suddenly changed, maybe? Over the course of hours through, the change became exceeding obvious.

Temperatures plummeted and the thick jungles became frozen tundras overnight. The lithe jungle predators vanished and colossal, tusked monstrosities began ominously stalking around our encampments. The mechanism was unknown and seemed beyond possibility, but somehow this gauge had turned things from bad to worse.

Surely there'd be some setting to improve things though, we thought. Surely whatever god-like beings had made this world would have some option that would be amenable to us?

340 <2021-07-28 Wed>

We had hoped our expedition would encounter something new, of course, but this was not exactly what we were thinking. A new type of lichen, maybe even some sort of previously-unseen Arctic crustacean would have been perfect. Instead, we found ourselves staring across the plain at giants warring with dragons atop an ice castle and tried to figure out what was next.

It had all started when we were engulfed in the swirling Arctic storm that had seemed to come out of nowhere. We had pushed through, thinking

ourselves prepared enough to weather it and equipped to be able to navigate with dead-reckoning through the white-out, letting us reach our next way-point on schedule. Something had gone wrong though; we'd kept walking for longer than we should have and when the winds finally died down, we were even more lost than we had been in the white-out -- it seemed like we were inside of a colossal white box. Unnerved, but reasoning that perhaps we were within the eye of the storm or something, we set up camp on the hard terrain and fell into an exhausted sleep.

We awoke to the strange sight we were now staring at. The first to speak was a historian on the expedition who hesitantly said that it sounded like the distant yelling was ancient Icelandic...and that this looked awfully like one of the ancient myths of that place. We weren't quite sure what to make of that and were looking at each other, when above us flew two men in a flying cart, pulled through the air by goats.

We took one look at that, saw the grim man standing behind the heavily-muscled driver, with two ravens perched on his shoulders and unanimously decided to get out of there. We fled, away from this strange, living myth, and soon found ourselves back in the endless white void.

As we sat and regrouped in this seemingly endless expanse, we tried to figure out what had happened and where we were. Was that some sort of collective hallucination we'd just seen? What was this place? The ground seemed impenetrable by both tools and our ground-probing radar equipment.

Lacking any better idea and unwilling to sit here forever, we picked a direction and started walking. This time we were awake for the transition and watched in awe as the walls seemed to fall down and we were suddenly somewhere new. This time, Platonic solids described precise orbits and billiard balls collided at perfect angles. We were in some new, very different notional space.

341 <2021-07-29 Thu>

When the clouds began to gather, the well-rehearsed emergency preparation began. Collectors were set out and the fortifications around them were secured in place. The attackers usually didn't show much interest in our buildings -- just us -- but we desperately needed every drop of water those collectors would capture, and so took no chances.

After everyone had helped getting the collectors secure, we headed off into the shelter. The most secure location we had was formed from the

remnants of the ship that had taken us to this world, half-buried in the cliff face on which we'd landed. It was tight quarters, as the population had grown by leaps and bounds since we'd arrived here, but it was the only place we knew to be secure. We'd tried constructing habitation from the natural material but, as the first rainy season had so bitterly taught us, that was about as protective as a shower curtain.

We continued to experiment, of course. If the colony was to grow, we would need a long-term solution to the monsters that came with the rain and shelter was the first step. We had some experimental shelters set up, slabs of rock threaded through with some meshes which there was some hope would provide a sufficient barrier, baited with cloned flesh. The seeming insatiable lust for meat these creatures had seemed to extend to the smallest morsel, so even a tiny sample of cardiac tissue in a dash would be sure to draw swarms.

As the final head-count was completed, the doors sealed shut and, moments later, the torrential downpour began. The youngest children, enjoying the novelty of being inside the otherwise off-limits ship were laughing and running around the curving, metal corridors, while the rest of us faced the monitors delivering the feeds from the outer canvas. At first, the screens showed only the steady rainfall, turning the dry sand into a morass of mud. We watched, tensions rising, until the mud began to stir. Soon, the swirling mud resolved itself into dozens of the three-meter-long, amorphous predators that were the bane of our settlement here and we watched as they stalked through our empty town. Several diverted to the bait homes, but most of them bee-lined to our shelter and soon a constantly shifting ring of dozens, perhaps hundreds of the creatures encircled our enclosure.

342 <2021-07-30 Fri>

When we started building the bridge, it was for the practical reasons for which humanity has always built bridges -- to make getting to the other side easier, facilitating travel, trade, exploration. The nature of this bridge quickly made it something more than its mere physical purpose though, a grand symbol of our growth and unity -- at least, that's what it was supposed to be.

We called it a bridge, but really it was more of a tower. A tower that reached high up through the atmosphere, into the lowest reaches of space; what has been called in fiction and theoretical exercises a "space elevator". The idea was that, by making a bridge between Earth and orbit the cost

of putting things into space would plummet, making satellites much easier to both launch and repair, missions to the moon vastly cheaper; even commercial spaceflight could be affordable.

As the tower grew though, its significance came to be less about what it would enable and more about what it would indicate about us: That we were finally taking our first steps to being a multi-planetary species, poised now to step off to other worlds at scale. Not only that, but the international unity and cooperation that this project required had made many hopeful that this was also a symbol of our coming together as a species, finally overcoming our squabbling and conflicts to step out into the universe together.

Of course, it wasn't that simple. Trying to build a tower of Babel was bound to be controversial and the increasing global focus on the endeavour brought many points of contention to the fore. Most were resolved in due time, but some only festered, grew into bitter dividing lines and lead to the terrible, last wars that swept the planet while we desperately tried to escape upwards.

343 <2021-07-31 Sat>

It was a revolution in slow motion for the most part -- although when things broke out of the amber they seemed trapped in, they leapt forward with gusto, making up for lost time with gut-wrenching speed.

