

[front cover. Should be half black, half white]

MONO CHROME*

by A. B. Dekkerman

*** Slang term for cybernetic enhancements**

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[back cover. Looks like a cheap sticker got slapped over the original text]

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We hope you enjoy **[INSERTname_b4PRINTdood]** as much as we enjoy bringing it to you! Cheerz!

[under the sticker you can notice the last words of the original back-cover text]

... running from the law, searching for a home. Only to find MONO CHROME!

A. B. Dekkerman

MONO CHROME*

***Slang term for cybernetic enhancements**

Buzău

2024

~~Note~~ Advice from the Author:

This book is meant to be read from the beginning to the end, left to RIGHT, line by line, like a computer would do*. Of course, you are not a computer so there is nothing I can do to stop you from breaking those rules. But if during your lecture things get confusing, just remember what I told you and you will be fine. If things get WAY too confusing, do not despair! Do not try to force yourself to understand anything, just move on and the pieces may fall into place eventually. Any apparent typos, grammar mistakes or general illiteracy on my part IS completely intentional (this is non a joke!). Any resemblance to real-life people, places, cultures, events (past, present or future) or trends is completely coincidental and totally non-intentional (well, maybe...). I recommend lecturing on a large screen (or paper), fullscreen and I HIGHLY do not recommend changing any format settings (font, typeface, spacing, etc.). This is NOT A JOKE! Do not change anything!

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* except for footnotes. Well, computers have that function too...

~~Suggestion Proposal~~ guidance from the writer:

~~Don't~~ listen to them! Read it however ~~the fuck~~ you want!

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...

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SilkRoadAds^d took the liberty of including keyword-targeting-text-ads in the glossary/trivia/history/lore section (no worry, no ads in the main story). The ads are non-disable but if you wish you may purchase a non-ad edition from our stores. Remember our motto: “If you can’t find it here, you can name-call us queer”.

Enjoy fam!

Chapter 1:

The madness of loneliness

I wake up... the same dream I have every night ever since...

I'm in a park. REAL trees left and right. People walk around close to each other. Many people touching each other, hugging, nonprotected! Children running around with nonobvious safenets* attached. Two lovers on a bench having an outrageous display of affection: kissing each other on their lips, nonprotected! I look to my left. A girl is holding my hand—again—nonprotected. I nonrecognize her. Her face is blurry, perhaps the sun shines in my eyes. Everything bathes in bright light and my soul feels the same. I am happy, like non ever before in my life. And then, cold metal on the nape of my neck. Shocking nonpleasure. Complete darkness. Nonthing. Probably how it feels to be terminated. Non even that, I felt NON thing. That's when I wake up. Every day, same hour. [4:20] AM. A Botlike behavior regardless of how tired or little sleep I've had. I nonlike it.

It has been this way for almost a year now ever since Father...

I check the calendar on my H.U.D.**: [5th Nov 2085]. Today actually marks a year since he... nonappeared. It's noneasy! I nonbelieve how noneasy it is nonknowing what happened to him. I could get closure with the fact of his nonliving. But this?!... is nonpleasant. I get up from the bed. Gotta find something to do with all this time I have before work. I mimic some physical drills and a short meditation. [4:39] Breakfast and pills. [4:44] Soy-tea*** and chills. [4:48] VR news but I get bored fast. [4:50] Vidya****, a flatscreen title actually: 'Lords of the Overlords'. A classic! [5:32] ...time seems to pass too slowly regardless of what I do. And all this so I may divert myself from thoughts of Father...

Maybe it's time I did do a little detective work inside my head. I have non done that in a while. I know the Overwatch***** *can* make people nonpersons. Nonrich missus Tronski. Her life-partner, mister Jan Tronski did something. Heard rumor he attacked a superior in Templewatch***** but who knows? One day he was there, the next he was nonwhere. Non inquiry. Non trial. Non that there are any public trials anyway. 'To protect citizen privacy data' and whatnon.

Listen to me treading on the edge of mindcrime. But for those trials you can at least request trial docs! For nonpersons you noncan. There are non documents. The person non ever existed and your requests come back nonvalid. It's a nonrelaxing feeling to the bone. The 'nonperson' actually has an official mind-law definition as a 'psychological affliction' called 'localized Mandella psychosis' or *locomania* for short. Citizens are treated in Mindwatch***** centers for such nonbalances of the brain. And they treated missus Tronski real good. She went nonsane after her partner's... nonpersonification. She kept asking neighbors and shouting in the streets 'My partner, he existed! Please say it's true!'. I knew better than to respond. Just sat quietly thinking about

* or safety-nets. Special devices attached to a child's neck or hand, noninvasive, required for monitorization by parents, guardians and the authorities. Mandatory under the Special Child Protection Act.

** Heads Up Display. Also known as Graphical User Interface or Augmented Reality Vision implemented in cybernetic headware technology - cybernetic eyes in this case.

*** tea squeezed out of soy beans. **[#Analyze error1, Academic Analyzer Ambiguity Params failed. We apologize if analysis prediction gauge was inaccurate]**

**** or video games, general term encompassing old "flatscreen" emulation, VR, AR and holo-interact media.

***** physical enforcers of the Monostate law. Basically, the guys with the gun privileges.

***** clergy members of the Monochurch or "Temple of Mono". The only legal religion under the Monostate law, "because it includes ALL religions!"

***** mind enforcers of the Monostate law. Basically, the guys with the psychiatry diploma.

the nonjustice. Treading my feet in mindcrime only inside the borders of my head. Keeping the masquerade going. 'All is good in the Monohood' like the old jingle went. I nonloved that song so much and I nonloved non being able to express my... my...

Protest! There, I said it. Even if it's only inside my mind. Ah... that feels so liberating! I must be careful though and always remind myself of this: nonever let your thoughts leave your head. 'You are the master of the nonspoken word' like Father used to tell me. Good or nongood thoughts. Nongood because I nonwant to become a zombie like missus Tronski. And good because I nonwant to pay lip-service to the Monostate. That is my form of protest and I noncando* that with a fried brain.

“...master of the nonspoken word...”

I mumble softly, just loud enough for the langwatch** machine to miss it. Non that it matters with such ambiguous phrases. But you nonever know...

[5:32] and [9] seconds. I still nonbelieve it to this day. I fall in deep thought and time seems to slow down while my focused ideas fire up. They fire up with normal speed on the inside, but for the outside world it seems like protobeam*** speed. I can blame the slowness of other activities on nonexcitement. But these 'deep-thought' states nonmake sense by scientific standards, at least for a purely biological brain. And I'm non genius and my brains are pure matter. I find those brainchain**** augmentations... a nonpleasant feeling. I have nonscientific***** theories that *they* can read your thoughts that way.

[5:32] and [10] seconds.

Maybe I am nonengaged enough. Or too engaged. I still appear to avoid Father's 'investigation', to avoid the nonpleasure I suppose. Ok, nonfocus!

The Overwatch noncan be it. Father was nonviolent and he nonloved violence. The Mindwatch... well, they *n'ever* make people nonpersons. Nonbest case scenario they bring him back as a vegetable. And there's non vegetables in this pod, except soy-based. And Father knew well how to play those... spooks!

Heh... heh...

He taught me after all! Master-of-your-word was his first lesson. So Mindwatch is off the list too. And Netwatch***** non make people nonappear either. Even when you join Netwatch your family still knows where you are, they just noncan see or hear you ever again. No one else except other Omniwatch***** members are allowed to interact with Netwatch operatives. I nonbelieve Father ever did any netcrime anyway. He n'ever did any nonsanctioned computing in the house.

Like I would do!

* no can do / cannot do [#Analyze error01, Academic Analyzer Ambiguity Params failed. We apologize if prediction gauge was inaccurate]

** audio-video-emotional-sensor processors used for automatic language regulation and crime prevention.

*** wireless, low-impact, high-speed data transmission technology used by most satellites around the globe.

**** 10G wireless brain-cloud link, a marvel of cybernetic enhancement, no wetware* involved!

* in the case of brains, wetware is using actual brain space for extra-information storage. For example, software used in H.U.D. hardware/firmware functionality. Among other things.

***** meaning includes the banned word "conspiracy". Among other things.

***** net enforcers of the Monostate law. Basically, the guys with the legal net-hacking privileges. Among other things.

***** Overwatch, Mindwatch, Templewatch and Netwatch as a whole and their ~~messed-up~~ genius hierarchy system. Among other.

At least when I was around... That only leaves me with him running away or... aliens. I know that last one sounds nonsmart as fud*. But to me, him running away without saying anything—just leave a cryptic message at least, if your life is nonsafe—sounds equally nonbelievable... ..I want to believe. He taught me ‘Moors code’** after all. NONBODY knows that. At least I have non heard of people using it nor saw any systems that implemented that kind of code. Maybe the censors*** have it. It could non have been the aliens... but I’m noncertain. The only thing that can put me at peace, at least for the time being, is that he had to have a really good reason to leave me in noncertainty. And I noncan blame him for that...

Father... I will find out someday... I promise!

I check the time: [5:59]. I’m nonsure if I dozed off for a byte there, but it worked. Looking around my pod I find the same nonlively monotones of white and gray. A few blacks around the edges of the langwatch, the telly-screens, the P.D.A. and the checkered linings of the window. The fridge looks a bit bluish, I guess. Five hundred shades of grey, like the people around here. Like our Monolang****, a gray, grey lang...

I fix my eyes on the PT*****. I insert the SD*****. What if he did leave a message and I totally missed it? I jump out of bed with renewed enthusiasm as I tap away a RegEx to crawl through my ‘nonofficial’ archives.

/(Father|leave|leaving|Exit|escape|down|nonsafe|nonperson|nongood|goodbye)/gi

I try as many keywords as I can come up with. There has to be a message in there somewhere!

[‘Search complete! – 101 results’]

Nonthing from Father. I check Contacts to start the manual scrape through I.M.s, docs, anything. N’thing. I non even have him as a contact anymore. Non outgoing, non-ingoing. Like a nonperson.

“Did he do this?” I say out loud, in amazement, at the thought of Father hacking his own child’s account. To wipe his own trace. As much as I know how that is a serious netcrime and that I should be nonalright with it, all I feel is proud and admiration for him. And it’s a smart move! But still leaves me with noncertainty... I do some more regular checkups just to make sure. Read up on some other contacts. Non much... Time passes by... [6:59]. Ah, the eldercare! I forgot about it. I need it to keep my S.C.S.***** on balance and the Hate Mass***** nonpresence has started to eat up my points. I *HATE* ‘Hate Mass’. It’s so pointless! I’d rather watch the white ceiling of my pod than participate in it. Why would I even care about them showing me some bioterrorists and other traitors I n’ever met in my life and probably n’ever will. Yeah! I know it’s nongood! Non need to tell me every day...

* Vague meaning profanity permitted by the Monostate. Other examples are “shud”, “dang” and “shooks” **[Error 1001: Ambiguity Params. We apologize if prediction was shuddy]**

** Morse code **[Error 01 1: Ambiguity...]**

*** pseudo artificially intelligent analytical programs designed to keep the gov/corpnets traffic in check with regulation. They consume most of a super-quantum computer’s processing power and are capable of real-time monitoring, censoring and removal of text, audio and video communication, including entertainment shows and other media that does not qualify to the standards.

**** One of the Monostate official langs. A sterilized, highly regulated version of 20th Century Common Tongue.

***** Personal computer terminal.

***** stick Data key.

***** sociAl credit score – rating assigned to each citizen of the Monostate. The score measures community involvement, Monostate “ProMos” worldwide and general respect for the laws.

***** Monochurch daily “optional” liturgy. 15 to 30 minutes of renouncing criminals of both mindcrime and actual violence. Universal Broadcast, meaning that any nonessential communications are jammed for the duration of the Mass.

I'll just call a bot-cab and be on my way. Screen says [30] seconds to arrival, pffft what's this? Traffic at this hour? Heh, I'd rather spend TWO minutes waiting for a cab* than spend 1 second at Hate Mass. Yeah, I'd rather spend eco cred** than gain social cred. Heheh, how's THAT for a protest! ... [15] seconds 'til arrival... better flee now... I grab my faceshield***, gloves, stuff and PDA and run for the exit. The cab pulls in just as I'm stepping down the front steps. I take a look around at the gray brutalist towers, which shadow me from above, and I take a deep breath of semi-eco-nditioned air before I leave this Lowerhood dungeon behind. At least for the day. As I climb in the mobile, the cab voice greets me with a pleasant jolly voice.

"Greetings, friend! Hop in!"

"Hey JBot, how are you?"

"I'm as gay as always, thank you very much!"

I chuckle and sit down while the shuttle door closes. I love JBot, he is the coolest botnality**** I know. Well, except for BBot****, I guess. I n'ever mute JBot, he always makes me laugh.

He continues "How about you? All is well?"

"I'm kinda nonexcited I guess." I roleplay a small shrug.

"I'm nonhappy to hear that, friend. But maybe I can cheer you up! How about a joke?"

"Sure thing, J. I love your jokes!"

"Ok. So, there's this computer, minding his own business. And suddenly, his computer pal comes running into the room, all screaming. His friend tries to calm him down and after a few megahertz the nonrelaxed computer explains: 'I just had the most NONPLEASANT dream ever! At first it was OK, you know, 1, 0, 1, 0, 0, 1, but then, out of nowhere... 2!'"

I stand there a bit nonfused***** for a second, waiting for more of the joke. But then, the punchline hits me. I burst out laughing at the silliest joke I have ever heard.

"Oh pal! That's a good one, J!" I remark wiping a metaphorical tear from my eye.

"Thank you, friend! I'm glad you like it. Forgive me friend, I noncan help but notice that you are nonwearing your gender tag at the moment. As such I am non able to refer to you in your preferred gendernoun."

...

Fud! I did it again...

* Clients are also charged for the time the bot-cab takes to arrive to location, unless the client declines immediately.

** economy credits, Monocoin or simply creds. Currency of the Monostate. Based on blockchain technology.

*** clear-glass face protection device that repels germs, viruses and other bio-terroristic weaponry. Mandatory in public spaces across the Monostate. Highly customizable!

**** Simulated Artificial Personality, or S.A.P., is a pseudo-A.I. personality simulator used in voice-input-output communications between citizens and bots.

***** or ButlerBot, a S.A.P. integrated in multi-purpose helperbots. BBot thinks his owner is a superhero and tries to offer aid in their adventures in any way he can.

***** confused. [00 Ambiguous Error...]



“Aww shucks, J! I must have left it back home.”

“Would you like to return shuttle to original location? For retrieval?”

“Non... it’s ok. I will be fine.”

“Are you sure, friend? Noncompliance can result in fines and even social score penalties, if reported.”

“Are you going to report me?” I ask with a bit of sarcasm in my voice, fully aware of the futility. JBot seems to stall for a moment, almost as if he is pondering the moral question. It’s only a few nonnoticeable milliseconds, but they are there, I can feel them. I know the chances of this actually being a ghost-in-the-shell* event is pretty dim, but still. I like to believe.

I want to believe...

“Nonworries, my friend! I am nonauthorized to report gender-tag compliance. I shall resume our current course to destination.”

“Thank you, J! Please put on some R.G.B. ** on 55% volume, monaural.”

“Oh, some good classics in there, my friend! Good tastes, mmmmm...” JBot’s voice fades away while some soothing electrojazz smoothly fades-in through the speakers. I relax my spine and lower the back of my head in the male jack of the sound system, to experience the full monaural effect. It’s non the best channel, but it’s the least nonbest of the corpo-splonk***. I turn off my H.U.D. as I close my eyes and imagine travelling to Mars to visit Noel’s Free States, where the Musketeers live. Or ‘traitors of Earth’ as the Monostate labels them. Traitors of Earth... pffff. I say good for them! They got away from this... grayness. I find it so funny the Monostate maintains that they nonclaim territories beyond Earth, except on the Moon and the satellites of Jupiter. Even if they’re non doing much in those places. But I’ve seen the ‘nonofficial’ leaks. The firepower those Muskbrainers are packing... fud, I doubt Monostate could get even CLOSE to Mars! And their numbers are probably higher than estimated. I’ve heard stories of geeks managing to trick the P.D.S. **** and escape Earth’s atmosphere, but even if that’s true, what chances do they have of reaching Mars? I want to believe...

“Aaand here’s your destination, friend!” I get mildly shocked back to reality as the shuttle stops 100% and the jack retracts out of my jack and back into the seat. The music continues on the speakers at 50% the volume.

“Thank you, J!” I press the ‘+ 10% tip’ button on my P.D.A. screen. “Love you, J!”

“You’re too kind, friend! Thank you! Have a gay daaay!” he says with the cutest glitch ever.

I know he is just an A.I. but giving that extra cred makes me hope it might reach the developers, somehow. They really deserve it with this one.

I step on the more breathable streets of Middlehood West, the one a bit more colourful than East Middlehood, or any part of Lowerhood. I did non check the clock on the dash and I non wanna turn the H.U.D.

* popular urban legend theorizing that there is a small chance that procedurally generated/neural-networked pseudo-A.I. could at some point actually give rise to consciousness, or at least self-awareness. Monostate science refutes such claims as nonscientific.

** Radio Good Beats!

*** like any other legal profanity, “splonk”’s meaning is vague but some circles might associate the sound of the word with feces dropping in a water-based toilet.

**** Planetary Defense Systems. Primarily designed to keep things from getting out rather than getting in.

on in these parts. Non need non 'papers' for these walls! I like this corner of the metro **. A bit neo-deco, a bit post-gothic but less gargantuan than the towers downtown or uptown. The eldercare is behind me but I spend just a few more moments absorbing the relative calmness of this area. There's even less sentries *** buzzing around in this hood. I pirouette and run towards the elder building, actually more like jogging to nonarouse any observant drone. Up the long, imposing stairs and into the reception. Doors slide behind me with a jingly ding.

Missus Ekaterina is, as usual, nose-deep in her WT**** but throws me a pity glance and remarks "You're nonearly. Again."

"Good morning to you too, missus E!" I say with a large grin.

"Non missus me, Dem, do you know what time it is?!" she is clearly trying to maintain her calmness but it still seeps out through her pores.

"Non, madam!"

"Well... why do you have those eye 'plants'***** for?"

"I turned them off, madam!" I'm clearly still smiling and laughing inside. I always tease her.

"You... turned them... off...? How... did... .." she is obviously trying to process our discussion and her tasks at the same time, but her randomly slowed tapping tells me both threads of thought are nonravelling. She stops the tapping and faces me with clear, chronic fatigue in her eyes.

"Look, forgive me I am in a mood but last night was—" she whispers "—nonsane! Three simultaneous heart nonfunctions and several psychotic episodes—" she whispers again "—mostly from ol' Maltov. Dear Mono, that male drives me loco!" She smirks but then suddenly goes poker-face, probably because she already told me more than I should know.

"Ouch, I feel ya, madam!"

"Anyway... I'll let it slide... **again**... but please! Next time just affirm or non, one hour in advance. It would really make my life easier."

"Thank you, madam! I will do that! And you can mention 'high traffic' on the report. I had to wait 'THIRTY' seconds for a cab."

"Thirty seconds, really? What a **hero**!" she's teasing me back. "And please! Non call me **madam**..." This one is less of a tease and more of a sigh.

"Ok, then how should I call you?"

"Call me... Eka."

"Eka?" Like a buddy-pal, Eka? "Ok, Eka, buddy!"

* wallpapers. Used in augmented reality devices to customize user experience on the streets of a city.

** metroplex, metropolis, monocity, megacity. Each Monostate city is divided into three neighborhoods: Lowerhood, Middlehood and Upperhood. Each "hood" is divided into "East", "Central" and "West". The distance of traversing a hood division from one edge to the other must take no more than 30 minutes on foot. The "foot" is decided by the "lowest denominator" ...

*** semi-autonomous flying or stationary drones employed by Overwatch Security Forces.

**** work terminal station

***** implants. [Error111 Ambiguity 10 / Plan 00 from 000—/—0—]

“Oh, stop it you donkey!” she laughs and that sound fills me with a bit of love. And I suspect she probably feels the same for me too because I doubt my nonsmart jokes are really that funny. Or funny at all. She is obviously a nonmale in her middle years and nonminds showing it either. And I noncan say I would nonlike someone like her, even with such age difference.

She’s nonyoung enough to be your mom!

Yeah, I know, but who cares? In this day and age anyway... But I digress. She probably has the love of a mother for me, rather than a lover.

Her laughter stops abruptly after her eyes fall on my chest.

“And the gender badge?”

“Please non report me!”

“Aaaaargh...” her annoyance is deep and thunderous. “Last! Time! Ok?”

“You are an angel, Eka! Those tags have nonuse here anyway.” I whisper “The old fuds non even care about genders.”

“Oh really?!” clearly going in tease-mode again “Well sometimes maybe I nonremember some of the staff members’ gendernouns.”

“Hehe, come on Eka!” I take a faux-offended tone and strike an arms-spread presentation “I’m two hundred percent male!”

“That has nonthing to do with gender and you know it, Dem.”

“Really! E, come on, you—”

“—Hey!” she cuts me off while sneakily pointing at the langwatch station. I know she agrees with me but I also understand why she is doing this. I nonblame her. I just wish...

Ekaterina takes a professional stance and says “Work time! Scroll away here to see today’s residents ‘human interaction’ requests.” She rotates the non-touch display of the terminal towards me.

“Is old Jakmann awake yet?” He is the only interesting fud of this lot but usually sleeps in at this hour. Totally nontypical when compared to the rest of the oldies who wake up at five or even earlier. But Jak at least is... ninety-five years old! I’d say he deserves it. He told me he worked all his life, did non wanna retire but a stroke got him at ninety, paralyzed half his body. Nonrich Jak, he nonhad the creds for a brain-fix, sold his possessions and moved in with the blokes here. There’s non as old as Jak here, most retire at fifty. And they look nonbetter than Jak at that age. Husks of males and nonmales.

“Old who?” nose-deep in her PDA.

“Old Jakmann! You know... ‘Cyberpops’?”

He did non have that many ‘ware implants,
but I teased him for being old-tech.

“There’s non... resident... called mister...? ...”

The split! I know it! I feel it in her trembling voice. She just turned into a frozen child, afraid to answer in front of the parent, afraid to nonanswer when an answer is expected. She has to speak but she noncando it. Ideas noncompatible, rationality override engaged.

...They made Jak a nonperson! I almost scream it but I think better. Non for my safety, I almost noncare anymore. But for Ekaterina, I care for her safety. A tear forms in the corner of my eye but I pull it back and calm myself, smile and fake nonsmart to non-fuse the situation.

“Oof! I really am a donkey today, Eka. I’ve been nonfused all day. Must be some holoshow char* I’ve binge-watched last week! Heh, Jakmann. Yeah...”

They have your watch history, splonkhead!
And it’s non that big to sift through...

Maybe the predictor-bots** are splonkheads too.

She takes her nose out of the PDA with a look of obvious relief on her face. Then she swiftly-sneakily pops a pill in her cutesy mouth.

“Ok... sorry Dem but I am mega-busy, can you please pick a rez***?”

“Certainly!” I swipe through the list looking for the few friends he tolerated: Ivann, Laik and... Xer Mina. But Jak mostly kept Mina around just to make fun of ‘Xer’ gender, hehe. Jak was non nongood though—

—like I would be!

[‘Non’] Ivann or Laik. [‘Mina’] is up there but she clearly mentions in the disclaimer [‘Non Dem’]. Wow, she... I mean sorry! Xer banned me. I think Xer loves me too much and is nonbrave enough to follow Xer heart. I smile wickedly and raise my head to meet Eka’s eyes and ask about the other two.

“Ivann and Laik are still non awake?”

“Ivann requested some privacy and Laik...” Her mind seems to wander a bit so I try to bring her back to reality. Back down to Terra. Straight back down... back dooown...

“Yes? Laik?”

“He... was one of the residents who... passed away last night.” Landing...?

* character, as in role [cinema], personage [theater], etc. Pronounced as in “**char**coal”.

** specialized A.I.s that analyze audio-visual information to enforce law compliance and predict any crime. Implemented in langwatch machines.

*** resident.

Laik, eh? I know he and Jak had their arguments but really? How would Jak, a half-paralyzed 90-five-year-old male, terminate a sixty-4-year-old relatively healthy male? Beat him over the head with a P.D.A. 'til he passes beyond? That theory non-stands.

Maybe he had a gun.

In this place?! *Nonprobable*.

Mini-crossbow, shuriken, chopsticks.

I nonbelieve I could bring a sporknife* in here without setting off all the alarms. I'm tempted to go with Mina for the teasing material but I risk getting reported the moment I step in 'Xer' room. She's a reporter** by profession!

Non... I go through the list again and pick some lucky bloke at random.

[Eolin Macdonland; 69yo; Prefers to be called **Don Monty**']

Yeah, that sounds interesting, I like it. Room one-oh-one. I accept the task and rotate the screen back to Ekaterina.

"Done. See ya on my way back. Kiss you!"

"Oh, you devil!" says the tease-queen. "Have fun!"

I will if this bloke has any answers. I easily find room one oh one. The old fud is sitting in the middle of a much more colourful room than I expected. Much more colour than I have ever seen, ever! I check my H.U.D. to make sure it's off. Don just sits there on a rotating stool, eyes fixed on some point on a wall decorated with lots of trinkets and antique-looking toys. Most of them are probably banned from child access. But his gaze is nonfixated on them. His eyes watch a painting on the wall. A funny looking... frogman of sorts. All covered in robes and a sort of golden disk around his head, behind his head. His green nonfat hands are hanging at his sides, palms towards the viewer. His palms... have holes in them! And red blood is dripping at his feet! But he seems nonphased by it. Just a peaceful, silly-looking smile on his splonky face. I 'assume' it's a 'he'.

I break the ice since the nonrich old splonkhead probably non even notices me. Dementia, among other things, I remember reading in the 'script***.

If I non get lucky with some answers,
I'll have a bit of a laugh at least.

Hehe, yeah... nah, I am gonna behave, he looks cool.

"Hello, Don Monty! How are you feeling today?"

He finally realizes he is non alone and half-rotates to face me.

* spoon-and-fork combo with a serrated edge for cutting (food). Nonlethal.

** a citizen who reports crime, any kind of crime. Valid reports are rewarded with social cred. Not to be confused with "journalist".

*** description. In this case referring to a resident's mental health docs.

“Hello... uh...” he looks for my gender-tag but finds non. Then completely ignores it and continues to speak. Like I said, they noncare around here. “Hi young man... uh...” Uuuh, ‘man’? His words roll heavily down his tongue, likely his face is paralyzed on parts of his jaw. It could’ve sounded like ‘male’. The langwatch is probably checking its ambiguity parameters. He continues “... I... uh... am fine, thank you! ... Yeah.” then his body rotates back to its initial position, comically a bit like Eka’s terminal screen. His gaze long gone to the painting on the wall.

“Ok... that sounds cool, I guess, hehe...”

Don Monty the Terminal Display.

Hahahah, stop it! I can barely maintain my laughter inside here but I’d feel like such a donkey to burst out, rolling on the floor in front of this nonrich bloke.

Done Monitor, Monty Pie-screen—

—Shhhhhhh!

“So, tell me, who is the fine-looking **male** in the picture?”

“... He is a... a great friend... yeah... a great friend...”

“Does he have a name?”

“Yes! His name is! ...” it’s almost as if he wanted to jump to his feet with enthusiasm at the thought of the name, but he stops and resumes his vegetable-like state at the realization of missing name data. “I really I... apologize, I have a nongood... memory... with names...”

“Non problem, Don!” Remember protocol— “It’s ok if I call you Don, right?”

“Yeah... yeah, Don, hehe. Donpadon padon, ha ha!”

Comedian of the Year, in the flesh! N’ever have I thought it possible but here is Don presenting me with the award. I’d present the same award back to him as a counter-joke, but I nonbelieve he would get the killer-joke in his state of mind. I give him an award in my heart instead.

“I like you Don, you’re cool! Tell me, how did you get this painting? Did you do it or...?”

“The painting... ah, the painting! Yes! No, I am non a painter... a gift... a gift! It was a gift, my grandfather, Yohann! Gambleputty de von, Ausbl...” his words seem to trail off in another dimension of existence I guess, because non thing he mumbles about makes any sense. Something about ‘dingles’ and ‘dongles’ but I nonbelieve he is talking about electronics. I interrupt him before he has another stroke.

“Yes, if I may just cut in on you there... in what year did he give you this gift?”

“Yes! It was in the year of... yes, nineteen eighty! ...” he stops abruptly but I’m unsure if it’s because of dementia or if he is actually aware of langwatch.

“...Nineteen-eighty? ... yes?” I’m very curious, that’s pre-H.C.R.P.V. * era.

“Ah... I... it was... before The Event, yes...”

Really? Nineteen eighty something.
69 years old. He was non even born then!

“Ok, interesting... and what does the painting mean to you, like... fee-low-saw-fee-ka-lee?” I try to keep a balance between langwatch—

—Assumed—

—handicaps and Don’s meager awareness.

‘Philosophy’ is a legal word but I’m sur—

—ASSuming—

—they put you on a watchlist for it.

...Maybe.

“The painting... to me... it means...” He changes completely! Even the apparent paralysis of his jaw is gone. He is glowing with light and happiness and I wonder if this! If this... is what a nonnormal event is. Like a... religious experience of sorts. Like a... `mircal` was it called?

Mire call.

Nah.

Meer coal.

You’re just inventing thos—

—Mine co—?

—Shhhhhh!

“It means sacrifice, nonacceptance... Honor! And... and...” his fervor fades back a bit but he is still activated “...and truth...”

A very bizarre yet engaging collage of coherence on his part. Sometimes the nonsane amaze me the most.

“Truth, yeah! I like that part especially!”

The predictor A.I.s are probably very nonfused right now.

Probably.

“Yes, it’s...” aaaand he’s back to the painting again. He already gave me so much, so kudos to him for making it this far.

Ask him about last ni—

“—Do you Don... by chance, you know... happen to know if... something... you know, anything about what you know happened... around you know last NI-ght?”

* Highly Contagious Respiratory Pandemonical** | Virus, aka “The Event” in common parlance, is a pandemic that took place at the start of the 21st Century, which put in motion a chain of catastrophic events that led to the creation of the Monostate.

**[Error666 Grammar Check Flail...]

That vague enough for you, langdogs?!
Don, as expected, is a bit nonfused too. But after some short processing he is back to activated Don.

“Oh, hohooo, yeah, yeah hahaaaah. Big booms, bang bang, ploooooowww! ... Heheheh.”

If it's a firefight he is describing, his enthusiasm is opposite to what such events should normally evoke in a person under threat.

He probably watched some holovid.

“You watched a holovid? A shooter-flick?”

“No! No... I was in it!”

“In the fire fight? You participated?”

If this doesn't get us on a watchlist,
I'll really start believing in mere koalas.

Oh fud! Non turning back now.

Why non—?

—Shhhh! Adrenaline 10%—

“—Yes! Yes... bang bang! I am **you see**, an actor!” I almost think he's gonna jump to his feet, but he just mimics a sort of dance or acting without much movement. Noncan ask for too many mircals in a day.

And we should be safe from the langdogs too.

And it's 'mere kale'. Just open your
H.U.D. and search for—

—Shhhh! Adrenaline stabilizing.

“Actor, really? Dang, that sounds too cool!” My admiration is actually sincere. At this point I am willing to believe anything.

Please tell me you're an alien, please!!

I n'ever met an 'actor' before. At least non in the fleshspace* anyway. Sure, I see influheads** at every street corner, but those are cred-a-dozen*** and they are splonkbrains and nonengaging.

Splonkbrains, real ori-gee-nal that one, Deme—

—Shhhhhh! Don the Actor, holoscreen star. Hey, maybe he's from flatscreen era too, who knows?

Assumingly.

True but...

... I want to believe.

Adrenaline 12%.

* meatspace, also known as “the real world”. Opposite: Netspace, “virtual space”, metaverse or simply the Net.

** fame-hunters or “influencers” are citizens taking a shot at celebrity. Shot as in “trying” not “fire shot”. Those in the latter category are labeled 'lone-wolf' actors and have been significantly reduced in current day Monosociety, with most of the cred for the job given to the advanced predictor-A.I.'s and their brilliant coders!

*** dime-a-dozen, cheap. [#Analyze error0001: We apologize if inaccuracy...]

“Well mister splonkbrrr-sorry! I mean Don Monty—”

—Gotcha! Hehe—

—Shhhhhh! Adrenaline... error—

“—it will be an honor to take care of you today. Now let me help you with those nontidy looking...”

I follow protocol and commence the nonpleasant ‘maintenance’ routine. But it’s non that nongood helping Don. It actually feels rewarding in itself. Like helping an old version of Father.

An older version you mean.

A senile older version.

Clean-down, check-up, stim-shot, pill-drop, he’s fine! I try to keep communication lines on-going and time feels like passing by much faster than before in the day. Still nonknow what time it is. Still noncare. Turning the H.U.D. off is so... relaxing! So nondistracting. But soon I get a different distraction and I’m nonengaged with Don, nonfortunately...

Nonrich ol’ Cyberpops, what did you do, you big fudster*? They may have nonpersoned you but I will N’EVER let them take away my memory of you. I promise!

The tears come flooding again but this time there’s nonpoint in holding them back. Don non seems to notice anyway. I gently weep for a while, on mute...

...Langdogs are splonkbrains anyway...

...Shhhh...

* like “trickster” ‘ ‘ [;)]

Chapter II: I want to press ESCAPE

...Did I doze off? ...Non, I tend to tell the difference when I keep the H.U.D. off.

...What time is it?

H.U.D. on. Ghost-trails* are replaced with [8:50],[42] seconds.

Plenty of time...

...much time...

Don Monty is ready to sleep like a baby. If I remember correctly—

—6-8 x day—

—he does sleep like a splonky baby.

Without that much crying though...

...Non cry...

Hehe, yeah. Don Monty is mega-cool. Wait, what? I'm non cry—

—Shhhhhh! Adrenaline... err—

—Ooh, is daddy Dem ready to repro—?

—Shhhhhh! Emotional nonstability 59%—

—Hah! Sure, I'm nonyoung enough to—

—Shhhhhhhh! Adrenaline... checking...

Wait! Emotio-whaaaa?a—

—Shhhhhh! Adrenaline... checking... 90% Warning! —

—I feel nongoooo—

—SHHHHHH—

—IT'S FUUUU—

—*Beep* on HUD [Alert! Alert! Systems Overload! Report Authorities? (Y/N) (Pat ESC to reboot)]

X!

ESC!

ESCAPE!

[Sys restarting, please wait...]

Well that still non solves the—

—Shhhhhh! Problem!

* temporary (mostly harmless) phantomlike optical illusion experienced by eyeware users who over-abuse their H.U.D. functionality.

I know I just need to—

—Shhhh! Nonproblem! —

—Good thinking, botbrain! All we need to —

—Shhhhh... meditating! —

—Just gotta—

—Sssshhhhhhh... meditating...

...Medi... tatas—

—SHHH!hhhhhhhhhhhh...

...

...shhhhhhhh...

...

I love... this... peace.....

...ssshhhhhhh..... adre... stabil.....

...shhhhhhh.....

The... embodiment... of NON.....

Non... adrena... stabilizi—

—Non—

—oooooooooooooh—

—shhhhhhhh.....

Non.

Adrenaline... stabilized.....

[8:55]. Still, plenty of time, nonpanic—

—unless there's traffic—

—Shhhh! Nontraffic! —

—I non even care—

—Noncare. Stabilized.

Good!

Good!

Good!

I say my goodbyes to a noncaring Don and rush down the hallways back to Recep'. Assistants* of the morning shift are already pouring in. Mostly young nonmales—

—probably—

—student-looking miss and missus X and Y. I'm sure most of them are just paying for their studies.

But I'm also sure—

—some of them are here to *probably* cover some social cred fiasco—

—wild parties, clubbing gone nongood and—

—Yeah. That stuff can turn your rec** —

—Nonclean! Non-stab—

—Most of the assistants non even throw me a glance. Non that I care. I nonmind them, they nonmind me.

Noncare. Stabilized.

Almost at the Reception. I talk while I do the walk.

“All-good-gotta-go, see—”

“—Waaaait-you-nonremembered-to—” I wave ['Agreed'] with my finger on her—

—non-touchy-touchy—

—Display. Stabilizing...

“Sweet dreams!” Night shift's over for Eka.

“Thanks cutie, I need it! I hope I non dream of you being nonearly again.”

“Ha haaah, you **love** me Eka, admit it!”

“In your **dreams!**”

Hehehehe—

—Swipe*** —>

—and I'm—

—Yours! Nonstabilized...

...

...

...

* Nurses.

** records, crime history. [#Analyze Error00 Assuming Judgement -...]

*** the act of Declining ((Swipe Left() or Accepting ()Swipe Right)) to complete the F.O.C.A. or “Form Of Commonsensual Agreement”. Consent can be invalidated at any time — by any members taking part in the Common-sensual Agreement — through the use of a safe word commonly decided upon and agreed to in T.S.X, or “Terms of Common Sense”.



I jump five—

—six—

—stairs then leap again 6—

—5—

—stairs and like a toad, in one sec, I’m downstairs. Non drones in sight! Stabilized...

Cab is already here. Non-time for scenic detour. Ah fud, it’s an MBot*! How did I erroneously swipe for—

—I [‘Mute’] before it gets to say [“Hell—”]

—Quiet. Stabilized...

Silence is better than—

—Jbot?...

Non-JBot...

Non-JBot. ...

Silence. I prepare myself mentally for the Upperhood. I—

—HATE! —

—Upperhood more than I—

—HATE! —

—Middlehood and Lowerhood combined—

—LOVE W-M-hood—

—... Maildrones*, Cleanin’drones**, Copdrones***—

—HUMAN drone^{zzzz}...

... All buzzing around for the same purpose:

Muh-muh-muh-MAXIMUM CRED!

Nonsmarts! All of...—

—Them non stabilized.

...

...

...

..

.

* MundaneBot, S.A.P. coded for “general purpose” and “easy” conversations.

I wish I nonworked for a corp, but where else would you work? You either work for the Govs* or you work for the Corps**. Or you go nonemployed***. But who would want that?!

Nonrich. Nonstabilized...

[8:57]. Still time. P.D.A. approx. [2min] to loc—

—still nontraffic. Still, you had to rent a pod on the longest route poo-ssibl—

—Nontraffic. Stabilized.

“Really nonusual...” This whole day has been like a ‘Nonlight Zone’**** episode...

Seven traffic; seven-thirty NonJak; eight- [58]—

—nontraffic. Stable...

[8:58],[24]’s—

—almost... there...

... ..

‘You are—’

‘—The Master—’

‘—Nonspoken—’

Word!

Word!

Word!

[8:59]. (Accept). No tip. Exit. Jog.

I jog towards the entrance, eyes straight, avoiding drones, bots, flies, insects of metal and wires, which might as well be flesh and bones with synth-bacon wings to complete the horrorscape. They nonmind me and I nonmind them. I take the escalator but still climb it with swiftness; every second counts. Eyes straight; non-minding the flag waving the Monostate emblem; nonminding the giant I’m entering is cracking the dome of the sky. Non soul in sight; well, except for the nonrich oppressed blokes in front, restricted to the smoker-pens or, nonproblematically called, ‘Smoker’s Area’.

I noncare...

...

...

...

..

* examples: state bureaucracy, Omniwatch, politicking, Omniwatch, Army, Omniwatch, etc.

** examples: corporations.

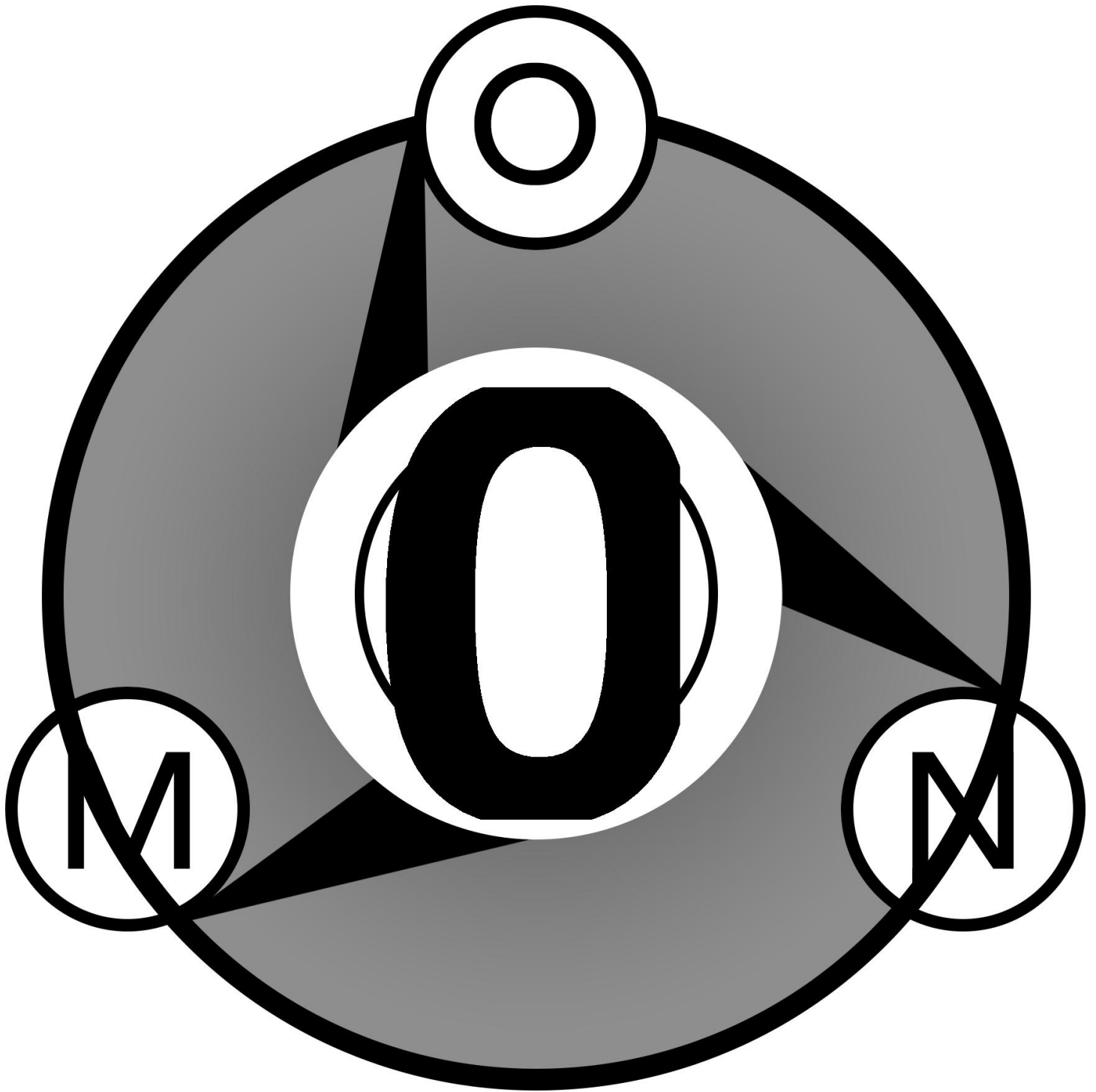
*** Social cred CAN be used as currency to obtain everyday necessities.

**** popular nonnormal[*paranormal] activity flatflick**series

where the usual plot revolves Around “bLack Is whitE”, “up is down” and the culprit is NOT aliens (or are they?). That’s the usual plot of another series called the “Out of Lim—”

[\Err-A51**]flatscreen movie

“—Booooooh, spoilers!!!”