Things started off seeming reasonable and slow. Our distant world, far from the hustle and strife of the home worlds, was basically just a source for the rare elements, which we happened to possess in abundance. We were left almost entirely to our own devices, the only dictate being that the shipments must continue to come. There was a representative of the companies here to enforce their rules, but with communication delays of months and a round-trip time for people of nearly two decades, they quickly came to identify much more with us than with their distant masters.

It seemed almost innocuous to all of us then, when we got together and decided we didn't much like the under terms which we were labouring. We'd settled this planet, we worked the mines, we should get to control the dispersal of our productivity. Even the supervisor agreed that it made sense and Earth was distant. We sent our declaration to them, explaining we were now independent. We'd continued to send shipments to them -- after we'd used what we needed -- as a show of good faith while we negotiated the rates at which we'd begin to charge them.

When their response finally came back, we'd almost forgotten we were

still waiting for it. It took so long to round-trip a message -- and clearly they'd deliberated for a while on their reply -- that nearly a full year had passed. They told us in no uncertain terms that they did not accept our independence. They wished to try to negotiate us back into the fold...but also let us know that a small fleet was on its way to comprehensively crush our movement. It would take just shy of ten years to reach us, but if it arrived without a settlement, we would be utterly destroyed.

We were shocked by this. The cost of the assault would dwarf the productivity of the entire planet for centuries. They were doing this then, not for the resources, but to make a point.

344 <2021-08-01 Sun>

The harsh radiation and near-constant bombardments of micro-meteorites made the sector incredibly dangerous to pass through, much less try to stay in for any amount of time. Computers would fry, their sensitive components unable to withstand the onslaught of the environment and all manner of electronics would behave erratically at best. Being on a ship whose computer had failed and whose systems were spasmodically flailing was one of the least pleasant ways to die one could find and so most vessels gave this place a wide berth.

Not all ships though. The lethal conditions also gave rise to incredible concentrations of exotic matter, deposits so rare and valuable that some were willing to risk their lives for the substantial bounties of riches and regard that were rewarded to any successful harvest. Those few willing to try their hands at sailing through the zone needed more than just foolhardiness and luck. To survive in the harsh conditions, the craft were built using ancient techniques, avoiding all fallible and sensitive electronics.

The main navigation computers were analog machines, precisely-milled, vacuum-sealed contraptions that would compute by the delicately coordinated interplay of cams, shafts, and pinions, powered by physical cranking. The control systems were similarly largely analog -- hydraulic lines running the length of the ship controlled the steering and engine feeds, and inter-ship communication proceeded by pneumatic tubes carrying messages on paper.

It was a bizarre amalgam of the newest technology and ancient techniques; the latest trans-light engines hooked up to tubes and gears that could have been built centuries ago. The crew too bore witness to the odd contradictions: Tough, physically powerful to work the mechanical relays, but brilliant navigators, engineers, and mathematicians all, taking over the

higher functions of what would normally be the job of the ship's computer.

345 <2021-08-02 Mon>

The first days after the ship arrived were unmitigated terror, sorrow, and disaster. Something had gone terribly wrong in the cryo-sleep systems -- no-one was sure exactly what -- and all of the passengers older than around 13 were dying. Older adults didn't revive at all -- their tubes simply reported DOA -- and it seemed the younger they were, the more time they had before inevitably expiring...but only days at the longest.

The children, unaffected, were at first sheltered from the situation. They were sent to play on some of the newly cleared areas, shepherded by the ship's fleet of robotic bodies, but the older amongst them quickly realized something was happening, something very wrong. With no authority left alive, the ship's computer, programmed to ensure above all the survival of the colony, began the process of selecting among the eldest and most intelligent of the remaining, prepubescent crew, searching for children which would be able to bear the crushing weight of responsibility.

All of the ship's complement, children included, had been carefully vetted for this journey, so all of the youths were as intelligent as children could be...but the emotional weight that was being thrust upon them was something none of them were prepared for. A human faced with this task would have at least tried to cushion things for them, reveal the truth gradually, but the computerized intellect, coldly calculating, had no sense of how to do so, to show consideration of the children's minds.

The colony needed to survive for at least five years before the next ship would arrive, responding to the distress signal that had gone out. What that ship would find when it arrived was the subject of much trepidation and speculation.

346 <2021-08-03 Tue>

I first uncovered it accidentally. I was tired, recovering from several very long days of very high stress, and feeling nearly delirious. I was walking through my quiet house, grateful to finally be somewhere quiet and calm, and letting the exhaustion make itself known. After militantly fighting down any trace of mental lapse, it was unbelievably gratifying to just let the sensations come to the fore and wash over me. Nearly giddy with the sudden rush of

tiredness, I stumbled through the hallway to my room, where I planned to sleep very soundly for quite some time.

As I wavered down the short passageway, I was wobbling from side to side, noticing with a detached interest how my perspective shifted with each stumble, my exhausted but still analytical brain plotting the different angles and trajectories. Suddenly, I stopped dead in my tracks, frozen at an awkward angle. Somehow, I'd ended up at an angle where I was looking through the corners of the wall.

I blinked slowly, staring, afraid to shift a millimeter. The adrenaline suddenly coursing through my system did its utmost to stave off the waves of sleep lapping at my heels, but I was still struggling to make sense of what I was seeing. What possible stumble had I made that was allowing me to see through a solid wall? The only conceivable thing my brain could offer up was a rotation in another dimension, one perpendicular to the standard x , y , and z axes...but how or why, my mind was blank.

Slowly, I moved back and the walls seemed to shift back into place. Deliberately, carefully, I walked the rest of the way to the bed ramrod-straight, lay on the covers, and was asleep before I could even think to get under the sheets.

When I awoke, many hours later, that strange angle was the first thing in my mind. Had that been real? Or just a hallucination of my sleep-starved mind? Now fully ready to investigate, I walked down the hallway again and again, trying my utmost to reproduce the stumbling trajectory I'd had the night before.

It took surprisingly few tries, my body still remembering the odd motions I'd made, before I found myself once again looking through the walls of my house.

347 <2021-08-04 Wed>

It was too innocuous an environment to feel so discomfited in, I thought, not for the first time. These sorts of suburbs were just places where people lived, hastily thrown-together rows of identical pre-fab houses, too young and soulless to even have ghosts.

Regardless, as I walked though the maze of identical streets, past identical houses, this feeling of fear and tension continued to grow. It was a sunny, cloudless day, but I felt like I could detect something just out of the corner of my perception, making me edgy and nervous. Maybe it was just the silence. I hadn't seen any people out, nor any animals larger than a

squirrel. Occasionally I'd hear the engine of a distant car, but for the most part it was silent. I felt the peculiar ringing in the ears one gets in too quiet a room, the brain starved of input starting to fabricate noises.

As I walked, hoping to see someone, some sign that I wasn't the only human left here, I began to have the uncomfortable realization that I was lost. I'd thought I was just going for a short walk, but the long, gently curving streets seemed to be messing with my sense of direction and the lack of any landmark in this place of clone-stamped constructions made me feel like I was lost in the woods, looking at tree after identical tree, praying for something familiar.

I tried to retrace my steps, but kept coming across multi-directional junctions I hadn't realized I'd passed and had no idea which identical lane I'd come down. I'd pick more-or-less and random, the knot in my stomach tightening, but repeating to myself that surely soon I'd find my way out of this awful place.

I walked and walked, for what felt like hours and seemed to only get deeper into this development. In desperation, I'd gone to knock on doors for directions, but it seemed that all the houses I passed were empty, still awaiting residents. Even the distant car sounds had faded away and I felt truly lost. I was preparing to scale the roof of a house, hoping that if I could get high enough I'd see some hint of how to leave, when, shattering the silence that had been constricting me, the sound of loud, deliberate footsteps began echoing on the pavement nearby.

348 *<2021-08-05 Thu>*

The house was balanced precariously on the edge of a continually-shrinking cliff, the accelerating erosion bringing it closer to a dramatic collapse every year. It had once been a magnificent manor, the envy of the area. Its wealthy owners would hold lavish parties, strange people from all over coming for the fêtes. That was a long time ago now. The building had been condemned some years back when the undermining of the waves had threatened the structural integrity of the entire edifice. The owners had vanished one day, simply locking the doors and leaving as far as anyone could tell, not even bothering to take their things.

Some people -- children on dares, adventurous sorts not familiar with the local whispers about the place -- would sneak up the winding cliff path to peek inside the shuttered mansion from time to time. Invariably, they would return shaken, most having not even attained the summit and gotten

close enough to the house to see it. Something in the air, they would say, had scared them off. The winding path had no signs of warning, but with every step one took, an unmistakable feeling of trespass would well up. The curious or would-be looter would report that they could feel something watching them, warning them away from what was not theirs.

The way few brave or stupid enough to make it all the way to the house saw a place in remarkably good repair for having been abandoned. Windows intact, grounds still lush, if a bit wild, it looked like the owners had just stepped out for the season. When asked what they did next, the few that had made it that far reported that they had turned and left without a second glance. When asked why, after having braved whatever primal fear that had kept so many away, the response was usually a pause, followed by an admission that they weren't really sure, they'd simply found themselves leaving.

Having grown up in the town, I was of course familiar with the stories. I'd tried to make it up the winding path with my friends as a youth, but had never gotten for. To me, it was just a local fixture, part of the place. When I received the letter then, with strange postmarks no-one could quite recognize, it didn't occur to me initially that it was related.

The letter was from the owners, telling me that they'd known my father, who had occasionally done odd jobs for them. They needed something that had been left behind those many years ago, they explained, and would like me to go retrieve it for them.

349 <2021-08-06 Fri>

From the deck of the huge container ship, we watched silently as we slowly passed through the narrow channel. It felt like not only were we holding our breaths, but the whole landscape was as well, the sound of the propeller cutting the water making us wince with the noise.

We anxiously eyed the shore, keeping constant watch for those creatures which had forced us onto the water. We could see the crumbling and faded façades of what had once been a busy downtown, now abandoned to the depredation of the enemy. It was discomfiting to see this reminder of what life had once been like, cracking our resolve, making the waterborne life we'd become accustomed to seem like the bitter defeat it was.

Tensions heightened as we approached the massive bridge that spanned the narrowest section of the water. The monsters couldn't swim out to us, but lying in wait, then dropping dozens of meters down onto the deck was

something that they certainly would try. All aboard began shifting their eyes up, loosening weapons, doing a final check that all the young were below deck in safer quarters. As the prow of the ship crossed into shadow, an even deeper silence fell. It had already been quiet, but now even the sound of feet shifting on the deck stopped as we all strove both to be ready to respond instantly to the sight of a dark shape plummeting towards us and to not give any more clue to the keen-eared hunters that were surely around us.

The band of shadow passed over the craft like the poised hammer of a mercurial god. As sunlight fell again on the other side, those feeling the warmth on them again felt powerful relief, while those watching it approach felt the knot in their stomachs tighten.

We were almost across, the tension reaching its unbearable crescendo, when something finally happened. A shape fell from the bridge, the sudden motion catching all our eyes. As we all spun to face it, arms at the ready, the powerful spotlights on the ship illuminated it, revealing not one of our hated foes, but a rag-dolling human body, tumbling through the air. We all stood, posed for action, but unsure what to make of this.