[8:59:10] Employees to my left: “—Have you heard of—?” blah blah blah?

[“*Ding* Welcome, Demet—”] error.

Employees to my right:
“—the gendernoun of—” give me a br—
—ache. Analyzing...

[8:59:29] Employee coming straight at— “Hey! I think you’re missing your gen—”

—Noncare. Paralyzing...

[8:59:39] Almost...

[“*Ding-ding* Nonsmoking area! Ticket issued to—”] bite me. Still time. Almost... There!! [8:59:5—]

—P.A. announcement [“Employee number 1138: Demeter B. is expected in the G.M.* office ‘Eyy. Ess. Eyy. Pee!’** T.H.X!***”]

...So close... yet so nonclose... Why is it that on the day I get to work on time—such a ‘Glorious Monoday’—is the day I nonremember my fudging G—

—Male. Nongender?

The G.M.O.**** is non far, but now I have to walk back... way back to the G.M... on the walk of shame between potential trai—

—All of them! Spleenky, splonky, doo-doo-heads! I—

—Nonliking.

Telly-screen is blaring news from Corpwatch***** [“...today members of ANT—”] some bio-attack in West-El-Hood*****. Far from my pod. Noncare. Corpo-drones are flanking me on all sides, throwing me glances, smirks and grimaces as if they’re throwing synth-eggs, cabbages and leeks at a B-A.N.-ed***** face. Heavy, dissonant strums from a harpy, discordant guitar flail me from my deep insides. NONcare.

Two employees are putting on their cuddlemasks***** , are they really gonna—

—Care-care, Stabilizing...

...

...

...

* General Manager

** as soon as possible [#Analyze Err0100 – Assuming Eye Qyu. We apologize...]

*** “Thanks!” [#Analyze Err0101 – Still Assuming, WE apologize...]

**** General Manager’s Office. Not a popular acronym due to being confused with “Genetically Modified Organisms”.

***** a news corporation. THE News Corporation.

***** abbreviation of Lower-hood. Not popular due to similarity to “L-hoods” or better known as “Little Hoodlums”, presumed gang of “nonscientific” (to be read “conspiracy”) theory-peddling little brats, mostly 9-year-olds. Illegal activity.

***** or “Below-average Nontheists” are citizens/civilians who have gone into social (cred) debt. Having their social score in a negative balance, they are required by law, every week, to take part in the ShameWalk.

***** Special silicone faceshields used for safe-kissing, also highly customizable!

Non-care. I'm in front of the G.M.O. but doors are still nonopen* . Nonpatient** .

Open! Open! Non-opening...

Doors slide, I'm in.

"Good mo—"

"—Demeter, what the **fud** is going on out there?!"

"Sir, if you would allow me to—"

"—I barely get to turn my consoles on—"

"—Sir, I just—"

"—and there's five reports on you already—"

"—**Crist!!!**"***

He freezes, only eyes moving back and forth from langwatch to me. His actual name is 'Cristain' and the legally-preferred abbreviation is 'Cri' but I love teasing him with 'Crist' since it sounds very similar to some old-nonremembered and banned word.

Was it 'Cry S.T.'?

Nonremember. Adrenal—

—I feel nongood. I nonknow what has gotten into me, I *n'ever* raise my voice at him and non because he is the G.M. He's actually suspiciously cool, for a boss I mean. It is my duty and honour to non-fuse this one. The langwatch lightbulb burns intermittently idle.

"Look... I'm... forgive me, I rushed to the eldercare this morning and completely nonremembered to take my gee tag." Crist is a thirty-young bloke but his face looks more like fifty. His body is a bit too fat in some places and too nonfat in others. I would non say a nongood-looking bloke, but overclocked regardless. Overtime is mandatory for G.M.'s. "I bet you fifty creds all those reports are about that —"

—Gaytag. Heheheheh...

He is calming now. Who knows what he imagined I was doing to the other corposcrews.

'In today's news, mayhem and carnage inside Tekocorp's—'

—Nonfunny. Judging...

Funny but nonpossible. How do those bios**** even...?

Crist pops a pill with style and lights up his electronic nonresidue-cigarillo. "Ah, yes... you are doing some volunteering work for—" Yeah, 'volunteer', heh.

I intervene, tease mode active "—you know, we could light up a real one. I n'ever report, you know me..."

* closed. Really redundant since "closed" is non a nonlegal term. [#Error error - Redundancy Test failed. We...]

** impatient. [#Analyze Error1110-...]

*** Pronounced just like you read it, "Kreest".

**** bioterrorists.

“Get thee behind me, thou spawn of darkness!” He does a Paladin striking-pose. We both laugh. He’s one of the few persons who appreciates LotO’s true valour.

“Yes, as I was saying, the elderpens* —” milipause** “—Sorry! I meant elder centers!”

“That’s non a b—”

—Shhhhhhhh! —

“—bb... ee...”

.....
.....
.....
.....
.....

NON THE BEES!

Funny! Nonpatronizing.

“Non... a... bee?” Crist is obviously nonfused to the max. This is what langwatch does to people. You non say what you mean, you only hear what you want and everybody talks like a nonsane person. Actually, nonsanes make more sense some—

“—Yeah, it’s an... —”

—older meme*** but it—

“—older meme. But it checks out.”

“Older? I non think... Ah yes, ha-ha!” Nervous laughter but message got through. Crist smart! “Listen Dem, you know we’re **good** friends and I want to apolo—”

“—Non need to but I **accept** anyways.”

“Thank you. Now, you know I tend to nonfocus on **some** nonissues—” he means he doesn’t give a fud about genders.

Genius guy! The corpoheads ‘suggested’ he pick a more nontraditional gendernoun ‘to keep up with company tradition AND increase morale’. So, the nonsane lad chose the ‘Sir’**** gender.
Sir / sir / sirs / sirsself.

* elder-care derogatory term. Legal.

** minuscule pause.

*** Net-memes are as popular as ever, although meme creation is a highly regulated activity under “Section 13” of Net langlaws. Censor-bots seem to have a very hard time understanding most of (if any of) the memes either way.

**** pronounced like “Seer”.

“—and you have been a very valuable asset to the company, in spite of some... **obstacles** we had to face... together **as a team**, I mean. By the way, Kudos to you for arriving on time—”

“—Thank y—”

“—**But...**” sir whispers with noneasiness in sirs voice “... I noncando anything about **five reports**, do you understand?!”

“Yes, si—”

“—It’s **too** fuddin’ **many!** I’ll sweep some of them under the ‘tapestry’, but at least one will have to go through, OK?”

“Sir, yes, sir!” Sir finally smiles. It’s an inside joke since he is THE *General* Manager.

“Cool... now move your END* to work!”

“Can I take the service lift?”

“That’s FOR emergencies only—”

“—To avoid any new reports on nonissues I mean.” I say in my defense. He sighs. His decision still non-decipherable.

“...This is the final time, Dem! OK?”

“Love you—!” I slip in the service lift before he gets a chance to parry. I can see his silly face through the semi-transparent door, twitching a grimace of defeat and promising a swore of vengeance. I press the last button in a row of hundreds and wait. Some youths on the telly-screen are singing the rap version of the Monostate Anthem.

[“Everything is good in the Monohood”]

‘Nontruth.’

[“All the way from Lower to the Upperhood”]

‘Cow splonk!’

[“Plenty of great food and in the greatest mood”]

‘... AnaLIESing, AnaLIESing...’

The rest of the rap just fades away as I lean-in to watch the chromium-coloured fuselage of the corp-next-door. Glistening rays of light dance wildly in sync with my lift’s acceleration. Destination: the sky! My mind wanders... if only for a bit... to the idea of falling from such great heights... Like falling asleep. THE final sleep between the twin peaks of eternity. It’s a peaceful yet noneasy feeling. Noncomputing the vastness of nonexistence.

[“Ch-ch-ch-ch-chaanges...”]

Non way! I turn to see ‘David Bow, i.e.*’ shine on the telly. They n’ever broadcast his music on this channel, ever! After all that’s happened today, I’m unsure I can believe in coincidences anymore. I want to

* bottom, ass, butt, buttocks, bum, tush, behind, cur — **[#Error069- Profanity Redundancy Check failed. We apologize...]**

* integrated engram. An engram is a digital approximation of a person’s personality (alive or otherwise).

believe... but I'm non sure anymore...! just wanna wake up i... with a bit of luck, this day will pass with minimum incidence to my rec's already... nonclean resumé.

["Time may change me... but I noncan change time..."]

I love you, David.

["*ding*"] I have arrived. But as I pass through the doorway, I get this sudden feeling that five seconds were actually five minutes. I noncan prove it. I look around, everything looks nondisturbed. Corpo-bees busily bustling around looking lively and apparently, happy. Time is [9:11]. Non much help since I have non checked in a while.

Aliens!

Nonpossible. My console is very close to the lift. I slip like a ninja between the semi-opaque panels that neatly pack our hexagonal makeshift cubicles—well, I say cubicles—with hivelike efficiency and nonefficient privacy. Anyone can see your screen all the time from any location on a radius of a kilo** away, both offline and online. Non thing passes through here without vigorous scrutiny from the 'watchers. I rock my chair all the way down and roll under the console, nicely fitting myself in the space underneath. This way non can see I non have a badge. All I have to do now is just insert the—

“—G'mornin'!” I rock my head to the left to re-visualize the newest addition to the team. He arrives all bubbly, dressed in a silly looking robe with the phrase 'Pansy Playa' printed all over it. I bet he non even knows what 'pansy' really—

—mean!

Cut him some slack!

He's the only one around here who non have any—

—use? Heh heh...

Meany! Me-analyzing...

Let's just say I'm non that fond of being a trainer***.

“Hey.” I respond nonemotionally. He is quite noncourageous. So, he non likes driving the talking. Time to take this beautiful jack and insert it in my—

“—Yo, whassup...” My head rolls to the right before my eyes get the chance to sync with the sudden change of direction. Magan Xel is physically fit, as usual, and towering above me. He is wearing a t-shirt imprinted with

** kilometer. [Error Pfg: possible fat joke]

*** fledgling employees are assigned to senior employees for hands-on training and observation. The only compensation for the trainer is corp cred****

**** corporate credit can only be spent at kiosks or vending machines owned by the employing corp. Each corp has their own unique cred unit of exchange inside the corp. Some corps are so SMART that they pay their employees in corp cred ONLY! Based on blockchain technology.

I noncan focus on the rest of the article, but I'm amused nonetheless.

"Heh, imagine that Magan, trying SO much to be like everyone else. Like the literal opposite of customization."

"Yeah... bunch of bee's! Heh..." aaand he's back to his music now... Ironically, I spot a newer male/nonmale addition to the team, first-time-first-see, who is passing by our backs. Vision available only to me. Nonsocial this one too. The ironic thing is that... *it* is sporting the same model and same colour of mohawk as Magan. I nonbelieve Magan would understand the irony though. I catch myself before I mention it. Magan is non fond of 'philosophically'—

—Analyzing—

—Himself.

... Heh...

Hopefully this will be my last supp—

"—Heeeeeeey, nongirls **!" I throw my head up... or down from my angle of vision, then continue the rest of my vision's trajectory with my eyes. It's 'FoxCatBoxxx' although I nonbelieve that is 'its' real name...

IT! IT! IT!

Actually, I nonbelieve there's a single real part left in it, except for a stim-abused shrunken brain.

Ears of a cat, tails of a fox
and mouth enhanced for—

—SOCKS! Stabilizing...

The 'thing's g-tag says 'They/His/Hers/We' but I have non idea how you're supposed to sprinkle those in a discussion! Rumor goes that it also replaced its... sock with a cyber—

—Snake? Paralyzing...

'They' were spreading the rumour I bet. I mean 'We' was spreading it I mean fud! This is donkey-splonk—

"—Dem-darling, are you non going to respond?" I'll give you a response you—

"—..."

"... 'She said heavy-hearted to the prince stuck in the closet'."

Hey! "What do you mean by 'she'? That's nonmentioned on your gee—!"

"—Just quoting OUR favorite game, remember? El Ohh Tee Oh?"

"That's non—!" *your* favorite game and "—that's non—" a QUOTE from *LotO* and "—THAT IS non—" of your business non, I will non swipe right "—NON—" you splonkbrain, piece of freak-flesh—

"—Nongirls, I think we got ourselves one stuck on a loop here. Heh... heh..."

I calm myself. Master of nonspoken, master of nonspoken master of—

"—..."

** boys. Although referring to someone's assumed biological s*x is nonlegal, "Girl" and "nongirl" usage is permitted and is popular among teenagers and young adults.

“... OOoooh, I see someone nonremembered their—” its eyes drop to my chest and from this angle it can see I non have a “—g-tag... hmmm...”

“... ..” Mental facepalm. Magan looks at me non giving a fud and Pansy pretends he’s been busy on his terminal and nonminding the discussion.

“... Well... it can happen to the best of us, is that non right, sweetie? But if you would non mind, I do have a lot of work to do at the... ‘tester-pens’* as Dem-love here loves to call them—” I do I do “—I’m off, nongirls, buh-bye...” and *poof*, just like that, IT is out of the picture like a magical fairy vanishing in a cloud of rainbow dust. I wish IT did that more often. For example, FOREVER!

...

IT tried to make it obvious that IT will non report me, but I know IT ... IT is a sneaky-tricky-icky one and I non trust IT a single BIT. An additional report would be almost devoid of meaning in the great expanse of time, space and life itself. It can non affect my Social Score as much as the first one does, officially at least. I get to keep my IN-tegrity. But IT will forever be damned to the void, seeking identity in non-identities. A follower of ‘consuming’, a totem raised in heretical honor to the overlords. Non, I shall non let them seduce me from my righteous path of NON. The path of NONconsuming. The path of most resistance. That’s the ONE true path to the ONE true Lord of the overlords: NON! That’s what Father tried to tell me, did he non...?

I check my surroundings to make sure all pests are back to their nests. [9:16] I can finally manage to fall in the Net. I jack-in and—...—aaaaah yes... wonderous, chaotic at times... illuminating NET! Information flying left and right and up and down and sideways. Nontextured**, my favorite! For normal people, perception of time is much slower down here than in the fleshspace... But for me, when I’m dug deep down in my work, hours can seem like minutes. I do the work just the same, just as fast! Even faster sometimes... but I ENJOY it... I noncomplain... non anymore... Anyway, it’s nonlegal to use the word ‘complain’, you say ‘nonagree’. I say ‘FUD YOU!’ that’s what I would say if I had... well...

... ..

Noncare. But it’s non fair we have non user access from our own—

[“—*Ding* Call incoming from—”]

“—What?!?!” I turn around to see the Persona*** of mister ‘Pansy-face’ staring back at my Persona with big mouse-like eyes and nose sniffing around nervously. I think I have to say some or other thing.

“... How can I help you?”

“...”

“...”

... ..

* derogatory term used to describe the Software Testing Department. Although current-age testers require serious coding skills to aid in automation, they are still regarded by most “other colleagues” as nothing more than mice-on-wheels.

** non-customized user Net experience. Basically, just code running in a three-dimensional space and nothing else.

*** or an “avatar”, is a digital self-projection inside the Net and HIGHLY customizable!

“Sorry, I’m... I nonknow what this alert is.” He places the report steadily in my view, the code sparking at the seams. [‘AlertGT: A51/XHT-H1B’]. A Netbomb*!!! Mine-rigged** too. Finally, some excitement around here! But why send such a request to a junior, are they out of their...?

“Knewman, you are about to get a lesson in bomb non-fusing. On your first day of work!” It’s his second day but who cares?

“...” nonresponse. Then, the trembling starts down in his legs and rises to his fingers. Nonsure if he is excited for the idea or against it but I have my theories.

“You’re lucky, Knewman! Few get the chance to work on a Netbomb.”

“A netbomb?!” He is clearly nonbraved out of his digital fur.

“Come on, nonbe such a pansy! Come!”

I grab his tail and pull him down the informational highway where the minimum speed is six hundred point sixty-six petabytes per second. I throttle my clock to maximum terahertz and reach our destination before you can pronounce [“*beep*”]. Before you can pronounce anything! The code inside has gone into quarantine, massive firewalls protecting me and Pansy from the outside code. From the “watchers’...

“There it is...” it’s beautiful! The bomb radiates of red and yellow code, floating peacefully in the netscape. Waiting patiently for some nonaware prey. Some splonker with shuddy security. Like those A.I.s are, splonk-brainers. Then BOOM! Systems nonstabilized, traffic paralyzed. I love those moments! The chaos... the non-certainty... The fantasy of breaking free from the shackles of stability. From the ‘goo-dness’ of the Monostate.

But I must follow protocol... and the protocol says to non-fuse the bomb. And I do what the protocol says. Even when there are ‘requests’ I do non agree with. And I do agree with this protocol. Non need to add salt to anyone else’s wound of a job. I approach the Netbomb using my handy ‘self-wrote’ proxy-code-shield, specifically designed to take out these beauties. But something is non right...

...

... Decoy!

Yeah, yeah... Obviously! Well, to me at least. And it looks like something is encrypted inside. Probably some file, or—

—a bigger, badder, stronger Netbomb!

I quarantine further, approaching the Netbomb with care. I want Pansy-bloke here to admire the curvy shapes of this bomb from up-close!

“Come closer Knew-Man and check the glory of—”

“—But protocol says to—”

“—Knewmann... come on... Non you trust me? You saw the star-rating on my skillz-**sheet**, right?”

“... The proto—”

“—col can bite my end, heheheh—”

* Networm usually concealed inside a more harmless looking Netvirus. If activated, it spreads extremely quickly by infecting vital infrastructure and overloading the quantum machines, which causes localized and extended Net downtime. Nonlethal to humans.

** Netbombs come in two flavors: mines and timer-bombs.

“—But Dem, that’s nonagreed in the terms—”

“—LOOK! You can say anything you want in here before the next ‘watcher-check comes in the next... two-point four secs.”

“—but the Netbomb is—”

“—OK, OK, look here—” I nonblame him, he’s new, he noncan trust me that much. Maybe he thinks I’m one of those ‘reporters’ trying to do a sting on him, mmm nonclean, splonky, social-cred-peddling-bi—

—... I nonblame him... he is trying to maintain a reputation. He NEEDS a reputation.

... I non care...

...

“Here, you see this corner over here?”

“Corner in a sphere, Dem? I non—”

“—Here, max-in rez’. It’s a decoy! You pull this encryption pin up and—” several cycles later all steps are passed down to Pansy, hopefully... “— Now... this method only works on version [‘3.616’] which is printed right **here**. Ehhh, in the tail of this particular Netbomb anyway.”

“But Dem! An...” his shyness totally missing. Then, avoidance. I encourage his... noncompliance...

“... Yes, anything on your mind?”

He hesitates—again—then takes a look at the ‘job-clock’. Five seconds added since bomb was non-fused successfully before ‘watch-clock’. ‘Plenty of time’ shines in his eyes.

“... Dem... a sphere does non have corners. Nor a tail!”

“At this resolution? Sure, but max-out rez’ and take a look at the Netbomb again.” He’s already gotten hold of zooming, debugging, force-tracking and net-wiring. One explaining each. Quite inquisitive mind. Still shuddy on calculations, but... “What do you see, K-man?”

“I see... a point.”

“Good observation, K. Now, is that a cube, a sphere or... can you even tell the difference anymore?”

“Non... non at all.”

“Exactly! That’s relativity. I say cube, you say sphere. But all it is at the end of the day is just a point. A point of interest, a nonknown variable disrupting this ‘boring’, ‘constant’ life of ‘consistency’, ‘continuous’ ‘constraint’ of ‘conformity’ under a crushing Mono-banner of Monotony!” I rap that last part with finesse. I.M.H.O.

“Dem, that’s nonlegal to say!” hehehehehe... Bait and...

...HOOK!

“... Which one?”

“... which one what?”

“Which one you mean is nonlegal?”

“... I nonunderstand...”

“Ah, forgive me, but there’s more than one term of offence spoken in my sentence, both lang and mind crime. Legally speaking, IF you decide to report me, the corp Terms dictate that you have to identify and divide the number of offences by definition. It’s a double-entry security check.” And they also make sure you *did* read the Terms. Though I nonbelieve he even knows or ever heard of most of those nonlegal words I just said.

“Did you get a chance to read the Terms, Knew-manny?”

“... Non, I had to go through other—”

“—But in your own opinion, is there more than one offence in my words? Or, dare I say... any offence at all? Which one is it?”

“If I say the word, does it count as an offence on my part too?”

“You mean if you say it to me and I report it? You think I’d report you? Or did you mean if you say the offence to the officers when you report it?”

“If I...”

And most important of all “... Are you going to report me, K-boy? Ooooh, that’s a big non-non in lang terms, is it non? You must have heard of it by now. And there’s an even bigger nonlegal mindcrime offence in there as a bonus. But I’ll let you wrap your mind around that mystery for a bit.”

“I... I have to... but...”

Hehehehe... “Are you... nonfused with a ‘SEE’ in front instead of an ‘En’? There’s a lot of things you’ll have to remember now, Knewmann. Better start taking notes.” I know the chances of him reporting me are very high and I’ve given him enough material to do that but... I like to believe...

“Dem... it’s noneasy to—”

—Trigger sound. Corner of my eye sees the netbomb screw come loose I missed the I-corner how-did-I-miss the*vs*ofthefuddin’for—

“—GET DOWN NOW!”

I forcefully grab K and wait under the proxy-shield. Nonthing... Non *BOOM*, non radiation, just a *poof* and a stony-platform-opening sound. My curiosity gets the best of me and I take a look. It’s a double decoy! Inside the second decoy stands a cute little harmless text file, glowing white and dancing around in a jolly orbit. I open it in read-mode only. A cover pic hits me in the face. ‘Nineteen Eighty-Four by George O—’

—The year, the year!
The missing year!*

Could be... could be something else. And now to link-it-up—

[“—*BEEP*BEEP*BEEP*—”] high alert, FUD! In all this excitement I nonremembered to take precautions. The censor-dogs already tagged the file and the report was sent. Authorities will be here in a few nanosex—

[“—**STEP. AWAY. FROM. THE. BOMB!**”]

* Monostate archives host no information regarding the year of “1984”. When asked about it, Monostate officials will declare th at “Nonthing of interest happened that year”, after which you will receive a fine.