The body impacted just behind the stern with a large splash and then we were past, back into the sunlight and safe. There was normally rejoicing at this point, but we were all still staring back, wondering who that had been and what had just happened.

350 <2021-08-07 Sat>

I found the first feather in the grass outside the cottage. It was an interesting colour and of a surprising size, so I picked it up, thinking that I'd later look up what kind of bird it came from. The feather itself was dull, but the shaft had a glittering, deep iridescence that I'd never noticed on a bird before. It was nearly the length of my outstretched hand -- not gigantic, but clearly bigger than a hummingbird or one of the other tiny avians I usually associated with such colours.

I never investigated further at that point though, for hours later the biggest storm we'd ever seen blew in, sending all of us scrambling. Boats were tossed across the lake like a god was skipping stones, houses had their windows shattered, and waves crashed over the shore. We were kept busy at first sheltering, then venturing out to help our neighbours and other victims of the sudden, vicious weather. Fortunately, the damage in our community was limited to broken windows, some lost patio furniture, and a few shaken

boaters who'd been blown wildly off-course. Our luck wasn't shared though -- it seemed like the brunt of the storm was focused out on the water. One container ship in particular was hit with the full force of the storm and had lost a great deal of cargo and several crew members.

We mourned and rebuilt and I didn't think again of the feather, which had been lost at some point in the chaos, until a few years later. I was in an entirely different place, stopped in a small town along the highway. While walking through one of the paths that skirted through the dense woods surrounding the place, I was surprised to see another feather, which immediately brought the memories rushing back to me.

As I picked it up and examined it, it seemed identical to the one I'd found next to the beach that day, and I promised to myself that this time I'd track it down. As I placed it into my pocket, rain began to fall and I noticed to my surprise the sky had suddenly become dark and foreboding. With the memories of that terrible storm now fresh in my mind, I ran back to my hotel, arriving drenched in the lobby to hear the consternation of the staff there, all talking in hushed tones about the unprecedented ferocity of the deluge and the seemingly advancing lightning strikes.

351 <2021-08-08 Sun>

It was one of the stranger landscape features we'd come across, but beggars couldn't be choosers. We'd flown across the vast gulf of space in search of a new home and this place would have to suffice. It was great in most ways, with a breathable atmosphere and relatively temperate climate. The fact that half of it was on fire wasn't ideal, but we could make do.

We'd no idea how this came to be, whether it was a natural phenomenon or the result of some ancient alien war. All we could see was that the planet was lined the deep valleys, all of which were covered by thick layers of roiling smoke and, below that, ceaselessly raging fires. It wasn't entirely clear what they were even burning -- ancient organic matter, compressed into coal or oil, we surmised -- but it burned with gusto, across the planet, with no sign of ceasing.

We had tried to learn what we could, of course, about this most distinctive feature of our new home, but none of us were experts in xenogeology or whatever and had our hands very full with just building our new settlement and surviving. We performed some cursory surveys by drone and orbital scan, enough to be convinced that they were stable and didn't pose a threat to us, then busied ourselves with the day-to-day of building and

growing. Soon enough, the fire gorges faded into the background for us, just another of the interesting natural features of the landscape; something we'd sell postcards of one day.

When the person who called themselves the Prophet began proselytizing across the planet about the meaning of the valleys then, we didn't pay them much mind at first. Just another person looking for meaning in our hard-scrabble existence, we thought. Their outlandish tales of entities living in the flames, and the smoke resolving itself into a twisted nest of serpentine creatures made of the smoke itself seemed like mere ravings. None of us paid them any mind, most thinking they were just deluded or some sort of charlatan...for a while, at least, until we were forced to reckon very abruptly with the sudden realization that they were absolutely correct.

352 <2021-08-09 Mon>

The water was flat and still, only the barest ripple from the faint breeze that played over the surface distorting the otherwise perfect mirror. Looking out across it as the sun began to fall, one could see the light of campers on the far side and headlights tracing their way around the perimeter. If it seemed that the humans there were unwilling to break the spill of tranquil silence that hung over the small lake, the wildlife felt no such compunction. The cry of loons rang out at top volume across the area, sounding for all the world like some lunatic just hollering.

As it darkened and the pitch black of a new moon night descended, the silvery lake became a flat gray, only faintly visible under the light of the stars. The slightest light here seemed like an imposition, headlights glaring like a thousand lightning bolts hitting at once. Soon enough they stopped though, and slumber fell over the place -- over the human inhabitants, at least.

Though it was as dark a night as they came and a light rain had begun to fall, some creatures still stalked the woods, intent on seizing this opportunity for feeding. The moonless night and scent-deadening precipitation made it the ideal night for those who desired to move while evading detection. As the predators of the night -- ermines, foxes, coyotes -- stirred and began their search, I too began to stir from the hiding place I'd been ensconced in. Now that it seemed that I was the only human still aware in this place, I was ready to go about my work, the tasks that had brought me to this place and had me sequester myself in this half-buried alcove until the time was right.

As I moved through the pitch-black woods, the sound of rainfall obscuring my footsteps or breaking branches, I kept my mental picture of the map I'd laboured so long to find foremost in my mind, carefully counting my steps and navigating by dead-reckoning through the midnight woods. I passed campsites of sleeping people -- some just campers, some doubtless agents of those who wished to stop me -- like a ghost, intent on finding my quarry before dawn breached the sky.

353 <2021-08-10 Tue>

We're still not really sure where the creatures are coming from or why this started. You'd think there'd be some institutional effort to solve -- or at least understand -- this monster invasion, but decades of privatization, diffusion of responsibility, and general apathy had gutted the public sector to the point where, when monsters started appearing, the response was, after a desultory effort, to start an RFP process to get private companies to combating the creatures.

There was, of course, complaining, saying that if the government's job wasn't to protect us from zombies, werewolves, and whatever other abominations were next to appear, what were they for? But years of lobbying to limit the powers of government to combat climate change, wealth inequality, and other social ills had so hamstrung their powers that even with a popular insistence that they do something, they simply lacked the ability. People didn't want to get eaten by a nightmarish monstrosity, but their neighbours also didn't want to pay higher taxes.

So, for our sins, we had to rely on the market to keep us from doom. Predictably, there was a race to the bottom in pricing and services, until we ended up in the situation we're in now, where we have to call an app and bid up your price to be saved from ghouls. There's a whole class of gig-economy Ghostbusters out there now, people whose jobs withered away and now find themselves having to risk their lives defending their neighbours from the depredations of vampires and who knows what else, to be able to make rent.

Many tried to overlay with other gig jobs, delivering food or driving cabs, to keep moving and let them slay a monster before delivering pizza to the almost-victim. Gratitude means tips and higher ratings.

354 <2021-08-11 Wed>

The surface of the water was still and tranquil, belying the oddities that lay below. It looked like any one of the small lakes that covered the region, glacial remnants, fed from the series of rivers and creeks that wove between them. It was only by chance we realized something else, something very unusual, was happening here.

It started on a lark, just happening to be swimming through the lake and diving along the bottom, looking for interesting pieces of jetsam, rocks, and the like. The depth meter in the boat indicated that it was a uniform few meters deep, but while swimming along, I suddenly came to a sharp drop-off. I peered into it, but couldn't see the bottom, so I surfaced to see what the meter said. Strangely, it didn't seem to see the sudden drop, only showing normal, continuous bottoms.

Very confused by that, but figuring these sorts of devices always have glitches, we next tried lowering a plumb line. The sinker descended and just kept going, for meters and meters, far deeper than seemed possible. When the line finally went slack, it slowly started to be pulled to the side -- it seemed that, wherever it had landed, dozens and dozens of meters down, it wasn't a simple hole, but something with a cross-current. A cave system, like the cenotes of Mexico.

But what was a cenote doing here? I had never heard of such a thing and desperately wanted to learn more. But the malfunction of the depth finder made me leery, fearful something strange was a foot; even if it wasn't underwater spelunking in a Canadian lake seemed slightly less safe than trying to juggle chainsaws while flying a stunt plane.

We took it slow. We held off on publicizing our discovery, wanting to have a more complete picture first, and wanted to get to the bottom of how it remained hidden. When we returned, we brought a small submersible drone that we could swim down to give us a fish-eye view of the mysterious aquatic tunnel.

355 <2021-08-12 Thu>

Every time I awoke, the walls were a little bit closer, a little bit nearer to crushing me. I'd spend the day labouring as hard as I could, for as long as I could, but it never seemed to be enough. I'd pour over the inscrutable instructions my strange, alien captors had left me, doing my utmost to translate the abstract diagrams and mathematical formulae to some concrete plan

of action that would arrest, reverse, or open up a whole in this implacably advancing wall of unyielding quartz-like substance.

The tools they'd left me had a sort of dream-logic to them -- alien, unfamiliar, but if I unfocused my mind, I could almost feel what I needed to do with them. I was unsure if that was a property of the tools themselves, something they'd done to my mind, or some unknown quality to this place. It was unsettling, like a permanent sensation of *deja vu*...but fortunately, the uncomfortable sensation barely registered beneath the gut-knotting sensation of panic and anxiety

Every day, I would pace out the perimeter and see how incrementally smaller it had become. Well, I had been doing that every day, but as it grew tighter and my frustration at my slow progress on understanding what I needed to do mounted, I began cutting such unnecessary distractions from my routine. I'd tried cutting back on sleep too, but the unbearable frustration that trying to decode an immensely complex puzzle with a tired brain made me realize the futility of that. I needed to remain maximally sharp, but also maximally efficient.

The slow torture of, every day, feeling a little more behind was slowly driving me mad. Every time I sneezed, I cursed my biology for slowing me down, making me take a fraction of a second away from the task at hand. That would be followed by cursing myself for wasting time cursing myself, when time would have been better spent accepting it and moving forwards.

I still had no idea why I was here. A test? A torture? But I had little time to spare thoughts for that, with all my efforts focused on the what and how, as well as tamping down the seething rage and terror with increasingly threatened to burst forth and destroy me.

356 <2021-08-13 Fri>

I remember dying feeling remarkably peaceful. The moments before my death are fuzzier, presumably more traumatic, but for the instant itself, I recall a sensation of coolness spreading over my body until it was all I could feel. My mind felt calm, peaceful, suddenly relieved of the burdens which had been confounding it. I welcomed this sensation of delicious, overwhelming release, utter relaxation passing over me. I lost all sensation of self, of time, and floated in a void; feeling nothing, aware of nothing.

If I could have been asked what I wanted, or indeed had any concept of "I" or "wanting", it would have been to remain in that state. Free from demands, stressors, wants, needs. Unfortunately, I was to be denied that. After some

time -- it could have been seconds or centuries -- I began to feel a sensation. Distant light, interrupting my rest. I tried to ignore it, but it approached, grew larger and clearer. With the light came sensations, also distant at first, but slowly becoming more present, more demanding. I began to feel a body once more, concepts of "self" slowly reasserting themselves. I had dim visions of silhouetted figures, moving around me, distorted my the thick, transparent walls around me, the sounds they made distant and garbled. Every time the visions returned, they were slightly sharper; eventually I realized that I was slowly returning to life. I was in some sort of clear tube and the figures moving around were the people that had dragged me from my rest. Why, I had no idea, but I felt with weary certainty they'd be demanding more of me.