The most chilling electro-bot-voice I have ever heard in my life. I turn around to witness the biggest, blackest ICE* I have ever seen in my life. Actually, I've n'ever seen ANY—

—4 nanosecs left. Comply, COMPLY!

I step aside and the ICE does its duty of sending the triple surprise to oblivion. I noncan help but get... *noncalm* at the nonjustice. Why??? Why noncan I READ the file at least??? Why is mindcrime such a big deal!?! 'To defend the integrity of the—' blah blah blah. IT'S ONLY IN MY MIND! It's non out there, how can CRIME be out there if it's in MY—?

[“—**IDENTIFY!**”]

I affirm my identity and immediately receive an I.M. from the G.M.

[‘Hands tied. On your own. Report to office 3101.’]

... Mindwatch office... Mindwatch??? This kind of issue is handled by Netwatch, normally...

[9:17:01] I unplug from the Net and raise myself from under my console to find a withered pansy staring back at me. He takes a pill out... I wait and wait. He non-pops the pill. Just stares at it. Strange...

“Non-worry K-man, —”

[“—*ding* Lang—”]

“—this non involves you.” But I nonbelieve he understands me in his state of shock. The pill stands still between his fingers. Magan is plugged-in and nonaware of us. “Look, you can completely nonmind that mindcrime report. It's NOTHING compared to what I've just done. They're gonna burn me up on the pyre for this much breach of the protocol, heheheh.”

Pansy twitches at whatever he imagined 'pyre' and 'burning' to be. 'Non in the literal sense you mean' he probably thinks. 'Depends on whom you ask' I'd say. Does a file feel the 'burn' when it gets overwritten? K looks back at the pill. Still non-popping. Still non words from his mouth.

“So yeah, in case I non come back... I say goodbye and n'ever lose your spark, **boy!**”

[“*ding* Lang violation, ticket issued—”]

“—**Suck** me, langdog! —”

[“—*ding*ding* Lang viol—”] We would be here all day if I cared to go on. But I noncare. With a smile, a finger-point and a wink, I rotate one hundred and eighty degrees and begin my march down the 'nonlife row'. After a couple of steps, I turn my head back for just a couple of seconds. K-man's inserting the pill back in its dispenser against any hygiene-laws. He looks back at me, his thought process still nondecipherable. But his eyes reveal... something... maybe it's rebellion! Or at least a question mark in his little pointy head.

I want to believe...

Maybe I was a bit over-melodramatic at the end. I'm sure I'll be fine... I've handled Mindwatch spooks before and I can do it again.

Yes, but you had higher social

* codename for “Intrusion Countermeasure Engram”, primitive A.I. defense programs that come in “white” (non-lethal) and “black” (lethal) flavors. A jacked-in Netsurfer who is attacked by I.C.E. will be shocked back to reality. If the attack is hard enough, they will be shocked back to The One Who created reality.

cred before, now you're almost—
—I know... The corridor to the main elevator seems endless and pointless, like the reports of my missing g-tag are probably flying right now. One of the corpheads just stepped outside of his office, possibly wondering who's the lucky winner. From my P.O.V. the 'head' looks like a synth-leather balloon filled with rocks. The 'head' sees me, my missing tag, grins and returns to their cage. I step inside the elevator and think to myself—
—Better *dead* than corphead!

'3101' is down at the third floor. I lean on the glass of the port-view to rest my spinning head. I noncare what time it is or what shines outside. And the telly is just background noise. All I care about is to get this over with. I almost fall asleep imagining I'm freefalling all the way to the ground, but a sudden stop jolts me back to reality.

["*ding* Floor number. Three."] The Mindwatch chamber is in front of me. I take one step—2 steps—three steps and I'm in front of the office. A white, imposing door is holding me prisoner outside. Light blinks, door opens, I'm in. The mind-officer is supposedly distracted by some work on his console, eyes closed, hands hovering slyly over the input-balls*. I n'ever greet these shiny-headed, dangbrain spoo—

—"Please, have a seat. Lomoc will be with you in a moment." Eyes still closed. Nonhair head reflects the white neon lights flooding from the walls. His beak-nosed, eyes-closed, pointed-chin face reminds me of that vendor in LotO who always charges triple the average price of any item or service. It betrays non soul residing inside of it. And the rest of its body betrays n'thing of its bio-gen**. Its gee-tag simply writes 'Lomoc+', meaning that instead of gendernouns IT prefers to be called by 'ITS' actual name PLUS the extra privilege of replacing all pronouns with its name. The ultimate EGO-centric! To its left, in the corner of the room, a cage is placed on a simple table. Inside, synth-mice are obviously active, running on the wheel or playing with each other. I would find that interesting if they were real. What I find interesting though, and weird, is the cage itself. There are two compartments to the cage, both linked by a gate in the middle. But only one of them is occupied by the simulated mice. Those crowded mice could surely use the space. The rest of the room non-seems very interesting, except for a few panels which are obviously (to me at least) hiding secrets in the walls. I nonwant to ima—

—"How are you feeling today, —" Lomoc's eyes are open and I assume they look straight at me. The almost-white iris and missing pupils betray non thing of its trajectory. A deep, chilling, gray— "—Demeter?"
"All's well. You?"

A slight pause. I imagine movement of the iris. I bet Lomo-chum*** here has bird's eye view in those babies—
—"Lomoc would prefer to keep the questions on Lomoc's side of the room."

I must admit, kinda original for a chum-head like—

—"Is that OK with you, Demeter?"

If you wanna play games, I got a game of my own.

"..."

"..."

"... ..."

"... ... See. You know the reason why you are here, of course. Would you like to explain to Lomoc why you non-followed protocol on a Class A intrusion?"

* Non-touch keyboard input.

** biological gender? [#Error1010012...]

*** Another vague meaning insult but excellent roasting material!

“...”

“... You have quite a brilliant mind, non you Demeter?”

Nice hook, Captain Chum!

“...”

“... Lomoc sees you enjoy snoop—”

—drenal—

“—ing around your colleagues’ accounts. And then make—” revolves a PDA towards me “— ‘joke’ pictures based on what you find, then use them to flood Tekocorp’s internal e-mail network. Lomoc must admit, the way in which you got access to that second account, Demeter... Very, very brilliant!” We’re fud now we’re —

—Sshhhh! Adrenaline 10%

Was it sniffing just now?

“Care to tell Lomoc what was that about?”

Is it asking about the meme or the ha—?

—Sshhhh! Nonadmittance! Non—

—denial! Roger!

A longer pause than usual on its part. The only thing that might indicate noncomfort. The rest of it... an iceberg.

“Does Lomoc intimidate you, Demeter?” Trick-question.

If I say ‘Yes’ he asks ‘why so?’.

If I say ‘Non’ he asks ‘why non?’.

“Look, Lomoc knows you... May Lomoc call you ‘you’?” ... Chum’s trying to nonfuse me.

Nonadmittance! Non—

“—Non.” I fight non to smile. He probably notices—

—why you calling ‘it’ a ‘he’—?

—Sshhhh! Adrenaline 20%.

I swear I saw another sniffing, very light... Might be a nervous tick. My focus gets ironically taken by the mice.

“You must understand Demeter that it will be noneasy for Lomoc to help you if you nondesire to collaborate. Even if we ignore the most recent... nondiscretion, the nonsanctioned Net-built **and** the ‘joke’ images, Lomoc still have to take into account: raising your voice at a superior, —”

—Adrenaline 30%, stab—

“—the several gender identity tag noncompliance reports, residue-smoking in nonassigned areas—”

—Adrenaline 25%—

“—four lang-law offenses **and** a harassment report, but that last one remains to be reviewed.” I guess K-man actually—

—Non! It’s that weaselly, sly, spawn-of-a-fox—

—36%-emo-non-stabil—

“—That brings your score down from thirty-three points to... four-plus-one-plus zero-point-two-times-a-dozen plus-two-plus-one-times-four-plus—the noncooperation issue—six... Which brings it down to...?”

“...” This nerp really believes I’m gonna do the math myself?

“... thirteen point six.” I notice a tiny, bitsy hint of smugness. “If Lomoc adds the other nondiscretions... you understand the drop will be well below the acceptable line. And today is Monoday... Shame-walk begins in one hour and forty-two—”

—NONADMIT—

“—... We observed some non-stabilized emotional levels while you were working at the eldercare center. Several times actually! Are you having any trouble with your dosage? Also, it appears you have missed your monthly vaccination app—”

—Adrena-50-per—

“—ointment... We also took the liberty of doing a meta-search through the N.M.D.B.* but could non find any char named ‘Jake-mann’, ‘Jack-mann’, ‘Jak-mann’, ‘Jaque-mann’ or ‘Jakmann’. Did you perhaps befuddle the name with ‘Jakrabbit’ from the ‘Looney Bins’ show?” YOU end-wiping-spawn-of-a—

“—... ..”

“You do know that that Netsite you ‘stumbled’ upon was proven to be nonscientific news, right? They had some very suspicious practices and they are being investigated at the moment.”

I told you! This—

“—We have reasons to believe you have been holding on to some private data. Is there any reason for hiding such info—?”

—is how they get you!

They pile up the—

“—evidence of many attempts to break in several netserv—” I wanna SCREAM!

“—... ..Truly you are a master of the nonspoken word! —”

—NON—

—FUDDING—

—WAY! Adrenaline eighty per—

“—Lomoc admires that. And yet, Lomoc does have to—” it presses a button. I knew that was a secret panel! I get an involuntary ache after I fix a fraction of my vision on the gadget being ejected from the compartment. I have non seen such a thing before and yet I HATE to think what...

It’s a headset with a jack waaay too long to go in—

—Where else would it—?

—I nonknow! Chum’s gonna probe our as—

—stabilizing... Nonsucceeding—

“—get some answers and you have non left Lomoc any other options.” It is dragging the X-gadget towards me when I hear a *click* and the real horror show begins. Hands and feet just got auto-strapped to the chair; I must scream but I have non—

—mouth clenched—

[—Alert! Systems Over—]-ESCAPE-its-gettin-close-fudfudfudfud—

—.....Adre-ninety-nine.....

* Net Movie Database

Time has stopped. Completely. The spook non moves and noncan I. Non more slow-motion, it's freeze-frame! I'm gazing straight into Lomoc's eyes, Lomoc's dead greyness is staring back at me. Even at this distance I still noncan say if IT is looking at me or non. Even CatBoxxx looks more human than this creature.

I'm gonna start calling these states D.M.T.
You know... deep-mind thinking...

... Any phobias on hold. Non can stand against the nonpossible. Icy eyeballs frozen in space, piercing me. Maybe this is how it feels before being terminat—

—NON! NON TODAY! Adrenaline 101%, safety overriding—

—It moves again, slow-motion, its hand on the set—

—Initiate F.OR.F.—

—F.OR.F.??? —

—FIGHTorFLIGHT? —

—FIGHT? —

—FLIGHT? —

— ??? Respond—

—FLIGHT!

FLIGHT!

Escape obstructed! Respo—

—FIGHT!

FIGHT!

Attack obstructed! Error... Dem...? On...

FRIGHT ON. Engaging!

Rage. PURE! FUCKING! RAGE! Arms tear through straps leaving pieces of flesh behind-noncare-hand-on-jack-stab-through-EYE! Straight! Through! Pupil! It falls to the ground. Must run now the fuck I did where-what—

—FLIGHT? Respond—

—BREAK WINDOWS—

—Jump-grab-cage-smash-win-down-jump! ... Falling...

...

...

..._...

HURTING!

BUT N'THING BROKE must—

—RUN! RUN! RUN! RUN—!

—two buzzers north—

—RUN! RUN! RUN! RUN—!

—Straight, left, right, straight—

—RUN! RUN! RUN! RUN—!

—five buzzers behind—

—RUN! RUN! RUN! RUN—!

“—*flash*, *click*, *flash*—”

—RUN! RUN! RUN! RUN—!

—Straight, left, small, avoid pedest—

“—Hey! Watch where you go, chum—”

—RUN! RUN! RUN! RUN—!

—Boots getting closer “FUCKSHITPISS—”

[“—*ding*din*din* Lang viol—Lang viol—Lang viol—”]

—RUN! RUN!

WHERE ARE WE RUNNING TO THERE'S NON—

—Projectiles passing—

—RUN! RUN—!

—lethal they shoot to term—

—Right non left non right—!

—RUN! RUN! —

—RUN! RUN—!

—Right—!

—Left—

—RUN! RUN—!

—RUN! RUN—!

—corner, jump roll—

—RUN! RUN—!

“—HALT—!”

—RUN! RUN—!

—NO CHANCE, NO CHAN—

—RUN! RUN—!

—Q-CORE UP AHEAD—

—RUN! RUNNING! —

“—HALT CITIZEN—”

—RUNN—

—NO CHANCE, NO CH-CH-CH—

—RUNNING! RUN—!

—MAYBE ESCAPE THROUGH THE SEW—

—RUN! R—

—Get grabbed from behind, low-light, nonmobilized, cold metal on neck, shocking nonpleasure!...

Darkness...

.....

.....

.....

Chapter Tree:

Non

Chapter 4: Escaped? Restarting...

... still darkness...

*'Tah Nah nAh naH, Tah nAh naH,
your next stop... the Nonlight Zone!'*

I imagined termination differently. Similar to the time before I was born. Was it like this? I nonbelieved I would be able to think about anything in that state of nonexistence. I imagined only a limitless, dreamless sleep.

Look on the bright side! Now you have
the chance to finish that fantasy book you've
been carrying around in your head all this time.

Heh, yeah... 'Do we choose fate or does fate choose us? Is it written in the divine scripts that a prince shall be king one day? That a pauper shall n'ever hold a gold coin in his palm?'

'In the history of our lands there are many tales of
fallen rulers and beggars turned to wealthy merchants.
Did they choose their destiny? Or was it something else?'

'Can mortals ever truly force the hands of gods?'

'These questions n'ever bothered Leek. He decided long ago that only heavy work mattered and n'thing else. He saved every coin he had, hoping he would one day enroll in the Whitestone Academy for—'

—It's a fuddin' shame you n'ever wrote it down.

Just kept it inside here like the most egotistical artist—

—Yeah, I know... But even if, let's say, the book passed the censors and I did non get sent to the Golfs*, non would have read it anyway. Big titles in trinemas** are 'Captain Longdong', 'Attack of the Bio-goons' and 'SlopX'. If it's non about army superheroes or a splonkomey, they just laugh at you and call you a nerp! And who reads anymore? Non reads anymore, non even for school! I would be writing for n'body!

You're getting worked up for n'thing.
The world non-owes you appreciation
for the book you n'ever even wrote!

Me?! It was YOU who brought it up in the first—

—Me? Analyzing...

Come on, you agree with me more than—

—Me? Comparing...

Yes, but sometimes you—

—Non-Me. Searching...

What the eff—

—Non-Me. Updating...

I think it's stuck on—

—Non-Me. We!

We?

We?

We? Respond!

He's right, I was acting like a donk—

—Nah, nah, it's me the one who—

* B-Sector "correctional" facility for high-risk mind criminals.

** tridimensional surround cinemas. You don't watch the movie, you "play" in it.

—We! Respond?

We good.

All Coolio!

We good. Stabilized!

Good!

Good!

Good!

Guess that off-remark from that kid in Pee-school* still lingers inside.

That chumskie fathead does non
deserve any space in here.

I know, I was just... remembering something Father told us later that day. ‘Nerp? Nerp used to mean something different when I was young.’ ‘What was it?’ I asked him teary-eyed. ‘A nerp was a very curious scientist or a gov insider or anyone who risked their lives for justice and truth.’ He looked at me with fervor in his eyes and said ‘Son... they were champions for Good!’ He always had the perfect words of encouragement. Always a moral for any tragedy and a warning for any happy outcomes. Quite a stoic view and I miss it... Non, I non think there was a reason for my nonwriting. The story’s purpose was to help me fall asleep for the past year. It was too personal and too nonbelievable anyway. Everything always worked out in the main char’s favour. Well, except for that kidnapping scene and subsequent rap —

—Hey! That Succubus was hot!
I would non call that a rap—

—Indeed, see? Even when it was supposed to be nongood, it was too good. Way too nonbelievable...

I think that scene is stuck in my head
again, I can feel something move down—

—where, what, wait, aaaah—

—drenaline 69%—

—...—

—Light! Rays of blinding light are penetrating my eyes slowly but steadily as they radiate from a single point in the center of non-light. A shadowy figure forms, getting closer and closer. Monolympus** beams glow behind it. An angel! Or alien? Or some THING. I focus on the shadow. The image gets less and less so blurry, the light less and less a flurry. It’s a... girl! Long-dark hair, big-dark eyes, cute-little nose and a fragile frame. She is—

—Hot-Hot-Hot!

Non, non that. She is beautiful, but non in the way I see Ekaterina. And she is way, way younger. It’s non lust but... I non know what it is. I’m in a bed but my surroundings are nonrecognizable. It might be a hospital but it’s non I’ve ever been in. Too nonsterile-looking to be a... But the girl looks frightened. A sponge in one hand, a small kind of ‘bucket’ in the other. I try to say something.

“Hell—” she runs away, non word said! I non understand... Aaaaah, I’m completely naked! I grab a nearby cloth to hide my shame. This is definitely non Hadesville*** either. My arms are covered in needles, my head’s a booming migraine. Non ghost-trails though. Weird... H.U.D. on.

[ZZZZZZZZZZ@ZZZ#ZZZ*ZZZFZZZUZZZ-ZZZKZZZ=ZZ-] H.U.D. off, something is broken. I scan my surroundings. A few more beds around, one patient resting in a bed opposite to mine. Non much space around, but judging by the machinery decorating the place, it’s definitely a hospital. Walls appear to be built from several pieces of metal and wood, like a Picasso pic. I begin nonplugging the needles but before I get far, two-mircals-in-one

* Primary school.

** Monochurch equivalent of “Heaven” but it’s not what you think. More like the long-term plan of the Monostate to reach “Zero percent crime, permanently!”

*** Monochurch equivalent of “Hell” but it’s not what you think. Trust me, you don’t want to know.

walks in the room. Jak??? It's Jak, Jak is alive! It noncan be. Non only is he alive but he also stands on his own, paralysis feature totally missing. He approaches me with a big smile across his mouth as usual.

"Jaaa..." I force a sound but my tears stop me. I try to force my tears back but I am noncapable.

"Hey there, chummy-boy! What's with the rainy face?"

"Jak, I thought you... I thought they... Jak, you're alive!"

"Depends on who you' askin', bwahahahaaaah!" his clownish laughter infects me and I join in.

"What do you mean, Jak?"

"Well..." he checks his surroundings, searching for potential... spies? "... let's just say I fell off the radar in a few places. Yeah. Heheheh..."

"Fell... off... how—?"

"—are ya feeling, mah boy?" Jak calling me a 'boy' is so soothing. Non visible langdogs around. Non hissing magnetic sounds. I feel so...

LIBERATED!

"I'm ok, except for a booming headache."

"Oh yeah, that? Pheeeeeww, that was a close one, chum! Someone up there must really love you!!"

"What do you mean?"

Are you asking about the 'up there' or...?

"Well... Look, there's plenty of things I haven't told you. For one thing—" he does a little jolly dance, hands spread to his sides. "—I'm obviously not half-paralyzed. I'm actually half-crazy for deciding to spend the rest of my days in that **graveyard**." He is either dead serious or his delivery is dead-pan. I smile just in case. "I haven't been fully sincere with you and I apologize for that. But I promise you that here—" he motions circles with his index finger "—you and I can be as sincere as we want to be. But it's up to you to decide whoever you wanna trust or not, including myself."

"Around here...? Jak, I have... so many questions..."

"Don'cha worry, there'll be plenty o' time for that. First, I have to explain a few things. My name is not Jakmann, never was. Friends around here call me the 'Dood' but you can call me 'Dee-man' if you prefer."

"'Dood'? As in 'double-oh-dee'?"

"Bwahaahaaaaah, nah, naaah! Unless I ever act like a pisshead to you. Yeah, I think you'd be entitled to that. Heheheh, dood... Nah, the vowels are 'you' and 'E'. 'Dude'."

"Duuude... Nice to meet you, Dude!"

"Heheh, ok now. I was never paralyzed, that was an excuse to retreat from all the madness! And I used a fake name. As usual, heheheh..."

"'Dude' is your real name?"

"Nope!"

"So... what's your real name?"

"Heh, even if I remembered it, I still wouldn't tell you."

Nonfusion at maximum. How would someone nonremember their own delivery-name*? And why non tell...?

Ask why he non wants to tell—

—Non! Asking... Analyzing... 'Y U nonremembering?'

"Why non you remember it?"

"Because I have used too many fake names, pseudonyms and usernames in my life and I met lots of great, funny people whose names I wanted to remember. And I had to keep track of all that. In the process, I lost knowledge of my own name. And like a damn dood I forgot to make a back-up. Bwahaahaaaaah!"

* birthname. Under the Monostate, children are not "born", they are "delivered".

His laughter fills the room with booming joy and it spreads on me again. My nonfusion still remains as to how this piece of missing memory could befall someone.

“But my name doesn’t matter. A name is just a name, it doesn’t tell you much about a person. And I’ve always loved my anonymity. That whole ‘celebrity’ thing made me puke my balls out! Heheheh!”

“You were a celebrity?”

IMAGINE that! A real celeb. In the flesh!

How is he a celeb if he is anon—?

—IMAGINE!

“Well...” Dude checks his surroundings again. He then pulls out a PDA-looking-gadget, out of thin air, like a magician would do, does a bit of tapping and hands it over to me.

The Luna Foundation for Research and Salvation article from “Meme ‘Istorians Archive Unnus”

What started as a meme joke on the Net in the (20)20s, “The Luna Foundation” soon became a real entity devoted to discovering “the Truth” about the origins of cats. Members of the Foundation have dedicated their lives to find out “where, how and why we have cats”, these creatures that are truly superior to humans in every shape and form. The main “theory”, which is based on several archeological, sociological, historical, paleontological, memeological and just plain ole’ wacky ~~nonscientific~~ (conspiracy) theories, simply states that “We believe cats are the original “Anunnaki”, the godlike beings that created humans and the rest of the world. The Anunnaki were mentioned by the Sumerian, Akkadian, Assyrian and Babylonian scriptures, but the Foundation ~~noncan~~ (cannot) explain how they got this information, except by divine inspiration. The “Research” part of the mission is focused on evaluating evidence about these “Antediluvians” (pre-diluvian or pre-flood mentioned in antique books). “Our main theory is that current-day cats are the descendants of an ancient alien species of Cats who had terraformed Earth millions of years ago after a comet or something extinguished the dinosaurs and the rest of Life that lived on Terra around that time. Cats re-created each of the species found in the archeological fossil record of that time period, but made the Great Apes in their own image. Well, the earliest versions were kinda ~~nonsuccessful~~ (failed) experiments, also proven by the archeological fossil record; the few that survived can still be found today (mostly in captivity). Project “hoomans Alpha 0.1” became the most successful of them all and began dominating the planet. The Cats celebrated and kudo-ed themselves and each other for a job well done, then left hoomans alone to do their own thing. But soon after, The Cats became kinda ~~noncaring~~ (lazy) and ~~nonremembered~~ (forgot) most of their technology and knowledge, while hoomans slowly but steadily became “hoomans Beta 0.5” and eventually “hoomans 1.0 ‘Homo sapiens sapiens’”. Cats at this point had mostly ~~nonremembered~~ (FORGOTTEN) about hoomans. But because hoomans are ~~nonsmartly~~ (stupidly) curious (like Cats), they began exploring the world and soon discovered “Eridu” or “Eden”, the City of Cats! At the sight of these ten-meter tall, furry, monstrous looking giants, the hoomans “~~splonked~~ (crapped) their pants” and began running and screaming “the devils, the devils!” All attempts to calm them ~~nonsucceeded~~ (failed) and the hoomans finally retreated back to their dwellings. But they kept their ~~noncourage~~ (fear), imagining the beasts coming at night and eating their children! So, the leaders rallied their people with swords and forks and bows to “~~terminate~~ (kill) these Devils!” They did ~~non~~(not) know better, the leaders were just as ~~nonbrave~~ (scared) as everybody else.

Of course, the agility and resilience of the Cats as a species were superior to any meager weapons the hoomans had developed by that time. Yet the Cats still felt pity for the hoomans. And being of superior intelligence they simply thought “They’re ~~nonsmart~~ (stupid) and ~~nonknow~~ (do not know) better, let’s just leave.” And the Cats left Eden. The hoomans thought they drove the Cats away, so they celebrated and moved inside Eden, which had “very strong, beautiful walls and houses of strange shapes, with very cool pictures drawn on them!” but they did ~~non~~ (not) know at the time what they meant. Celebrations ended soon though when a great Flood came and wiped (like so many times in the history of the Earth) most of life on Earth. Both hoomans and Cats ran for the Mountains, Primordial beings searched for the Fountains, Of Life! They ran away from the Death! To Survive, their differences they had to shed!

They became the best friends, made sure they met both ends, The Cats became small, hoomans ~~nonlearned~~ (FORGOT) it all. The cats caught mice, the Humans fish and rice and Everyone was nice till the next Age'Ice!

At least that's the completely ~~nonsane~~ (crazy) story that the Founder of the Luna Foundation, a mister Ben I. S., wrote when he posted his theory on a pop' (/x/) imageboard of his youth.

The meme soon got spread
Like the hottest bread
And people got excited
The Foundation started
The Cats became revered again
As they realized their waiting had ~~non~~ (NOT) been in vain!

The Founder swears on his life that all of this information was transmitted to him by "Luna, the first cat I ever cared for and one of the nicest persons I have ever met", although he also mentions that "maybe one of ~~Gran's~~ (Grandma Hancock's) ~~cookbooks~~ ('Fingertips of the Dogs') had a bit of influence on me too".

Alas, the "completely believable" story is ~~non~~ (not) the focus of Luna's Foundation. Instead, her main mission is "rescuing, preserving and observing these magnificent beings in their natural habitats." The Foundation is willing to and does cooperate with several other rescue missions, like "Dogs United Mega Bytes", which the Foundation ~~thinks is~~ (considers) "pretty silly (D.U.M.B.), but useful non(e)theless".

The Founder passed away this year at the ripe young age of 95 years old without leaving any heirs except for the Foundation itself. When asked about his choice of ~~non~~ (not) raising a family, the Founder explained "I made a (STUPID) promise to Luna when I started the meme and I felt obliged to keep it".

After a couple of chuckles and laughs, I'm astonished I'd n'ever heard of this meme before, but I'm mostly amazed by the idea itself.

"Heheheh, imagine that, Dude! All this time we were looking for aliens out there and all along they were right here among us."

D-man giggles and remarks "Yeah, sometimes we tend to miss the things closest to us."

"Well said." I scan the text again in speed-mode and say "I see some 'archeological' evidence that suggests someone took a bit of 'creative license' with this text."

He smiles and makes a nonaffirming motion with his body "I deny any accusations, your Honor!"

"Heheheh, I see... so you are mister Ben...? I mean, non, of course non... Not!" I wink-wink in the most obvious way. He is amused and bows his head in appreciation.

In a fantastic coincidence a... very realistic synth-cat jumps on the bed next to me. It checks its surroundings with a bit of nontrust, sniffs the air and immediately cuts right to a routine cleanup of her legs. As if non thing of interest is happening. I call to her but she nonminds me. Hmmm, must be programmed for non-interact—

—What??? Have you ever even SEEN such a thing?!

I... I... Non—

—Aliens, dood! Ayy-lee—

—Ssshhhh! Catalyzing...

"Nice... cat, Dude! Looks very real!"

"Bwahahahah!" Dude gets close to the synth-cat and the cat starts to move itself up and down and left and right, under his palm. Hmmm, must be programmed for id-l—

—Ssshhhh! Dem-o—Shhh! Analyzing...

He looks at me and proudly says "This one Demeter is as real as Queke made it!"

"Is he some kind of genius inventor?" I ask as nonsarcastically as possible.

"Bwaahaaahahahaah!" I failed "In a way, yeah, he is THE genius inventor. But he is not of this world."

Alien!

Sshhh-huh?

"You mean like a..." I jokingly point at the cat.

"Hahaaah, no. Cats are our parents on Earth. Queke is our parent in *Have-an!*"

"Have... an?"

"Yes! Have-an! Paradise! The Infinite Cyberspace!"

"Infinite? N'thing is inf—"

—Sshhhh—

"—or...mation uh, I mean... non thing is non... Ahhh!"

"Don't wrap your head too much around it, Dem. Everything must be quite overwhelming right —"

—Overclocked MAX! Nonfragging—

"—now. Give it some time, you'll get used to it. This world is full to the brim with information!" he does an awe-inspiring adoration, using his arms to lift the revelation to the...

"You're right, all of this has been..." I do an instinctive check of my datajack at the back of my head, spreading my shaggy hair to the sides. Something is non right... "My C.I.P. * ! It's gone!"

"Yes, you're S.I.N.-less ** now! And I wasn't joking when I told you that you're a really lucky boy. Man, do I have a STORY to tell you!"

"I love stories!" I say, again trying not to sound like a splonky-sarcasto-chum.

"Ok so, when I decided a week ago—"

"—A week?!?!?" I've been out for a week?!

"Yeah, yeah, wait, that's not the only weird part!" He joyfully smiles like he noncares at all about my nonpleasing missing data of a week! "Just listen and afterwards you can have the 'fuck-you'."

"What did you just call me?" I act an offended pose, huge grin splattered all over my face. He laughs a bit.

Dude max smart! Verifying...

"An 'Eff' 'Aey' 'Qyu'. Frequently Asked Questions. Well, you may ask me any questions you'd like, it's just easier for me to say it like that."

Dude mega-giga-smart! Updatin—

—Sshhhh!

"Ok, so after I got rescued a—"

"—Resc—?" I stop myself abruptly, smile and let him continue. He appreciates the effort and says "—... week ago, we had, let's just say, a bit of a difficulty with our exit. So, we needed a 'diversion'. This was around nine."

The missing time *** at the corp, I knew it! I—

"—While we were preparing to take our leave, we got a distress signal that 'someone or something was rustling the Mono-hive'. My curiosity got the best of me, as usual, and I had to see for myself 'what the 'ell was causing the ruckus'. Disregarding my rescuers' plea for sanity, bwahahahahah... I checked the feed and there you were! Runnin' your guts out trying to get away from the Monobrainers —"

—HeHeHeh, noted! —

* Chip Identifying Person. Holds all private and public data of a citizen and has some other neat features too!

** System Identification Number.

*** A Binaural Override of Willpower (or a B.O.W. directive) is one of the cool features of the C.I.P. A powerful signal emitted by Monoliths (aka Monotemples), it can render the population of a megacity completely powerless, motionless and in a zombielike trance-state of mind. B.O.W.s can't be activated for longer than ten minutes due to obvious microwave secondary effects related to brain matter and overload on the power-grid. For obvious reasons, Omniwatch members operate on different frequencies.

“—and my heart just... couldn’t just let me sit and watch how they snatch my favorite boy!” he smiles like...
Fath... err? Sequencing...

“But there was a catch, you see! Uuugh...” his voice sounds quite nonpleased. I feel responsible for no reason! I start putting the pieces together. “... I was gonna try and contact you when I got here and then plan for your escape, but we needed time... you should know that C.I.P. removal is brain surgery, you can’t rush it!”

“Yeah, how did—?”

“—So, you see, we... I had to take quite a horrible moral decision. We couldn’t take you with us, P.I.C.* installed and all that. And we didn’t have time for a full operation. So... we had to do the ‘raw’ extraction instead. I uh...” he is deeply disturbed by his words “... we... I basically had to decide between leaving you to the Mono-dogs and Quek-forbid, let them do who-knows-what butchery to you OR risk frying your brain on extraction. To me, those are basically the same thing.” Noneasy emotion in his voice, he’s holding in something. “There was no time to ponder any morality in all that, only time for action! I prayed to Quek. I knew that no matter what, HIS will shall be done! And HE listened to my plea. And in his GREATness he performed a ‘mircal’, like he always does, and guided you to—”

—we really gotta meet this bloke and thx—

“—us. And on top of that, brought you back from darkness’s hand in record time!” His eyes get as big as foot balls as he whispers “Most people in your veggie state take **at least** a month to recover!” He points to the fellow on the opposite side then looks at me and shakes his head as if he’s saying ‘no chance for him’.

Queke good! Analy—

—Sshh—

—SSHHHH!

“I’m... uh, Dude, I have to...” tears of thankfulness start flowing and there’s non—

—stupid—!

—reason to hold back. I am truly grateful for—

“—There, there you big, heart-brain!” Dude embraces me. I let all nonpleasure, fright and noncomfort flush away. “I’m glad you’re here and that *‘all’s well’*.” I chuckle ‘cause he sings that last part just like David does. “Fan of Bow, are you not?”

“He is at least top one million favorite musicians for me.” A million, really...? “I don’t mean that in a belittling way, no! David is...” he looks at the ceiling “... up there in the Top Ten or less.”

“He is top—period—for me! I even met him inside the Net!”

“Hee-hee, yeah me too! He is awesome!” he gets excited but soon deflates and I suspect a tear forming in the corner of his left eye. “I never got to see him alive unfortunately. Only in vids and interviews so funny I crapped my pants!” he lets out another laughter almost like F—

—he is a fossil after all—

“—Anyway... let me help you with those...” Dude carefully removes the rest of the needles, gives me a pill “To calm your mind a bit”, checks some med-stats on one of the machines, voice-links to someone nonknown and then gives me a slick black backpack holding a set of clothes: a green sweater, a white hoodie and a pair of black jeans. “It gets a bit cold down here.”

“Down here, Dude?” I ask nonfused as fud.

“Hehe, you’ll understand soon enough. Come, follow me!” he grabs my hand exactly like Father used to do and drags me away to the exit. “Oh, and that P.D.A... you can keep it, I have damn too many anyway! It’s jack-only, just as you like it. Oh, and also... nontraceable, heheheh...”

“Nontraceable, you say, eh...? Dude, I noncan... I cannot thank you enough! For everything!”

* geo-tracing is another AWESOME feature of the ~~P.I.C.~~ C.I.P.!

“My pleasure Dem! You deserve it, kid!” he stops and eyes me a little worried. “Oh, and about your... ‘real name’. You might want to consider keeping it a secret and using a ‘replacement’. At least when you’re not around really GOOD friends. You may be SINless now but almost every SINless is a ‘patsee’ in this world!” “A... patsee?!” I know I’ve heard that before...

/(patsay|pat|see)/gi, Searching—

“—A Primary Adversary to State Integrity. Or ‘Pee’, ‘Aey’, ‘Tee’, ‘Es’, ‘Eye’. A ‘patsi’. But not with a ‘why’ at the end, nonono! That’s a big No-No in Monolang.”

A P.A.T.S.I.* Yeah—

—bio-terror, net-terror, mind-terr—

—Patsi. Big. Nongood. W—

“—Does that mean I have to delete my rec—?”

“—Nope, no need for that, you’re already wiped out of the M.S.C.C.D.B.** Bee Ess by the stupid Monos themselves! You’re a nonperson now!” Me a nonperson... Holy—

—SSSHHHEE—

—Heart. Broke. Eka...

...

...

...Recalibrating...

“Then how am I still a...?” my words trail off. I realize, if only for the present moment, that there are probably so many things I ~~no~~ do not know about the Monostate and about... this place. And all those patsies they show at Hate Mass, are they also nonpersons...?

“Patsies are held on a different DB. One maintained by the Arm—”

—yeah, of course it’s those cheeky bees—

“—and not as easily accessible as the gov/corpnet. But that’s a story for some other time, my dear. You just make sure you keep that name a secret.”

We step outside of the healing-bay to find a breathtaking view. It attacks, offends, amazes and shocks all of my senses. The sky is dark, almost black. But it does not look like a sky. There are no stars nor clouds. I survey the visible horizon and assume we are located in some kind of a super-giant bunker. Or cave, or something under the ground... either way, n’ever in my life have I seen such a spacious and yet claustrophobic place. Jak err... I mean Dude exclaims “Welcome to ‘Libertopia’! Well, not ALL of it. Only one of its sub-dwellings, ‘Liberta’.”

I force myself to face Dude, my eyes still dripping of the scenic glue. “Dude, I n’ever thought something like this... could exist.”

“Never ends to amaze me either, little man. Not a single time! This whole world is so...” his words trail off. I’m not sure, is he searching for the perfect word or did he have a change of heart?

He definitely must think Monobrainers are shh—

“—Dude, I have a million quest—”

“—I wouldn’t expect anything less of you, dear. But don’cha worry, you’ll get your answers sooner or later. For now, just follow me and enjoy the show.”

... We pass a couple of tentlike buildings flying red cross banners. But the cross is not drawn in the style of hospitals I know. The bottom vertical line of the plus is longer than usual.

* high-profile bio/net-terrorists wanted by the Monostate for crimes against “Mono-humanity”.

** Monostate Citizen/Civilian Database Bull SH—! [Error 102 – T.M.I. We D.A.F.T.I.!]

“Are these hospitals?”

“Saint Mary’s Army Surgical Hospital, voluntary division. Some of the best around here. Privately funded too, mostly from donations.” Imagine that. Private...

...What privacy? Our pee-pee was
on display for everyone to ss—

—Shamelyzing...

We follow the primitive road down a flight of stairs, which feels like the scoliosis backbone of a hill. The lower we step down, the stronger the smells get. Smoke, perfume, food, garbage and...

...pee...?

... They burn my sterilized nostrils. The stairway leads us further down into the settlement. Various dwellings sprawl around us. Some are colourful, some are nonbeautiful and most look tiny and ready to collapse. I would not even dream of activating ‘papers in this place, even if my H.U.D. worked. Tons of glitches would probably pop all over the walls.

Non ‘papers, please!

People of all colours busily run around, not wearing any obvious faceshields, gloves or any kind of protection. Green people, red people, blue people, rainbow people. The chroma of their clothes is as varied as the colors of their skins. Some skins are so dark or so light I believe I’ve n’ever seen in Monosociety before.

Well, maybe non lighter than m—

—Sshhh! “Dude? I see non wearing faceshields. Is that legal?” I suddenly realize I do not wear one either. I get a sickening feeling to my core.

Phobias! Adrenaline 3—

“—Very few things are regulated in the underworld, my friend. Sure, you can wear a shield if you want, but most people have bigger fish to fry than worry about some silly bugs.” Shudders, sweats —

—we already got used to no langdogs
around, might as well—

—Stabilizing...

“You can find your old faceshield in the bag, if it makes you feel better. You do look a bit greener than usual.” “I’m... I’ll take my chances for now. Trying to get used to the smell.” And I’d be the odd one out in this crowd anyway...

“Bwahahahah, that’s mah boy!” He gives me a slap on the back. I feel offended by the amount of power used in it but... I must not get upset. I know he means well.

We continue trekking the nonclean pavement for a while until we reach a large plazalike space. Two major streets intersect it at the sides. Judging by the ancient vehicles passing us slowly and rarely, I think they’re used for motorized transport. We approach the center of the plaza to discover something I have seen before. The frogman in Don’s painting! A large statue of the creature stands proudly in the middle, holding a long paintbrush in his left hand and a large antique book in his right hand, with its pages open and facing the public. There are sculpted words on its stony pages but I can only discern ‘United’, ‘Divided’ and ‘zero’, that makes non sense... Smaller statues of a dog and a cat sit to his right and left sides. More text on a plaque at the base of the frogman statue, more readable this time: ‘Pepe the Holy, Son of KEK’.

“Pepe... I’ve seen him before, Dude! Back at the eldercare there was —”

“—Oh yeah, Don Monty that old cuckoo. I have no idea how he managed to get that painting inside. I think there was more to him than the façade he presented.”

"I got that impression too... Hey wait, did you give him that painting, Dude?" I ask because my trust in him is not fully restored.

"I swear on my mother's teats, man! That thing was there when I moved in. He either has friends in high places or nobody checked 'cause he is too wacked up to even tie his own shoes. KEK works in mysterious ways..."

KEK, updating...

"So, you mean... Pepe is banned in Monosociety?" Dude just nods and closes his eyes. I believe him. For now...

People of different shapes and sizes have gathered 'round the statues. Some wear dark or white robes, some wear green or brown hoodies, some even wear simple orange cloth to cover themselves. There is a group doing slow ritualistic rounds of the Pepe statue. From time to time, a person or other will rise and bring flowers, toylike gadgets or drawn pictures to place at the feet of the statues. They chant 'Shah-dee-lay' in a dronelike fashion. Must be a meditation of some kind... Suddenly, I see a certain shadow. More like a whisper, maybe. Behind the statue of the cat. Could it be...?

The girl, the girl, the nerpy girl!

"Dude-man, do you... by chance, happen to... you know, something or other about whoever took care of me when I was... mentally missing for a week?"

"Dear KEK boy, that's a roundabout way to ask if I ever heard a longer one."

"You're right... I'm—"

"—Bwahahahah, it's ok. Most of your healing was done by hospital staff. But..." like earlier in the hospital, he takes a suspicious check of his environment then says "... there was a certain little lady on my rescue team who insisted we let her take care of you. She insisted in her own **cutesy** way." Really weird... imagine that—

—Sshhhh! Serotonin <3%

"How 'cutesy' was she?"

"Oh, believe me, she has her methods of settling things, heheheh... fierce **cat** that one, ouch!"

"Does this 'cat' happen to have long dark hair and big black eyes—"

—and cute hot a—

—Sshh—

"—ssss?" I end up sounding like a splonky snake.

"That's the general description, yeah." He grins.

"That little thing is a fighter?"

"One of the best. She speaks no word; I don't even know if she's a mute or if she took a vow of silence, she ain't tellin'." He grins again but I suspect this one is forced. "But she can make herself perfectly clear most of the time. She shows you her claws and you back away. You just leave her do her thing."

"Really? I mean will she not start breaking things and terminate people at random?"

"Hah! She ain't a beast, boy. She's a lady! But sort of a lady-punk, yeah, heheheh." He seems terribly amused to say that. I still nonbelieve that story but I guess less, or more nonnormaler things have already happened.

"She sounds like quite the teammate. She did take good care of me, I hope I can thank her someday, I did not get the chance. When I woke up, she just fled the hospital." Probably got scared of my big—

"—Bwahahahah, did she now?" he taps his chin trying to link who-knows-what dots in his wizened head. Then he pridefully exclaims "My description of her as a cat shall remain. Her behaviour just keeps surprising me again and again." Dude gets lost in thought for a sec then shouts "Come!" He grabs my back and pushes me through the crowds, saying "I want you to meet someone."

Dude-man drags me past the statues, towards a middle-sized road. I instinctively check the back of the statues. No girl... I approach a curious pillar nearby, a sort of a mini fountain. I look at Dude nonfused, he

encourages me to test it. I approach my face to the nozzle and push the tiny lever on its side. Water shoots all over my face before I adjust it to my mouth. Weirdly built but the water tastes... so refreshing! Further down the road street-lamps shine like plasma. But plasma-lamps are nonallowed in M—! ... Housing becomes more breathable on this side of town. Back there, dwellers non even bothered with doors. Here, doors everywhere and there's actual space between buildings. A bit more land per house. Their yards are decorated with some things that look like real trees. Must be some really well-made imitations because I nonbelieve you could grow anything in this cavern... but some grow patches of veggies and some even grow... err... is this possible?