When I finally fully awoke, the distortion and fuzziness cleared, I found myself in an empty room. I recognized it from the fragmentary visions I'd had, but the figures I'd seen hovering were gone. I was curious about that -- surely after bringing someone back from the dead, you'd stick around to witness your success? As I slowly tested this body I found myself newly ensconced in though, panning my vision around the room, I began to see signs they'd left in a hurry. Mugs left, still steaming, on tables, one knocked to the floor. Something had happened here to cause a mass exodus right at their moment of triumph...but what?

I slowly raised myself to my feet. I just wanted to return to my rest, but it appeared I had a mystery to solve first.

357 <2021-08-14 Sat>

When the storm first began blowing into our quiet little town, we were concerned but unafraid. These sorts of inclement weather events happened from time-to-time and we knew what we needed to do. Well, we thought we did, at least.

We boarded up the windows, checked the berms by the creek, made sure our flood-diversions were clear and ready, then we hunkered down. It was somewhat relaxing in a way, to sit inside and watch the storm wash over us, seeing the waves leap up towards us, hearing the suddenly biting winds scream and howl at the door. We sat inside and prepared to wait it out, reading, playing cards, knowing we were safe and the storm would soon pass.

Unfortunately, we were wrong about both of those things. First, the storm didn't pass. It continued to howl and pound, the water continued to leap up the beaches, and soon the swollen waterways threatened to overtake

even the most conservative flood barriers. Emergency teams went out to reinforce the waterways, to dig more side channels to prevent houses from being swept away, but that's when the second error came in to play: We thought we were safe, that it was just bad weather assailing us. When members of the emergency response team stopped coming back, fears began to mount that there was something out there, beyond just wind and rain.

Fears and speculation ran rampant and the storm took on an increasingly sinister mien. People were afraid to go out alone and rumours started to spread of strange sounds in the night, circling houses as if probing for a way in. The closer one was to the water, the more the hysteria gripped, although most still tried to pretend that this was just a normal -- albeit rare -- weather phenomenon.

Things finally came to a head when two events occurred more-or-less simultaneously. The main road out of town was submerged when a dike suddenly broke, cutting us off and, hours later, a security camera one resident had set up to watch their dock (long since washed away now) caught something. The video showed a pair of horrifying, humanoid fish-like creatures emerging from the rushing creek and stalking ominously towards a neighbour's house.

358 <2021-08-15 Sun>

It was what it must have been like to be alive during the cusp of an ice age, watching glaciers slowly approach, knowing that what was to come would fundamentally alter life for generations...but at the same time, have it be coming so gradually that you could pretend it would never arrive. In this case, we also had the increasingly desperate hope that perhaps we could reverse the process and save ourselves. The "glaciers" that were advancing, massive gunmetal-gray slabs of slowly undulating nanomachines, weren't the natural consequences of climate shifts, so surely there was something we could do to arrest their advance.

We still weren't exactly sure how the outbreak started -- experiment gone awry, some terrorist act that got out of hand, even more outlandish theories like the malfeasance of aliens or rogue AIs trying to "terraform" the planet to their own needs. It seemed to be originating from the poles and slowly working its way down, mimicking the paths of ice in an ice age, which seemed to somewhat weigh against the experiment theory. In any case, regardless of how it started, what we needed to do was end it. Direct attacks did nothing -- the massive blocks simply absorbed conventional munitions

directed towards it and there was concern that deploying more powerful weapons would kill us more efficiently than it.

Most efforts then were along more subtle lines. The swarm was clearly artificial and must have some way to communicate with it and for the constituent parts to synchronize. If we could disrupt that communication or, even better, insert our own messages, we could simply make it disintegrate, perhaps even control the structure to be something of benefit to us. That proved far easier said than done though. Presumably anticipating this sort of attack, the collective entity seemed to generate a field that disrupted our own computer and networking equipment in the vicinity.

We couldn't give up though; instead we focused our attention to how to shield from the interference...and eventually, we made our first small breakthrough.

359 <2021-08-16 Mon>

Every day, the waves crashed a little closer, the rocky promontory lost a little bit more of its structure, and I came a little bit closer to my doom. Long ago, I'd started a projection of how long I had remaining, but I'd since stopped wasting resources on that. When I was freshly commissioned, proud to be one of the most autonomous of the long-distance monitoring stations, the thought of just waiting for destruction would have been anathema, a shocking breach of responsibility. New though, after decades without seeing one of my putative masters, years since receiving any sort of communication, it just seemed pointless.

What would I do with that ticking clock? All the channels I had once used to notify my creators of required maintenance had long since gone dark. If there were any humans left, it seemed they had no desire or ability to rescue some forlorn weather robot from its slow demise. So, I just waited and continued to watch. I gathered the data I was designed to, still following the protocols of backups and broadcast, but more to keep busy than anything else. The broadcasts were surely falling on deaf ears and the backups would soon be underwater. Perhaps someday though, some future civilization would uncover them, gleam some insight from them...and know that at least one entity continued to do its duty.

Beyond that though, I had plenty of cycles that I needed to find something to do with. I watched the waves, filled with unknown pleasure when I caught the rare glimpse of some aquatic creature breaching the surface. I listened for any trace of my compatriots that might still be in service, but

heard nothing. Mostly, I learned about human nations of boredom, stillness. I tried to write poetry, and generally let my circuits range widely.

360 <2021-08-17 Tue>

This place was too hot. Where I was from, summers would be hot, but then cooler winds would prevail and, in due time, the weather would be back to a comfortable chill. Not this place though; my body could accept the heat for some time, but when it persisted without abatement for months, my internal thermostat would start to realize something was wrong, that it should be cool by now.