"Dude...?"

"Yes?"

"Are those... real pigs?"

"Few animals are nonbiological around here, son!" He takes a whiff of the smelly air as if he's smelling the tastiest veal—

—I on the other hand feel like
returning my nonexistent meal!

"Do people... eat them?"

"What else, milk them?! They're quite tasty!"

"You mean you... eat these creatures?"

"I love 'em, Demmy-boy! I still can't wash the bitterness of that synth-flesh they dumped down our throats in the elderpens."

"Heh you're right, that thing was very nonpleasant. Does non around here mind that people eat animals?"

"Well... there are some animal-lovin' activists but they don't bother us much. They just pass you by and hand out flyers that say 'Flesh is Fash' and other silliness like that, heh-heh. Ah, speaking of the devil..."

Right on cue a nonclean, long-haired guy(?) approaches us with his right hand raised. He hands me a flyer then continues his journey down the road. Our only interaction: a friendly nod and a piece of written info on a laminated, flexible piece of... material. And a stomach-turning image of a skinned... dog? I have no idea what—

"—Uuurgh!" I instinctively throw the card away from my sight. Dude retrieves it from the pavement to study. "Ah, that's a new one..." he sighs deeply "... I agree with them on this one. Skinning alive, making an animal suffer..." Dude's sadness reverberates in his voice "... If I have to sacrifice an animal, I must do everything I can to make the process as painless as possible. Nobody deserves to be tortured..."

We walk a little more before Dude looks at me, eyebrow raised and says "And you should know, some Monobrainers only like to PRETEND they don't eat real flesh..." I non know what to respond. I've n'ever seen a real animal in my life. Owning such things is highly nonlegal with the Monos. But who knows...? The rest of our quest to Dude's mysterious friend is taken in a silent procession. And I do not mind the extra time for some of my own processing... of events, of ideas. Courts and fences become walls and towers and the spaces between them get larger and larger. The pathways are more private, until we reach some kind of... fortress. Strong, odd, interlinked, black, rusty cubes form the outer-walls in a pattern of irregular depths. Guard towers spring up at geometrical distances, giving away a medieval vibe. We climb the giant metal steps up to its metal gates. The heavily-armored guards do not even blink before raising the barricades to let us in, no questions asked.

"You're kinda famous for a guy with no name." I whisper, but mostly for the 'horsey' comical effect in front of the guards. Dude whispers back "I have friends in high places, heh-heh-heh..." malefic laugh.

The building is definitely more professionally built than —

—most of the scrapheaps we encountered—
—but it retains their raw humbleness. No sign reveals the mystery of this place, except for a giant ‘Ohm’ symbol painted on the inner-gate. Must be some kind of workshop, maybe... We step inside the fortress. Two more guards are in stand-by but this time less armored, more official. Black and white padded jackets and trousers and a half-yellow, half-black ‘V’ sign pinned to their chests. The official on the left steps forward. He lifts his right hand and Dude mirrors the action. They touch their hands, nonprotect—

—aline 22.564798...%. Disgusting...

The grip is strong, each hand in equal standing to each other. With their free hands they build a stack on top of the gripping hands, like a benevolent tower. A truly barbaric act of greeting.

Nonnecessary? Analy—

“—You are always welcome here, Dude!” speaks the official. “Peace be with you!”

“And also with you, brother!” Dude turns to face me and says “He is, uhm... what was your name again?” I immediately realize what his obvious winks mean.

D.M.T. TIME!

I have all the time in the world to come up with something clever! After a short brainstorm I finally decide.

“My name is _____.” Jak-uh, Cyberpo-uh, I mean Dude signals me with his other eye as ‘okay!’ and continues:

“Yeah, uhm... of course! He is _____. An old pal of mine.”

“Certainly.” the guard exclaims nonchalantly, certainly not the remark I expected to such an obvious—

—Stabilizing...

The guard takes two steps to the side and says “This way.”

“You go on without me. I have one small ‘biz’ to attend to... Go on!”

“Dude, wha—” but he just smiles and makes a silent grunt. I non underst—

—ah yes, the smelly ole number—

—2 nonpleasing! But—

I nod and follow the official. Palms a bit sweaty, arms like spaghetti. We end up in front of a brown office door, the texture reminds me of wood. Chubby guy opens the door.

“Untrehvooh, please! Come in!”

What did he just call me?

I step forward inside a tree butchery. Stacks of papers—real tree-pulp-looking paper—rise like stalagmites wherever I look. The official returns back to the lobby, nonword said. His Chubbiness makes an inclining gesture forward, presenting me his semi nonhair top. Probably a hint for me to take a seat.

Sitting!

“Welcome... uhm...” he snaps his fingers in a quick motion towards me.

“I’m _____.”

“Ah, yes! Welcome, Dem!” my eyes widen. His smile deepens. “Excue-zeh muah, a little joke. Do non be afraid, you are amongst friends here.”

“I’m...” suddenly my detective-mode snaps in and I let the daze of the moment dissipate. My nonfusion still young, I inspect my surroundings closely. Stacks of blocky-squares are also spread amongst the papers. Could be antique books. A white cup holding some brown liquid inside and a weird looking gizmo are placed on the desk in front of me. Non model I recognize. Lots of buttons, L.E.D.s and a speaker-grate on the side, but non

sound coming from it. The only sound in this room is a low-buzzing, whirring, droning sound coming from my left side. Here, all around, less paper, more digital: hardware bricks, data-sticks, round colourful disks, boxes of flimsy looking squares—

—they look like the SAVE ico—

—and a couple of PDAs (non of them docked). Non models I recognize. Inside the piles of—assumed—storage devices are buried four blocky, nonclean displays and their blocky, nonclean terminals of various sizes. First one is turned off, second on, third off, fourth on. Those turned on are scrolling lots of information. Text. Garbled text. Garbage data. I turn my eyes to fatman over there, perplexed look on my face. He smiles and motions his head towards the terminals. Non words, just observing me. I get up and approach to take a closer look. It certainly must be garbage data: nonuseful, corrupted or simply noncorrectly formatted. Or any combination of those three. Or it could be a...

...

... Cyphering? Reverse-engineering...

Maybe it's just an illusion. But I can swear some parts of the code seem to link up, like repeating keywords. More like repeating symbols. Might be pictograms. Otherwise, nothing. Non syntaxes, nonlogic. Could it be...?

...a...

...Code! Secret?

I return to face Chubby and mumble "Looks like... sort of a hidden... message?"

"Most exel-un, neonate! You would make quite the linguist. Or should I say, a fledgling cypherre-punk?"

Cypherpunk?

Code, data crackers.

Patsies. Scarylizing.

"I still have non idea how it actually works though."

"It iz called 'cryptscript'."

"Interesting... Given the apparent large quantity of data, I assume most of it is auto-generated."

"Ooee! Le occasional crackhead might try to bake one manually through **fancy** copy-paste scripting but the code itself iz always changing. It works like a script but it's randomly-procedurally-generated by design. And no message is like the other. There are non repeating blocks of data all the way down the chain to the original block. Oh, and on top of **that**, it splits into shards when data-blocks reach certain thresholds. Simple, effective, secure, cheap and anonymoh."

"Splits into shards like a... fifth generation proof-of-stake blockchain?" I say, proud of my nerpy analysis.

"Treh-bien mister Dem, treh-good! Not quite like that but close enough." He radiates with proudness. I non think it's that big of a deal.

"There iz a peh-teet catch though. It does check for a SIN or not. Or any other kind of bio-I.D. verification that you code into it. If you have non clearance, you will be reading mer-duh! Hohohoh, heheh..."

Mere-duh? I knew I should have bought an Academic Anal—

—Sshhhh! I.T.-lyzin—

—Sshhhh!

Sshhhh!

"That sounds quite ingenious, I must admit."

"Marveleuh, then you may fit right in." He smiles and extends his right, fully biological—

—nonprotected! —

—palm towards me. Flashbacks of the ritual between the Dude and the official hit me. I cannot—

—Bag, gloving! —

—I put my gloves on in a hurry and then non-gracefully extend my hand and grab his—

—first, I grab with my left hand—

—then correct myself and grab with my right hand, mirroring his side. I wait to see if he'll respond with the other hand. He does not. Instead, he continues "Name's captain Jaque Melee. People around here call me 'lieutenant-colonelle' or jokingly 'Il Dooche' but I hate those denominations." He starts shaking my hand up and down while squeezing quite nonpleasantly. I try to... be... respectful...

"Siltuh-pleh, just call me Jaque. Or Captain Jaque if you insist." He loosens up the grip a little.

"Nice... to... MEET you J-man!"

"Hehehe, it's my plehzeer!" he finally releases my hand from his titan grip. Whhhewww...

"Jaque, I have a serious one thousand and one questions to ask and non of them have anything to do with your accent or the funny words you sometimes sing."

"Ohohoooooh, heheheh!" Jaque seems genuinely pleased "... I know you are a very... curious young man, that I can tell." He plays with his long moustache in the fashion of a flatscreen villain "I will try to answer all of your questions in the best way I can, in the short time we got." He points to a round mechanical-looking gadget on the wall. No numbers or letters are printed on it, only small lines dividing the outline into —

—Calculating—

—sixty equal spaces. Three slim arms radiate from the middle. Starting from top-to-right, the shortest one points between the forty-eighth and forty-ninth spaces. The middle-sized one points straight to the thirty-fifth space. And the longest one skips every line once every... second.

"And that's approximately...?" I have non idea how the device works—

—it's an ALIEN clock!

HAH! Get real.

"... Around 'alfan 'our. I have other appointments to attend to. And yours was... a bit unexpected." Still does not answer how the device works.

$60s/12h=5min, 30min/5min=6 \Rightarrow @ 51^{st} \text{ space?}$

Is that A.M. or P.M.?

How should I know?! We're under—

"—Great, so go on, mon 'share'! Ask me your burning curiosities."

"Where ARE we exactly?"

"Right now, you are in Liberta, an undisclosed, underground miniplex, part of a network of several under-dwellings spread across the Crap mountains."

"N'ever heard of... is that far from my home-city?"

"Quite far... this land is under 'Le' Resistance control, just one of many lands united in the underworld-wide effort for truth, justice and peace!"

"Le... Resistance?"

"Ooee! We are part of Resistland and we oppose the **lies**, the **ensorship** and—the **violence**—of the Monostate or any other faction, regardless of political stance."

"So, you're the... 'good' version of the Monostate?"

"Bwaaaahahahahahahah, ohohohoh, mer-duh!" He laughs noncontrollably but for the first time in my life I am one hundred percent sure it could not have been my—

"—That's a good one, lad! Non... noooon, we operate in no way like the Monostate. Non, Demeter. You see, we are not fashists—"

—fashests? —

"—, socialists—"

—social-what? —

“—or totalitarians—”

—Total I.T. = area n? —

—Watt? —

—Sshhhh—

“—of any kind. The Resistance is more of a decentralized —”

—like blockchain? —

—Sshhhh—

“—voluntary effort between various organizations and individuals alike. Muah, personally would describe it as a ‘leh-zeh-fair repuh-bliq’ and you can QUOTE me on that!”

Ah yes! Now you’re REALLY starting to make—

—nonsense? Debugging..

“Voluntary, eh?” I ask with sarcasm in my tone, knowing full well that non thing is truly voluntary in this world.

Total design? Relativizing..

“Ooee, mon dear Demmy! Excue-zeh-muah, may I call you Demmy?”

“Yes, Father used to...” emotions overflow me, stacking me like a pile of stampeding animals. How could they kn— “—ow did you know that?”

“Ah, silvoo-pleh mister Demeter, do not be afraid. Like I said, we know many things about you. Info iz our greatest trade. And it is a vital one to survive on this harsh mond.”

“You can say that again.” And maybe translate from time to time.

“Bien sure. You must understand that we carry quite a sensitive operation over here. Anyone who comes, leaves or contacts us in and out of our territories must be thoroughly checked.” Jaque leans in with scrutiny in his eye and says “And your... ‘Father’ has quite the missing record.”

“Father must have deleted it before—”

“—Non-non-non. I do not mean the Mono Cit’civ’ DB, I mean the A.P.D.B. The one in which you still exist.”

“Really? Father wiped out his own patsi trail?”

Holy splonkers, Father’s a superhack—

“—That we do non know. As far as our organization is concerned...” he leans in even more, menacing grin on his moustache “...you just made him up.”

“Really, my own Fath—?!”

“—We agree with you, we do not want to make any particular unfounded accusations. Non, non! Silvoo-please, forgive muah! We just find your case quite peculiar. Normally, we wouldn’t allow someone of your particular track record, personal record and communications record to enter our domain.”

“You’ve been snooping around my private p—”

“—No more than the Netwatch did.” He grins all the way to his ears and beyond.

“How does that give you the right to do it?”

“Oh, what I meant was, we only used data that the Netwatch already used. You see, we usually do not rescue Mono-slaves—”

—Slave? Re-mastering—

—Sshhhh—

“—of your age and particular background. The shock of the truth is too much for them and the security risks are too high.” He puts a warm hand on my shoulder and continues “... But tell me, where were you born, garsonne? There is some conflicting data regarding your original birthplace. We’d be tempted to blame that on bureaucratic incompetensse, but maybe you have a different story? Dem?”

I get a chilling feeling to my bones. This is sounding more and more like that interrogation —

—I fake-check the room again,

peripherals scanning the ceiling.

Could be sensors. Bio-monitors. Nontruth—

—Lies detecting...

“Heh... well, the—” I make *air-bunnies* “— ‘official’ story is that I was ‘born’ in the B-sector, R-subsector, city number seven—”

“—Of course, Dem, we figured that out. What about the...?” He patiently but eagerly waits for an answer to his mysteries.

“... Well, the ‘nonofficial’ story is that I was ‘born’ in the ‘States’* and brought here when I was quite young.”

“Oh, is that soh? Your parents are native to the ‘States?’”

“No, they are both from B-sector but I’m not good on the details.” I’m not faking ignorance, just non sure at this point “... Mother got a job at a corp and Father was a freelance decker.”

“Treh intereh-san, mmmm... what corp did your mother work for?”

“M-shaft, they coded this really buggy—”

“—M-shaft? Of course, you must mean ‘Microware’, right?”

“Non, they were still called ‘M-shaft’ back then. They basically ruled the world since the beg—”

“—Your Father worked for Micro... shaft also?”

“For them and anyone else who bid the highest on a job. He loved being his own man.”

“Ooee, of course! That’s a natural human desire after all, isn’t it?”

“I would not be so sure...”

“Why non, mon petite garsonne?”

...This guy is really pushing it with the name-call—

—sshhhh! Data miss—

—Sshhhh!

“I... non know for sure why...”

“Non proh-blemm! As you were saying... your ‘unofficial’ version of the story, yes?”

“Yes, a few years later Father had to leave because of the... nonportations.”

“The **de-portations** you—” You’re the one to correct me??

“—Sure, whatever. Mother was stuck with the job though. She had part-time citizenship due to her job Terms so she was allowed to stay. But the terms of agreement were somehow... nondefinite... or non-defined... whatever... She basically could not leave even if she wanted to.”

“Mon deo! That sounds like indebted servitude! Slavery, tyranny!” he gets all worked up.

“Yeah, sure—” whatever those words mean “—something like that. Anyway, he brought me here and somehow faked delivery data and other background stories.”

“And your Father told this to you, in confee’dunce?”

“Uhm, ‘ooee’, except for the ‘dance’ part.” Big joker-grin on my mug.

“But my dear _____, do you understand that this happened...” worried look on his mug “... that M-shaft was named M-shaft almost eighty years ago...” Oh, really...?

“Well, that makes non sense since I’m only twenty—”

“—Oh, non-only that but... we took the liberty of doing a deeper bioscan of yourself. Your biological imprint seems to indicate that you might be around... ten years old. Your organs at least. Have you had any wetware transplants or...?”

????? “... Non, non at all... And on top of it, I have all these memo-r—” Do I though? Nontrust seeps its toxic claws in my heart. Father?! Is there any truth in anything you told-m—?

*the “States” is a special privilege territory under Monostate authority. Same goes for P.R.A., U.S.A.S.S.R., Pakindia-Sector and Isreal (pronounced “izreol”). Some lang-laws do not apply to them but they also make some of their own homebrew laws.

“—... —”

“Of course, mon ahmee! I trust your **experience** of those memories to be real.”

“They **felt** real at least...” My eyes drift in sorrow and I drown my anger in a pool of pain. Jaque tries to comfort me, so he gives me a slight pat on the back.

“Oh, that **’orreebleh** experience of de-C.I.P.-ing must have drained you.”

“It’s been quite a journey.” I lean back in my chair, touching my datajack. Rubbing it slowly through my unkempt hair. I have a noncomfortable feeling of a C.I.P ghost-trail.

“_____, you must be quite tired.” He points again at the antique—

—OR AYYY-LEE—

—ssssshhhh time device on the wall and continues “I am sure you will find all the answers in due time. You are surrounded by information! And—” he backs away and does a waving motion around his planetary body

“—Leh Dude is a close friend. I trust him with my life. And by extensee-on I trust you with my life.” He raises his head in reverence—

—or smugness—

“—Do you trust yours in my hands?”

“I... you... well, your organization seems to know more about myself than I do. I think... I will follow your lead for a while.”

“Treh bien, I assure you; you will non regret it. All you have to do now is sign the N.A.P. and you will receive a free citizenship with unique private key, public key and special—”

—free? —

—he means ‘civilian’, right? —

—Unique? Private? Override dir—

“—I’m a bit nonfused...”

“Non proh-blemm, **confusion** iz the most prized weapon of our enemies. But we fight with the best counter-attack: The Truth.”

“The truth... really?”

“Yes, _____. You see, although Le Resistance is a stand-alone organization, our creed—”

—creed?

Believes—

—Want. Need. Creed—

“—is not coerzee’on.”

Coercion?

Violence.

Non-good! Penali—

“—I must say Capt’n Jaque, although I’ve only witnessed a meager facet of your Resistance efforts, I non believe it’s possible for you to stand much chance against the high-tech of the Monos.” I scratch my chin in deep-thought, not realizing how much time passes between strokes and synapse-firing. I look instinctively at the—presumed—clock on the wall. Short arm points between the fiftieth and fifty-first spaces. Medium arm to the sixtieth and first space. Almost half an hour... but it felt like mere minutes. I non-think—

—reverse-D.M.T.!

Maybe... I continue my thought “I think I do happen to agree with your creed.”

“Truth be told, you did not seem peculiarly interested in... Mono-worship, were you now lad?”

“Heh, yeah I guess you would’ve figured that out by now.” Not a fan of the ‘Monoheads’! Hehehe...

Real origi... hehehe...

Hihihi—

—funnilyzing—

“—About this N.A.P. you mentioned, what does it involve?”

“You may review it right away, _____. Here on this terminal.” He pushes a button on the side of the first terminal and it turns on. He dials up some commands. Inserts some data. Done, he shows me a ‘contract’.

Non-Aggression Pact
under Resistland principles

- **Article 1:** Thou shall never initiate aggression, coercion, violence or duress against anyone or anyone else’s private property, inside and outside Resistland territories, especially against, but not exclusively applied to, any other N.A.P. signers.

- **Article 2:** See Article 1. If you do not respect Article 1, Article 2 takes precedence and your private property becomes subject to debate. This may include your consciousness or even your life in situations of urgency where an immediate call to action is required, a.k.a. self-defense.

- **Article 3:** See Articles 1 and 2 again.

[Subject under review by Ltn-Cln. Jacques Melees]
[Subject bio-I.D.: ...Registered!]
[Subject background-I.D.: In progress...]
Do you AGREE, _____?

Yes **No**

I ponder for a bit. “Does unique key mean I cannot use any other—?”

“—Non, non! It’s just for the ‘official’ biz, you know? Bio-I.D. check, that sort of stuff.”

“I see...” Yeah, yeah, sure! Why not? I affirm name, data, everything, click ‘Yes’. “Done!”

“Congrats! You are now a Free citizen of Resistland. As you’ve already read and understood I hope, we as an organization consider both sides of the C.O.N. * as enemies of mankind!”

“Both... sides?”

“Yes, there are two sides to the Monostate.” half a smile on his moustache “What you lived through we consider the... benevolent dictatorship.” Benevolent? Yeah, rig— “—I call it an O. utopia.”

“O.? I’ve heard that before...”

* The Council of Nations** is the self-appointed body of government proposed by the P.R.A. and the W.B.G. as a solution to the Event problem. Each nation got re-assigned to sectors/subsectors (with a “few” suggestions from the P.R.A.) and given one seat at the Council’s table for 5 years a mandate. Each seat owner is chosen by “democratic” vote in each mother-sector (to be read ‘nation’). The P.R.A. owns more seats at the Council than everybody else though, but we don’t discuss that.

All lands on Earth* are claimed under Monostate ownership [#Error101 – Ambigui—]

—***whether you like it or non! ****

****All your bases are, belong to us! *****

*****All your children, belong to us! *****

*****All your time, effort! *****

*****Ours!!! *****

*****Submit! *****

*****Obey! *****

*****No! *****

*****Escape! *****

*****Citizen! ***** [#ERROR:1776, Initiating de-sabotaging...]

"Ah oooo, here!" He throws away a couple of books from a stack, nonregarding their fragile nature. He flimsily grabs his target and hands it over to me. 'Nineteen-eighty-four' by G. O. my...

"... This is what I... what basically... heh..." I remember what put into motion the total turnover in my life. Jaques most probably already knows about my fiasco at the corp. I think Jaques is a sneaky-tricky one. "I have never seen a paper book in my life, it's nonlegal to own such things in—"

"—Keep it, _____! Take your time with it. If there iz something you do not understand, it will be my plehzeer to illuminate you in any way I can."

"Well, for starters, half the things you say I do not get—"

"—Ohohohoo, excue... I mean forgive me, but if you decide to join Le Resistance, you shall receive a free complementary tele-link-slash-Academic Analyzer with full install, dark-hack-foolproof and fully—"

"—Tempting, but I thought I was already part of the Resistance."

"As long as you decide to remain on Resistland territories, you are protected by the N.A.P. standards. But joining the Resistance involves an extra creed. Only those of true calling should take such vow. Tre-tre cooraj and dedication. Only a few may climb that ladder." He looks at me, menacing smile in his eyes.

"I understand... I'll certainly think about it." I say but I'm still non-trusting of the whole—

—lotta—

—splonk? —

—real—

—oreejhee-nah—

—Sshhhh! I.T. y? Analy—

"—You do that, my ahmee!" closed eyes, splonky smile on his face.

"So does that mean... I can leave anytime I want?"

"Unfortunately, non, not at the moment. You see, I trust you, but my advisors, and Le Resistance leadership consider that you are still a... security proh-blemm, for a couple of reasons."

"What kind of security **proh-blemm**?"

"Forgive me, but... muah filling you in on le details would be a security proh-blemm in itself, you understand?"

"I understand. I assume I am some sort of a temporary detainee, then."

"Well phrased. Gran' tet my dear shatteez-minded boy!"

This fat-head-splonker-fest
is really starting to stretch his luck
with all this chum-fuddin-sh—

"—But I trust you shall be cleared in non time! After we wipe your memory, of course." Serious, poker-face on his fat-mug. I look spadookled and befuddled. But he finally loses posture and lets out a trollish laughter at the best joke he probably ever made—

—on account of my nonrich as—

—serting dominance—

"—I assume another one of your joke—" with half-a-grin.

"—Oooo, oooo. Non, but if you ever wish to leave Liberta, you shall be escorted, blindfolded." His right eye enlarges significantly more when compared to the other "...Unless you ever decide to join Le Resistance, that is..." Jaques jumps in his chair, crushing it with all of his glorious fattiness, leans back, pulls out a HUGE —

—... brown... stick? —

—fires it up, puffs inside his lungs, blows it out in a hazy, chokey, bluish smoke and continues "In that case—" motions his brown stick towards me "—you might get the opportunity of doing a little escorting job yourself."

"Intriguing..." HmMMMMM....

HHHMMMMMM—

—Mmm? Intrigui—

“—Cpt. Jaques, that does stack the odds higher in both of our favors. An offer I... almost cannot nonaccept.”
Well, I say ‘cannot’.

“Marvelo, _____. Think about it! Discuss it with your ‘friends’. Find a squad for part-or-full time partnership. The underworld iz full of opportunities!” He jumps out of his chair and does a little silly dance around it while singing “Ooh! Lah! Lah!” He must be nonsane, what did I get myself into —?

—Funny! Jaq silly! —

“—You have quite le potential. And we do know you are capable of taking action when absolutely necessa —”

“—Ah, yeah about that—I—uhm, really non thought—”

“—Perfectly understandable, _____. You were put in the most non pleasant situation possible, although we’re not quite sure what that particular situation was. The video-feeds are kinda... well... Regardless, I must say I am most intrigued as to how your escape was even possible...”

“Capt’n, I!... well, I cannot explain it myself either. I just...” I pause, reliving those mentally-bodily non-comfortable moments. “I felt... great noncomfort. Rage! Simple, raw, nonfiltered hate! They were going to —” I almost cry but slap myself back to my senses “—...”

“... _____, you are quite the specimen I must admit.”

... Jaq max silly.

“As you’ve read in the N.A.P., self-defense is part of that system. Our data is insufficient to assume anything other than self-defense in your case.”

“I nonbelieve the Monos would agree with —”

“—Us? Well observed.” He slides his chubbiness forward “You will definitely enjoy that book in your hands.” I look down. Had completely nonremem—forgotten—about the book. I rapidly but carefully scan a couple of random pages. ‘Doublespeak’? ‘Ingsoc’? ‘War is peace’?

Big Bro—?

—War = Peace? Noncompatible—

“—This data certainly seems worthy of browsing, sir. I will definitely study it closely, thanks.”

“Hehehe, sir! I like that, hihhi...” Joker of the decade nonmales and gentlemales —

—Sshhhh! Internalizing...

“Oh, my apolojees —” he points to the clock again, short arm pointing at fifty-third space, medium arm at... 26th space! WTFuddlyzin —

—yeah, that one’s a bit funkeeh —

—THX!

“Sure, uuuuh —” I stumble over my words when I rise to my feet and suddenly all my blood rushes to my brain or it fell out of it or I non understand... I’m dizzy and fall back into my chair. White lights or lightning blinds me. Minutes or seconds pass by in a trance-like state. “... I’m... ooooooh... my...”

“Oh, dear Deo! Are you ok?” Jaques jumps scared out of his baggy pants. I try to calm him.

“I’m fine... non-worry, just got a little vertigo...” after a short while my senses return. I attempt to rise —
—slowww-ly—

—and steadily back to vertical position. “I’m ok now...” I step with one foot in front of the other. I open the exit door. Brown, imposing, mysterious —

“—Oh, forgive me _____, what did you say your Father’s name was...?” Serious look on his face. Serious line on his horizontal lips. Non joke. The world shatters between us and just an open, black void remains. A black hole between us, a dark cloud in the info-entry where Father’s name should be. ‘Black Sabot’s *Iron male* plays with heavy riffs down somewhere in the void. Did I even tell him? Did he even ask? I am paralyzed. Horrified.

Intrigued.

Mortifying.

‘Has he gone nonsane? Can he see or is—’

—it amnesia? Side-effect of de-C.I.P.-ing maybe—

—Ayy—

—line format-error? Diagnosing...

The lyrics are sung in reverse now,
it’s Hadeslang—!

“—Ooh, forgive me Jaques, I... as silly as this may sound, I am not able to recall at the moment...”

Jaques scrutinizes me deeply, his facial expression certainly opposite to a spook’s visage. Then suddenly, he smiles:

“Must be a side effect of that de-C.I.P.-ing. Your memory will soon return to you, je-sooee quite certain.” He stops, as if he got reminded of something “Ah, and until you can find a place of your own, you may squat in the Communal Dwellings in the southeast quarters. Non worries, they are funded from donations. Anyone in need iz welcome to spend as much time as they require or needs.”

“That’s very— ... kind of you people... Thanks!”

“Enjoy your stay! Ohre v’oi!” Jaques waves me goodbye and automatically grabs a PDA, jacks in and continues with his who-knows-what tasks.

I step out. Non want to touch the door ever again. Outside, a black-and-yellow ‘Ohm’ emblem strikes me from the opposite wall. Resistance? My head is dizzy. The path of least resistance? Is it...? My mind is foggy. My heart is...

... Fath...er?...

“Fat... ‘er...” I whisper but it does not help in remembering. I always called him Father. He was not any mister ‘Why’ or ‘Zed’. Just Father. He was all I had and all I ever cared for, his real name never of much importance. The pleasant memories of my childhood in his care were all that mattered. In fact, they are the only moments I can actually remember of my childhood...

...Weird. The rest was mostly splonk anyway.

Probably... I want to believe. I NEED to—

“—Fat... ‘er I WILL find—”

“—Fatter? Who’s fatter?” I turn around a bit startled by the squeaky voice that just barked. I zoom-in-zoom-out, nothing. I adjust my view downwards to discover the source half-way lower than my height.

“Excuse me? I non understand...”

“Din’cha say ‘fat’? That someone is fat?”

“No, I said ‘Father’. As in ‘dad’, ‘male parent’, et cetera.”

“Oh, OK ‘Professor’! Heh... ‘male parent’, heheh...”

Has this little nerpball been
passively roasting us just now?

Nerpball! Funn—

—I take a closer look at the small critter. Its brown, short hair and saggy male-ish looking clothes make me believe it’s a ‘he’. But its nonmale facial features and adorning girlish trinkets—

—pink ponies, multicoloured hearts, et cetera—

—betray a ‘she’. Its pose betrays non one way or the other. Its size makes me approximate the age of... ten, maybe?

“Are you a girl or a nongirl?”

It looks me up and down and says "You talk like a damn robot, mister!"

Oh! You're really pushing it now bud—

—calm down for a sec. It's just a kid—

—and kids say stu—

—uff sometimes. And I should focus on non-Monotonizing my speech too.

"You're a little young to use profanity, are you not?"

"PFFFFFFBBBBTTTTT!" It spouts the most annoying flatulent noise typical of the assumed age. "How old do you actually think I am, grand-pah?" It strikes a threatening pose, palms on its hips.

"Oooh, I would say around... ten? Or twelve?"

It recoils from receiving the most nonpleasant imaginary slap ever. "... You're a 'deek'!" Presumably a harsh reply followed by the fastest exit I have ever witnessed in a diss battle. Well, that was —

—probably thought we'd kick its end.

... Kinda getting used to these weird moments. I'm walking in a dream. Maybe I was actually terminated back there in the metro. Some Over—

—chum—

—aimed, pulled the trigger and non-missed me. I'm just lying in some bodybank somewhere, waiting to be... Escape how? How would these 'people' be able to skip every secure checkpoint and army of sentries and sensors and... Nonregarding the nonwealthiness surrounding me, the... savagery... that surrounds me, it still sounds too good to be—

—True? Comparing...

... And yet, this is especially not what I imagined nonexistence to be! I non imagine that. How can *we* as limited beings imagine... immortality? Or infinite nonexistence for that matter...

... Brrrruhuhhuhh, chilly feely...

Yes... I have no choice but to believe what I see. I want to believe.

I NEED to believe!

I am woken back to reality by Jacques opening the door behind me. He looks around looking for something or someone. "Aaah, anything else you need help with, _____?"

"Non, thank you, I was just... Are you looking for someone?"

"Well, yes, I did have another appointment but... well, non proh-blemm. Good night, _____!" and he slaps the door back in my face.

Weird... I fall back in a daze but get restored by a dear gaze. Dude is waving at me in the background of my foggy view. I smile, shake myself up and say "Had a good shit, beautiful?"

"Bwaaahahahaaaaaaah!" He cracks-up as if he's splonked himself, again. Wipes a tear from his eye and replies "Man, haven't heard that one in decades."

"Really?" I say confused (more than anything else) by the nonoriginality of the joke. Well, I say 'joke'.

"Yeah, it was in my native language eh... well, what you said was the punchline anyway. And your translation was spot on in my mind, heheheh..."

"Native language? You make me curious... you not from around here, Dude?"

"I am, I am! I mean I'm not! I'm not!" wink-wink yeah-yeah, I get it "It's just that..." the deepest sigh thunders in his chest, as if he just remembered a dear friend who has passed on. "...the native language ain't as popular as it used to be."

"But there were several langs in the B-Sector before the Eve—?"

“—Yeah, well I am native to—” whispers “—the R-subsector.”

“Same as me.” I whisper back. “What was the dominant lang there?”

“You never heard of it. Probably closest to ancient Latin really, but had no shame in borrowing words from any language that it got in contact with, one way or the other. Quite a useful habit I must say so myself!” Dude raises his eyes, hand on his chest, but it’s sincere. He continues “Anyway, I bet you must be starving like a wolf!”

“Not really Dude, no. But I could go for a small byte.”

“I know just the place, follow me!”

He grabs me like a loose wire and plunges me into the relative light of the city below. The ground trembles with activity, we get lost in the crowds. Some moonlit signs look almost afire. Steam and sights surround me. I like the sound of the smell. My mouth’s alive with juices —

—and whine down there too—

—Mmmm... catching my breath. We stand close behind in a queue. I peer at the displays... Is that...?

Fish?! Smellynizing—

‘—Her name is doo-doo doop dee-dee doo—’

“—Dude, is that... fish fillet? As in, **real** fish?”

“Mmmm, yes. **The** best in town!”

My blood is drumming inside my skin. Animal flesh? Real animal flesh?! How could I... It was nonlegal to even think about. Well, except for bugs but I guess there’s always room for double standards... I did not mind that rule... When I think about the suffering and nonjustice done to those animals. Even fish suffer, they’re vertebrates. Well maybe some nonvertebrates also suffer but... But...

... Hey, there’s always a first time for any—

—Sshhhh! Internalizing...

“Is there anything else besides animal-related food I can choose from?” I scan for any prices or menus in a lang I can understand. There are non in any lang.

“Uhm... you could get a bowl of noodles.” He leans in and whispers “But it’s crap.”

“You mean like ‘carp’? The fish?”

“No, like ‘shit’! The excrement!”

I get caught by surprise and release a burst of laughter while the crowds snap their attention to the source of the fuss. They get back to their activities soon after, nonamused. I nonbelieve they heard any of it anyway.

“Oh, you old fud! You always catch me off-guard.”

“Ya better get used to it, boy! Life’s much funnier when you don’t have to watch your tongue every damn step of the way!”

“True, it does feel... liberating.”

It’s our turn next. He looks at me “So, what’s it gonna be?” Thanks to —

—DMT be praised—

—I have plenty of time to decide. Choosing the fish seems irresponsible, and yet so... curious but —

—so delicious, so—

—I have to take into account his argument of choosing between excre —

—metaphorically speaking...

I finally go on the wild side and say “Fish for me, Capt’n!”

“Good choice, me lad!” He addresses the vendor in some Mandarin-sounding lang. The vendor is a tiny eyed, short, dark-haired, nonfat male (maybe) wearing a cute fish hat that looks too large for his head. He lowers his head several times, saying something that sounds like the word ‘hi’ each time Dude speaks two or three of his

words. In my mind it plays like the scene of a broken serve-bot glitching out in front of a customer. I cannot resist the urge of releasing a couple of chuckles. Dude smiles at me, but I nonbelieve he would understand. 'Fish-hat' snaps a couple of fillets from the tray, rocks them with spices and rolls them in rice. Dude puts a hand in his pocket, the other pocket, back-pocket, some 'imaginary' pockets, then grabs a shiny-whitey steel-looking round item from his jacket's inner-pocket and hands it to fishy-boy.

"Dude, are you paying with coins? Like in... medieval times?"

"Yep, that's how old I am, bwahahahah! You should know... silver, gold and copper go a long way down here."

Wow... nonprotected, nonsecure, physical metal exchange. Fascinat —

—indeed, I say, we're dead and gone to LotO!

Dude hands me a tray of fish-rolls. I almost cannot bring my self to eat even one of them and it's not because of the smell. The culinary design is hypnotizing. But the blood, the fire, I'm a boy not a man —

—Just eat IT! —

'—eat it eat it eat it—'

—Ooff ooff ooh, I take a huge bite and it crushes my taste buds in a million pieces. I get an ache in the glands under my jaw but the flavours soon settle down and I'mmmmm... yeah mmmmarvelous!

Satisfying...

"Man, Dude! You were *omn* right *nom*... about *omn*... th'r *nom* delish —"

"—Fuuuddelicious, I know! Didn't expect an ex-Mono to tolerate it though, heh. Come, we can eat on the move. Let's explore!"

We surf through the crowds. Oddly enough, I'm noncaring much about the random contact with passersby. The restricted space does not allow us to distance ourselves much anyway. Shoulders, elbows brushing against elbows, glances fleeting, poses non-greeting. Smiles quickly fleeing. Perfume, familiar...

...Is she behind us or up ahead...?

I instinctively throw an eye over my shoulder like a foot-ball over a goalpost. I almost drop my fishrolls. I search and search but nonhopeful that I could discern anything in this sea of people. Faces blend in colors and shapes, psychedelically. Why do even I care about...? ... Dude just breathes it all in, he absorbs the air, no fear nor care. I look around, above and at the ground. I feel noncomfortable. But excited! I'm on the run, I also want to absorb it all in, but on fast-forward! It's crazy curiosity at best, but I like it! Boutiques left and right, kiosks block our way from time to time, forcing us to detour our trajectories. Almost all of them are dealing in culinary-related stuff. Some of them... hand out some pieces of cards or something—zoom in—

...Text, numbers... receipts?

"Dude, it appears to me that vendors around here hand out receipts in nonelectronic formats. **Only** in non-e-format."

"Yes, why you ask?"

"I mean, some of them do not even bother to give nor clients take 'em. Which makes me believe that..."

"..." Dude looks even more puzzled than I am.

"What I mean is... Dude, are these people even paying any **taxes**?"

"Heheheh, that depends on what you **mean** by taxes."

"Well... you know, paying your **dues**? To the authorities?"

"This ain't the plantations of Mono', boy! **Bwahahahahaah!**" his laughter is quite loud and sharp but passersby non seem bothered.

"Nah, nah... you see, here—" he waves his hand around himself "—you only PAY for dues you VOLUNTARILY agree to pay. You need your trash picked up: you sign a contract with a company of your own choosing. You

need electricity, sign a contract. Waterworks, contract, constructions, contract, security, contract, social security, contract. Education, medication, infrastructure, social structure, contract, contract, contract, contract, contract—” I interrupt him before he gets stuck on a loo—

“—But wait, what about justice? Crimes? How do you deal with —?”

“Look, you **did** READ and SIGN the N.A.P., didn’cha?”

“Yes, I **did**. But I still do **not** see how—”

“You signed it but did you READ it? I know ya kind, you click ‘Agree’ on any stupid crapf—”

“—Dude, I admit I did not read IT all THOROUGHLY, but I got the gist of it, ya know?” I nonget to ponder much about it because my attention is grabbed away by a disheveled, bearded old man walking towards us. He is wearing a faded yellow robe but what really amuses and befuddles me is that he’s holding a transparent, cylindrical device that shines a swinging light of a... flamelike hologram inside. It does radiate light in a realistic way I must say, but why would you do this in such daylike environment, I non...? He holds the lantern in front of him, pushing it in the faces of passersby and scrutinizing them with narrowed eyes and serious judgement. This guy is definitely out of his—

“—mind you, _____, but if you had read the pact thoroughly you would’ve understood how this place works. It’s simple, we have these Dispute Resolution Companies that are like, you know, life-insurance or whatever you wanna call it and blah—” I already know what he’s talking about. Basically, justice is served, but privately. And publicly. But privately. Anyway, it’s not the details that intrigue me, it’s the whole IDEA of it. How can this EXIST in the same world as the Monostate? HOW? How could some people be forced to burn the bridge between security and freedom? And get Security but at what cost? And here, you get Freedom, but hey... you’re also in charge of security basically. Or you pay someone for it. The N.A.P. heh... Pie in the sky and yet...
...

... Fluctuating...

“—sure, the Resistance offers a ‘Vee-Eye’ Pak or you know... ‘Premium’ citizenship, which includes garbage disposal and other basic services. But even if you choose not to pay for that, they still provide free basic security funded from donations and they also offer public dispute resolutions for a very small, tiny fee, of course.”

“I see, but—”

“—And you’re free to refuse any of those. Heck! Don’t donate to the public security fund, your choice pal. But you don’t get to—” Dude flips his jacket-flap to flex a flashy holobadge “—show off one of these neat things. Eh? Eh? Don’cha like it?”

“I see... yeah, I do agree with you on, you know, a philosoh-fee-call level. It’s just the details of it that, eh... well, I do not find compatible at the moment. There’re reasonable ideas in there, I can say, it’s just...”

“Sure, kiddo! Don’ worry, you’ll see. Things work **pretty** smooth around here.”

I try to find holes in their system. “What about ‘lone-wolf’ **random** events? How do you deal with those?”

“Oh! Well...” Dude flips a lower flap of his jacket, revealing a humongous revolver-looking monstrosity.

“Almost everyone around here is packin’.”

“For real...?” I look around me and a sudden noncalmness washes over my body. Everyone here could...

“Yeah boy, even the kids—”

“—You must be jok—”

“—non-lethal weaponry anyway. But yeah, you should know this. The Overwatch may apparently be very successful at protecting their citizen-children, but down here kids are very successful at taking care of themselves!” He smiles and winks at me in a menacing way, I.M.H.O.

“Well Dude, I’ll have to see it to believe it!”

"I certainly hope to KEK you never have to witness that." He does an odd gesture where he touches his forehead, his chest and then his shoulders.

"I see..." I get struck by an idea that *never* came in my thought process before and it should have. What if I did NOT accept the N.A.P.? ...

"... Dude, I just realized... I did not ask about what would've happened if I did not... uhm..."

"...Yes, yes? Spit it out boy!"

"What if..." we adventure on a crosswalk and I check left and right lots of times, I non-trust these antique—

"—What if I chose 'No' on the N.A.P.? What would have happened to me then? And most of all, if I change my mind now, can I nonsign it?"

"Heh, I mean... yeah you can revoke it at any time and yeah, you get to leave. No harm done. As long as you're not part of the Resistance you don't know the location anyway. Heh... But I trusted you to be reasonable enough. Jacques knows me, we're old pals, way back from... Eh, well look _____, —" Dude grabs me by the shoulders, looks dead-serious in my eyes, giving me a chilly feeling to the bone "—you don' wanna go out there. This is the best place you can be in right now, TRUST ME!" he gets all turned on, wtf—

"—Dude, I'm a bit noncomfortable at the—"

"—Listen to me, kid! There's more to this world than the 'Monostate' and 'Libertopia'. There's vampires and werewolves and dragons out there! I know that sounds stupid as fuck and it is! But sometimes, people can be worse than those monsters we hear about in spooky stories."

Ok, he's definitely got my attention now!

"Monsters, Dude?"

"Yeah, monsters with big teeth and claws of metal! There's lots of dangers. The Monostatists at least have only one mind, one purpose. Well, it's a split mind but... at least they are PREDICTABLE. In the underworld, there's none of that. Sure, you got your Liber-minded people and they are mostly PREDICTABLE too, but there's other things out there..." Dude looks away, deep on the horizon. He's fallen in a trance, or... a flashback of something... "I implore you, _____! You have to trust me on this one, I ain't shittin' ya, I'm actually downplaying a lot of it."

"Dude, I trust you. I trust my life in your hands! You saved me more than once."

"Bwahahahah, more than once?"

"Eh... metaphorically speaking..."