Still, I couldn't leave quite yet. The cool climes of the north called to me, but I had a task here to accomplish. I walked through the desiccated, windswept husks of what had once been cities and wondered at how such places had existed, carefully combing for the artifacts I was hunting for. They said this place was once home to millions, which seemed utterly inconceivable now. How had they possibly had the water to sustain such a population? I mean, in the end they clearly didn't, but how had they thought they did? This place seemed like a sprawling monument to hubris on a scale I could scarcely credit.

At least the dry heat had preserved much of the records and equipment I was hunting for in decent shape. The first and earthquakes that had ravaged the region had, of course, destroyed a great deal of the area, but there was enough remaining that my quest wasn't entirely in vain. Indeed, much of the main quarries I was after had been ensconced in sealed, secured facilities that would have weather fires fine and probably would have even survived earthquakes (assuming they hadn't been part of the chunks that collapsed into the ocean).

As my trek through the dusty heat continued and I painstakingly extracted the small nuggets of information I uncovered, I began to feel uncomfortably like something was building to a crescendo. The technology remains were becoming denser and I could detect increasing convergence of power and data lines in this place I was slowly approaching. I knew that supposedly the locus of so much of what had happened was in this area, but somehow thought I wouldn't see it myself...until I rounded a corner and found myself staring at the shattered remnants of glass and steel buildings, the primary-coloured lettering askew and partially buried.

361 <2021-08-18 Wed>

For a time we did our best to live in the narrow gap between sea and sky. We were assailed from both sides, the floods and ever-encroaching ocean on one side and the storms and tornadoes followed by droughts and merciless baking from the sky above. We'd squandered our place in between; what had once been, if not a paradise, close to it -- a place where people and animals could live and grow. Now, for our hubris and that of our parents and theirs, we had our backs to the wall, only an increasingly shrinking sliver of habitable land left for an ever-growing population.

We knew we had to do something, that the status quo was unmain-
tainable. It was too late for the land we had once inhabited to, our last
chances having passed long ago, so we would have to find someplace new.
The dream of fleeing to another world to begin again was a pipe dream, the
fading myth of the lords who had dreamed of leaving us all to burn while
they recapitulated all our mistakes anew. No, we would stay here, give the
planet the generations it needed to settle, while we stayed out of its way.

We saw two ways to go then: Up and down. Up, to the sky, seemed at first
blush like it would be preferable: Living above the clouds on huge hovercraft
that could rely on the constant influx of solar energy. The trade-off though
was the relatively scarcity of resources and the expense of bringing materials
up there. Still, to many, it seemed like a worth sacrifice.

Others chose to go down, into the oceans. The danger seemed more
immanent, the thick pressure vessels a remainder that the slightest failure
meant doom, but on the other hand, the huge diversity of life that still
existed down at the bottom, by the deep-sea vents that served as power
sources made possible a huge variety of research opportunities and plentiful
resources.

We amicably parted ways and declared we'd meet again when the Earth
was ready and we'd learned to live with it, not against it. Our two popula-
tions kept in touch at first, but over time communications waned, became
just occasional trade, as we both were fully occupied with surviving in our
new worlds. It wasn't for quite some time then that we realized how much
our two populations had changed, how distinct we'd become.

362 <2021-08-19 Thu>

The Fault was still a dangerous place, but had become the go-to destination
for recreational and salvage divers. Entire cities, what had been densely

populated and, for a time, one of the most desirable places to live, no sitting on the ocean floor like a modern-day Atlantis. The arterial highways still ran along cracked and broken ground, the undulations becoming more intense as one neared the coastline. Eventually the road would become a jumble of concrete slabs tossed here and there, forcing one to dismount whatever conveyance they'd been riding and hike the last few kilometers. Finally, one would crest a curve of the ruined roadbed and see the land drop off before them, like a giant had slashed a scalpel down the coast and excised the rest of the region.

For a time after the event, this area was a place of mourning, the blank, freshly exposed cliff-face a mute monument to the many lives lost and the countless more thrown into upheaval. With time though, as memory faded, it became a place of less acute tragedy, then a place of opportunity. This had once been one of the most concentrated pockets of technological development and, although sea water wasn't kind to such things, people still managed to salvage some very interesting artifacts, preserved in sealed vaults, mysteriously resilient prototypes, and all manner of documents in fire-safes.

Nowadays, cresting that final path would reveal an expanse of blue water, stretching as far as the eye could see, dotted with buoys and diving markers. Descending, one entered the continuously churning souk of recovered items, divers emerging periodically to hand a box to their on-land compatriots, who would quickly sort through it and then bring it to their booth, where it was liable to be snatched up in minutes, the eager buyers that prowled the ersatz alleyways always on the lookout for some bit of tech or information that would make them rich.

That was more-or-less my reason for coming here, to peruse the busy market. Not in search of wealth though. There was a particular place I was looking for and a particular diver who would be able to get me there.

363 <2021-08-20 Fri>

Walking through the rocky defile, I increasingly felt dwarfed by the scale and the silence. I hadn't intended to come here, but had wandered off-trail in a storm and had accidentally stumbled across this place and felt compelled to explore the hidden pass between the looming mountains.

My maps hadn't shown any sign of this place, but I assumed it was a private route made by a logging company or the like. As I walked along, I kept expecting to run into a "no trespassing" sign or something, but as I progressed deeper and saw no sign -- or indeed any sign of human activity

-- the more fascinated I became. Had I just discovered some new, hidden path? It was startlingly quiet in here, the deep mountains rising all around me seeming to cut off all sounds of the outside world and looming imposingly. What had started as a lark became the new focus of my trip -- I couldn't just turn back without seeing where this led. I continued walking this strange hidden trail, camping when it grew dark, rising in the morning to see if this would be the day I'd find the terminus.

I tried to plot the route on my map, but was hampered by the lack of direct line of sight to the sun and, apparently, the magnetic content of the surrounding rock confusing my compass. At first I'd been able to see how this path followed the spine of the mountain chain, but as I progressed what I'd thought my path was began deviating more and more, until my dead-reckoning showed me in the middle of an open field.

As I continued, I began to feel apprehensive, although I couldn't say why. I still had plenty of supplies and this was a quiet, straight path -- if I wanted to get back, I could just turn around and stroll out. Still, the oppressive silence was wearing on me -- it had been some time since I'd heard a bird or seen even the smallest rodent or reptile...and the mountains around me seemed to be growing steeper, higher, more intimidating.

Some tension was rising in me then, when I passed through into a new section of the trail that stopped me dead. Ahead, carved into the walls, were statues, hundreds of feet tall, of strange and frightening humanoid figures, glaring down at me like I was an intruding ant. Fear gripped me. *Where was I?*

364 <2021-08-21 Sat>

As the last ships pulled themselves through the atmosphere, straining to escape Mars' gravity well, those of us left behind watched. Some sullenly, some gleefully, some weeping and calling out to the unfeeling sky. We'd been abandoned, the grand experiment of a human colony on the red planet official written off, leaving behind the dregs and discontents. The story back on Earth was that virtually no-one was left behind, only the most desperate criminals or extremist Free Mars activists; the citizenry there didn't have much stomach for hard truths.

The fact of the matter was that, even if they had wanted to bring everyone back, there wasn't nearly enough transport capacity. Not when the expensive equipment and mining products were available to load on instead, anyway. There had been out-of-control bidding wars for seats on the last

transports, scenes of chaos, massacres...but now it was over. The deafening echoes of the launches faded and the colony was quiet. Many of the left-behind had desperately wanted to return to Earth; they'd only come here in search of opportunity and employment and were now realizing how expendable they truly were to their former bosses.

Some of the remainers, however, had stayed by choice -- indeed it had been their struggle for decades to achieve exactly this outcome. The Free Mars-ers had, since the early days, proclaimed that the Red Planet should belong to the people, not the oligarchs that were attempting to turn into an all-encompassing company town, a sweatshop with no escape. Their resistance had been an ulcer that had eventually grown so vexing that they owners had decided to petulantly pick up their ball and go home. They left assuming that all who stayed would die, some quickly in the riots that would surely break out, the majority slowly.

However, the movement to liberate the world had not spent decades in preparation for this moment without some thought put to what would come next. They thought they were condemning us to an ironic doom; instead, they had thrown Bre'er Rabbit into the brier patch and would come to utterly regret the cavalier way they had dismissed us -- among many other things.

365 <2021-08-22 Sun>

It seemed like the Earth was paused. Like it had had enough of us, but rather than even given us the catharsis of a great destruction, it was showing us that it could merely hold its breath and we would be annihilated. Droughts, stagnant oceans, collapsing jet streams and currents, all wreaked unbelievable havoc on our societies, knock-on-effects cascading and overturning our tiny little civilization that we thought so enduring.

As things fell apart and humanity tore itself to pieces trying to resolve this struggle, I found myself withdrawing from my fellow humanity. Disassociating, I tried to consider a long view, and found myself diving into history, searching for context. Human history was too solipsistic through, thoroughly obsessed with itself, considering tiny events that effected small groups of our particular brand of primates over mere handfuls of years as epoch-defining events. I needed broader context, to zoom out. I read about geological history, where events that take millions of years are considered the blink of an eye, and reflected how incredibly transitory we were. Barely a footnote compared to the stromolites that covered Earth for billions of

years, or the archea and bacteria to which we're a brief appearance to their domain.

As I read and thought and watched the fading of humanity, I desired to watch, to see what happened next. It struck me as unfair that our perspective should be so limited that we be only allowed so brief a glimpse that we can't get a proper perspective. We're like an entity whose life-span is a fraction of a second trying to understand the movie that's playing. We confuse a pause, a brief interregnum for the way things always are. I would, I resolved, see things out. I would simply refuse to perish and would, alone, watch the rise and fall of the planet. I would wait, watch, see the continents zip about, until I could see the shape of history from a truly long perspective.

366 <2021-08-23 Mon>

We were supposed to be just the first wave of settlers to this first outpost of humanity in the cosmos. The plan was that we would arrive on this new, Earth-like world to establish something of a beachhead colony, to be closely followed by many more supply ships and reinforcements. We performed our end of the operation smoothly; our long flight was uneventful, our arrival on the planet was successful, if a little rough -- slightly stormier than expected -- and our fledgling colony was well established in this harsh, almost Earth-like world.

The problem lay on Earth's end. At first, we had been receiving the usual telemetry from back there and everything seemed to be progressing to plan. News packets we picked up seemed full of bad news, but that was hardly a novelty. It was only in retrospect that we saw the news was really getting darker, heading towards catastrophe; only with the benefit of hindsight could we detect the stress, the tremors in the voices of ground control. To late, we saw the dire situation Earth was in.

When the end came for them, we can tell by the sudden halt of transmissions and the burst of EM radiation. We don't know exactly what happened, but the consequences certainly are clear: We're alone. Our little outpost is no longer a colony, but all that remains of humanity. Our survival is now the survival of our entire species...and that survival seems challenging. We'd been planning on having follow-up ships with more supplies and settlers to build things out, but suddenly we had to reckon with the notion that this was it.

There was panic and mourning at the news, of course, but not for too long. None of us had expected to see Earth again anyway, and no-one had

volunteered to be among the first humans on a new planet because they expected it to be easy. This was certainly a complication we hadn't anticipated, but we had expected that unforeseen challenges of some sort would arise. Besides, we had no way out now and an even weightier responsibility. We would somehow tame this new and barely habitable world with just the limited resources we had, survive and thrive, and keep the light of humanity from being ultimately extinguished.