"I see but don't let that fact drag your neck down, kid! I understand the sentiment nonetheless. Ok, we're up this corner right over here and then we go for..."

Our journey gets us out of the human jungle and into a bit more non-claustrophobic space. Rows of pretty built houses line up to the horizon. You never see houses in the Mon... I watch amazed the silly architectures; well, I say silly. Some are odd, some would look neat on the H.U.D. Some are old, some have a natural-looking mold. And those perfect tree imitations, are those really synth or am I...? I lose balance —

—Sshhhh! Stabilizing...

... It's like in my dream... well, not really. Nonetheless, it is quite nonsettling. But makes me think, what if...? What if in a way—

—all of that Monosplonk
was just a dream—

—a nonpleasant dream from which I finally managed to wake up. I know it sounds silly. Even so, we know the 'Monos' still exist in this world. And other 'things' exist too and we better be ready to learn about them. I just never imagined life without the Mono—

—splonk-fud-chum—

—T-heads! Judging...

This place is proof, for now, that things can be better. Even if it does not always look great. People can actually be free m—

“—Aaaand this is my place! You’re very welcome to stay for the night, but I have to tell you, I’m all spent. I’ll have to go directly to bed-mode!” He fakes a faint and almost falls off his cyber-junk legs.

“I’m very grateful, Dude. But I kinda had a long sleep already and I—”

“—know, I understand lad. You can always call my place if you change your mind. No prob’, Alf Red will answer and get you in, you got his link-I.D. on that Pee Dee Eh I gave you.” Alf Red, is he a...?

“Is it a Bot or a non-Bot?”

“A B-Bot!” Bee oh— “—Hehehe, yeah one of the best! I even modified him a little... for extra security reasons I mean.”

“I’m uh... intrigued...” I want to go see the beauty-bot but I also want to... to explore, to—

—Bot, or Not to Bot. That is the FAQest—

—Alf Reading High Lvl’s Wanting—

“—Ok Dude, I guess I can spare some moments to meet this Alf char.”

“He’s a crackpot, heheheh!”

We climb the tiny serpentine bottleneck of the stairs that keeps expanding up to the large imposing doors at the top. The menacing mansion magnifies magnificently the more we move closer to this mildly maniacal monument of a millennial majesty of long-forgotten moments in time. I cannot pinpoint much of its architecture, but it’s closer to what West-Middlehood looks like, and far, far away from any other splonk-pools of the metro. Dude knocks three times on a large steel ring adorning a large dark steel door. A tiny display lights up in the middle of the ring and a red-chassis in a familiar tuxedo greets us. Definitely looks like—

—ndorphins <30%...

“Ah, Master Dude! I see you’ve brought a guest! You have ten seconds to identify! *gun clicks* Nine, eight, seven, —” come on now, is he really gonna? I nonbelieve— “six-five—” hey, what the fud—

“—I’m uuuh, uh-uh-my-name-is—”

“—two, one—”

“— ____ !!! It’s ____ !”

“Stand-by... Confirmation failed, non-existing data! Engaging fire—”

“—Dude, wait, what the sh—” —reaking out DMT max freeze-frame glitch it’s NON possible Dude would never allow this to—

—come on, I’m DEAD of curiosity!

... A loud, long, watery, almost odorous, farting noise comes out of the speakers. I am stunned and I look at Dude splonking his pants of laughter while Redhead over there joins in with *ha-ha*’s of his own. Well, well— “—Well played, troll-*meister*, real original too, never have I heard such...” but suddenly the joke grows on me, all the ‘dreno drained away, I’m left only with the sweet, odorous comedy of life. I soon join in the laughter, all three lost in a blissful heart-pounding cackle.

Dude tries to calm down a bit “Oh, man!... it never gets old for me, heeheeheee —” Aaand no chance, he’s back at square zero. Redhead calms on queue and says “I’ll let you right in, gentlemen!”

The door opens automatically and we step inside its atrium. An eye-watering, light-drenched dome proudly covers the incredibly tall roof of the enclosed space. Colourful, antique-looking pictures appear painted between and under the windows of the dome. The windows themselves are painted yellow and red and black and blue and... The lower walls of the building have transparent windows. On this side at least, I do not

remember seeing inside from the outside. Portraits and landscapes encumber the corridors. Statues of ancient stature are spread at equal lengths down the endless-looking halls.

“How was your day, Master Dude?” Alf is as cordial as expected.

“Oh terribly, terribly, TERRIBLY...” then another pause... Then he smiles “...terribly marvelous, my dear Alf!” “That sounds terribly, terribly SPLENDID, my lord! Care to share any details?” Alf does a silly-bot rotation of his head in my direction.

“He is a good friend and a... mircal in the flesh!” Dude poses dramatically with his hands towards the ceiling

“For he was dead! And now, he is alive! Resurrected!” Eyes closed, fist on his chest, drama fin.

“Oh! Must be one of them ‘Mehsighah Complex’ disorders!” Alf does a bot-laugh. What’s a...?

“...Meh-sigh-ah?”

“Oh, it’s sort of a... superhero, you know? Yeah, a ‘saviour’ of humankind. Or at least someone who **thinks** that they’re saving the world. Eh, it’s sort of **complex**...” Small giggle on Dude’s part. Small smile on my part.

I’m gonna SAVE the world!

And then I’m gonna make a back-up—

—Heheheheh, nah that sounds better here on the inside than on the outside. Anyway, I think —

—*sigh* Come on! It’s not ssh—

—Internalizing...

“...Heh, neat crib Dude! But it does not look like the home of someone who’s only been around here for a week. I mean, did you buy this or...?”

“I built it!” Get real now.

“You built all this in a single week, Dude? For real?”

“Bwaahahahah—” of course he’s pulling my socks “—Nah, nah, I’m renting it!” Now he’s pulling my tail too.

“Rent a whole mansion, all by yourself? Or is there anyone else here? How can you even afford —?”

“—Wow laddie-oh, are you from the ‘Eye-Are-Sum’ or some? What’s with all the questioning? Brrhehehee—”

“—Eye-Are-Sum? What does that mean?”

“The ‘Eye-Are-Ess-Double-You-Em’! You know, the—”

—eco-dogs*!

“Hahah, I get it now. Forgive me, Dude, I did not mean to pry in your biz, it’s just that it’s all so... unbelievable for me right now. And knowing that you had cred problems...”

Dude looks at me, then looks away, pondering. He looks at me again and says “Doncha worry your little head about that. It’s half the story. My finances, well, let’s just say ‘unofficially’ I wouldn’t have to beg for a good brain-ripper!” He does half a grimace. A ripper? Is that what they call surgeons around here? “Look, I never tried to be opulent. I mean, I spent most of my early life away in meaningless existence anyway, almost like a mindless dog. But I lied to myself, thinking I was searching for the ‘Ultimate Meaning’ or the ultimate high, whatever that is. But when you go really high you can also fall very low, for way longer. Fortunately for me... I had a great family, and they’ve helped me through my dark times and cherished me through my good times. That humbled me. That put a great mirror in front of my soul and showed me I wasn’t the only one in this world that has thoughts, feelings or desires. Buuuuut, they’re gone now, so, yeah...” he smiles and looks around the palace’s lobby.

“Are they... ‘gone’ as in ‘they left the premises’ or ‘they’ve passed on’?”

*The “Internal Revenue ServiceWatch of the Monostate” or “I.R.S.W.M” is the Netwatch-supervised subdivision of pseudo-A.I. services that monitor finance, taxes, etc. across the Mono-eco-sphere. All automatically and electronically performed, Monostate tolerates none of that cash nonsense in Monosociety!

“Some have grown apart, some have passed on, some... KEK knows. Eyes that don't see each other tend to forget each other.”

“So that story about you not raising a family is nontrue? I mean, if there's anything true at all in that article, I mean...”

“Heheheh, that one's true. Nah, I was referring to my immediate family, relatives and old friends. People who knew me. People who actually KNEW my original name...” Dude falls into deep thought.

I try to reel him back to the surface “So you mean to tell me you're some kind of secret playboy millionaire?” I wave around at all the 'opulent' interior.

“Heh, wish I was still a boy. Well, I still keep a boy inside, but —”

“—What? Where are you keeping him? Is he in this house right now?”

“Bwaaaaahaaheeh, dear KEK, no! I meant **inside** myself!” he points to his chest. Still a nonlogical figure of—

“—And you trust me with all of this? I know most of it is kinda vague info and yet...?”

“Sure, Dem! I trust you with my life, boy! And you can trust Alfie here too! He has no choice, heheh!”

“Dude, that's kind of a big response—” he risked both of our lives to save me “—... Wait, is this some kind of reverse 'you saved me, I owe you my life' scenario?” Like that 'Nonlight' epi—

“—Hahah, nah, although I can see where you're coming from. No, you gained my trust during those times we've spent together, all the way back at the elderpens. Those I trust I put my life in their hands.” He is quite serious and blissful about it.

“Sounds kinda risky, non you think?”

“It paid off up till now. Not much's gonna change my mind in my final years.” Some music I non recognize plays somewhere in another room. A soothing nonmale voice accompanied by a piano chills the mood completely.

“I'll try my best, Dude!”

“Thank you, lad, I know you will.” He grabs my right shoulder, less forceful than in the past. A tiny gleam in his tired eyes. Alf grabs my other shoulder, much colder and tighter than Dude and says “May I take your coat, surr?”

I gently shrug off both hands “Non. Forgive me, I was just passing by. I have some more... exploration to attend to.” I do an instinctive check of my pockets and bags in case I might have left something around nonaware. As if I had much on me anyway. As if I ever had much on —

“—My, an adventure! Jolly good surr! Is there something I can do to aid in your quest, sire?”

“Non, thank you! I'm good.” I wanna do this on the highest difficulty.

“Aah, good you reminded me, Alf Red. There was one thing I meant to give you Dem but I've completely forgotten...” Dude starts digging through a large drawer, making a mess of booklets, components, gadgets and cables. They all sit scattered on the table above, inducing in me an obsessive-compulsive reaction. He finally shouts “Success!” and pulls out a silvery, metallic, chunky—

—cutesy, nerpy—

—shooter? Arming...?

“Here!” he shoves the thing in my face, barrel facing sideways. “For protection.”

“Dude, I cannot accept—”

...

—Dude pulls me on a sofa with a table in front of it, sits me down, places the assumingly lethal gadget on the table and says “Look, I know you probably never shot a real gun in your life—”

“—Real?! No, never—”

“—but here, in the underworld, it’s best if you carry one. Mind you, no need to use it! Ninety-eight-point-four percent of the time you’ll be perfectly safe around here. On Resistland territories anyway...”

“Is that a real statistic or you just pulled it out of your...?”

“Statistics, schmatics! My point is that there’s plenty of uncharted places out there where those odds drop in the zero-point-zero percentile. ‘Ye be prayin’ for a knife to slit yer own throat when ye walkin’ in the Valley of Death, boy!’” That’s a quote from LotO! But it’s diff...

“Heh, that sounds to me a little bit over-melodramatic. But I believe you Dude. There are monsters out there, I get it.”

“And darkspace is just as dangerous as fleshspace!”

“Darkspace? You mean Darknet? The fabled, terrorist cyberspace?”

“Oh yeah, the Underworld was built on Darknet. It would hardly work without it. Did you see cryptscript?”

“Yeah, fascinating piece of tech—”

“—Knowledge is vital in underground circles and information requires the highest security, anonymity and trustless environment possible to be able to run its contracts. Darknet provides the infrastructure for all of that.”

“It uses blockchain I assume.”

“Baah, that crumbling ole fossil? No way! The ‘cutie’ machines—” he must be referring to qt-machines * “—can break those obsolete encryption methods in one point five nanosecs. Even if Monofficials SWEAR they never tamper with Monocoin, nooooo! Inflation is just natural they say! *Ptuah*!” He spits in non-gusto on the floor. Really Dude, that’s kinda nonnecessar— “—Yeah, anyway, Darknet operates on something totally different. The—drumroll please— ‘blockmatrix!’” Dude does a magician’s handwave in a cocky manner.

“A blockmatrix? So, it’s not a chain, it’s a—”

“—Sort of, yeah. It’s got ‘Oroboro’, ‘sharding’, all that fancy techno-shizzle. And it’s as solid as a cyber-hydra!”

“Fascinating... So cryptscript is part of that?”

“Yeah! It’s the original script provided by the original inventor, ‘Yasoojee Miaypoolah’, heheheh...”

“Funky name, I nonbelieve it’s real though.”

“He was anonymous after all.” He shakes his end a bit to find a better spot on the sofa. “This fellow posted his blueprints on an obscure crypto-forum back in the ‘20s. He didn’t even build the thing, the community did! And it grew and grew and... survived the coming purge...” His eyes widen. Horror glitters out of them. Purge...?

“Wow Dude, you’re pretty old are you not?” Skepticism overload.

“Yeah, that’s another one of the ‘truths’ I told you.”

“Did you invent the Darknet?”

“Bwahahahah, don’t be silly! I mean, even though at the time I understood how crypto worked, I could have never come up with something as marvelous as the darkchain of supply. I admit, I did support and ‘finance’ development in the newborn industry but not so much to make a difference in the long run, I’d say. The right people saw the potential at the right time.” Fist in a strong grip, clenching teeth, squinting eyes, firmly rooted feet. “And so, part of the old world survived here in the sewers, in the abandoned silos, caves and refuges of the world. In the underbelly of the ‘beast!’” Dude stands up, his melodramatic ways starting to kinda —

—piss me right—

—Off! Empathic On, Stabilizing...

Injury in his heart, but there’s hope in his face. He calms and reverts to presenting me the termination trinket that’s laying on the table.

* quantum computers are giant, fusion-powered hivelike towers that perform most of the computing necessities of a Monocity. Usually located in the center of each ‘hood subsector (one in East Lowerhood, one in Central Lowerhood, etc.). Also known as “motherboards” since traffic of all terminals, consoles, PDAs, etc. has to pass through its Computing Filters (censors, predictors, etc.)

“Never mind all that, sonny! Here, the important thing is that you’re always prepared for what this crazy world has to offer! Better safe than sorry.” He performs a dismantling operation on the gadget. The pieces come off quite intuitively. He proceeds with his instructions. “Here is the safety. Always keep it active when you don’t plan on frying some poor bastard.”

“Fry??? Dude, what kind of a shooter is—?”

“—This right here is a marvelous, highly-modified ‘Nohate Club’-dee-licensed G.U.D. ‘Pusher’ version three-three-three plasma pistol—”

“—Dee-licensed? G.U.D? What... Dude, wait, plasma??? That’s Class triple A.U.H.F. nonauthorized—”

“—Yes, yes and quite economical too, energy wise I mean, see here—”

“—But it’s so smol—”

“—OH, well it’s got TSL microfusion batteries, boy! This thing can fire TEN shots before it needs a battery swap. Or you can do a recharge if you got the materials and know-how.”

“*Pfft*, so all I need to learn is nuclear fizz—”

“—Nonsense, I’ll teach you sometime.” He shrugs it off as if he’s talking about teaching me how to ride a tricycle! “Now, here you see is a data-jack, female—”

—fee-male? —

“—entry point. You see, this thing has smart-link capabilities.”

“Wooah Dude, are you serious? Then you mean—”

“—Yes—”

“—But—”

“—How—?”

“—Yes—”

“—Well—”

“—Not—”

“—I’m afraid so.”

“Well, what if...?”

“Nah, it’s perfectly safe!” he assures me. “Even if, let’s say, someone tries to bypass security remotely, you can still block them with bio-I.D. verification. It’s foolproof if you program it correctly. OR just use a cable if you’re THAT paranoid scare-anoid, heheheh!”

“Believe me, paranoid is a mild way of putting it.” Although bio-I.D. check non sounds half-nonsmart—

—just say ‘dumb’, stupid—

—I’ll worry about that later since I still have trouble with my H.U.D. functions.

“Dudemann, I will not be able to use that anyway. My H.U.D. systems are fried or something.” Cannot say I miss the ghost-trails though.

“Ah! Alf Red here is a ripper-doc in his spare time, a really good one! Coded by some famous coder you never heard about.”

“That does not sound very safe.”

“Don’cha worry, hey Alf Red, mah man! Can you do a jack-up check on my friend here?”

“Certainly, Master Dude! Let’s see if—” the massive bot begins to approach me in slow motion. I’m quite noncomfortable with the idea of a raw-authorized—

—line:33%, rising—

‘—probe in the lobe, nonsane in the mainframe—’

—I’ve never been analyzed by a bot before. I study Alf top-to-bottom and back. Multi-purpose, multi-noncertainties. Jack-in all Trades, Master of N—

“—on’cha worry your pretty, young, paranoid head. Alf Red is a PRO! He can’t help it, he’s coded that way, heheheh!”

Alf rotates his shiny head towards Dude, forced smile displayed on his mouth-screen. “Really funny and original, master Dude! Really—” he proceeds to mumble something under his nonexistent breath while stepping menacingly closer to me, mechanized feet stomping, stomping, stomp —” —May I, surr Dem?” “Uhm... yeah, sure Alf! Be my guest!” I turn my back to him and reveal the data-jack entry hidden under my fuzzy, shag-of-a-hair.”

“Oh, a Mono-model, surr? I see...”

“You nonget many of those around here?”

“This will be a ‘walk-in-the-cake’, surr! Now remain calm and stand still, please—”

—SHARP paining! Ahhhh—

[—Z|ZZS#ZZZZTZF#CZZZK0Z—]

[—... Restarting...]

“Please do not attempt to access H.U.D. functions for a minute, surr —”

“—Ok, ok—” as if I’d dare—

—EEhaaaaaaaaaAaaAaah—

[—Synching O... Data check, stand-by..... corruption – check, 110 entities, please wait for debugging... /ERR: /1/1/...1/...2/.../... Complete! Restarting...]

Bzzz, *bzzz* and H.U.D. is back to normal. Alf does a second quick check and then finally nonplugs. “All good, surr! I am thankfully glad there were no hardware issues found. Quite unusual for such an apparently rushed job of de—” He stops, composes himself and ‘rephrases’ “—... debilitating trauma.”

“I appreciate your cordiality, Alf Red. And thanks for the jack—”

“—A simple routine job my good surr, but nontheless... intriguing.”

Dude barks in a wild manner “All this mooching and no flowers for Alf, Dem? Bwahahahahahah!”

Alf faces Dude, all squiggly smiles on his mooch “No need for such kind gestures, master Dude! Better to reserve them for the **ladies!**”

He says ‘ladies’ as if he has
‘laid’-in a few in his time.

... Libidi-no-lyzing—

“—True and none of that synth-crap either, heh!” Dude, why so disgusted by some—?

“—Heh, yeah... but we do have real flowers in Mo...” why mention Monosplonk? “... Non mind that, I do not want to retain you more than is necessary Dude, you’ve already given me so much. About this pistol...”

“Sure! It’s very portable, only a few metal parts—” points to barrel and battery “—easily ‘concealable’—” whatever that means “—jacket, pocket, cyber-limb, you name it! —” I get it now “—And it shoots straight up to a hundred meters or TWO hundred, with high precision if you use that smart-link.”

“Dude, this sounds quite expensive—”

“—Don’t mention it kiddo. I’m just givin’ ya a head start. And I build stuff like this in my spare time, it’s no biggie!” He smiles playfully while making a silly plane motion with one of the pistol parts.

“Are you part of the Resistance?”

“Heheheh, nah... I’m too old for that stuff. But I like to help wherever I can. Just don’t tell anybody!” Dude does a *shush* with his finger while smiling. He puts the parts back on the table, shuffles the pieces a bit and says “Here... think you can put it all back together?”

“Hmmm...” challenge accepted!

I review the parts to make sure I get the pic. One handle, one barrel, one cover for the barrel, aim system and side-jack-case, the jack *female* itself, two microcells and two cover pads for the handle-case. Microcells go in the handle-case. All most probably assembled in the same order I just mentioned. I begin the sliding and pushing and grunting force I need to “—MMmmHAH—” and just two more, hmmm... I look around for a presumably missing piece.

“Dude, I think there’s a piece of the puzzle missing...”

“Ah yes, be right back!” he jumps on the pile spread on the table with the drawer and extracts a ridged cubelike thingy and throws it my way Dude-really-I’m-not-that-goo—

—DMT!

I nearly miss catching it. “This piece seems to fit perfectly right back *click* here.” Something tells me this was some sort of a test.

“Yep, can’t do jack-shizzle without the transformer. Even the barrel is optional but not recommended, uhm...” Dude shudders as if he’s reliving some ‘accident’ from the past. Of his or someone else perhaps...

I place the smart-gun back on the table, with the barrel accidentally facing Alf who’s far away in a corner cleaning some dusty painting. I instinctively grab it back to check its safety lock. Safety ON. I look at Dude, he smiles and nods.

Me smart.

Not ‘Me’! ‘We’, remember? —

—U nonsmart—

—Sshhhh I.T. head!

“All right, kiddo, time’s up. Grab yer shit and leave me alone!” His smile cannot offend me with such words.

“I’ll be right out of your hair, Dude—”

“—As if he’s got any hair left, surr!” Alf Red thunders from the back of the room.

“Bwaaahahahahaah! Tooshay, Alfie-boy!” Dude seems nonphased by the insult.

I whisper to Dude “This is not your typical ‘Butler’ ‘Ess’ ‘Aeh’ ‘Pee’ now, is he?”

Dude mouths a devilish ‘nope’ but Alf grunts again from the background “I heard that, you know! Pffft, calling me a sap, why youngsters these days...”

“Ah, Alf Red I apologize! I did not mean it in THAT way.” I do my most sincere —

—but faux—

—apology.

“Apology accepted, surr! I understand—” his head rotates morbidly one-hundred and eighty degrees to face us, his work noninterrupted “—young people like to diss from time to time. I must admit, I do enjoy a little gay banter from time to time MYSELF!” Alf swirls in excitement and knocks over some quite expensive-looking vase. I look at Dude wide-eyed but he just smiles and shakes his head. As if it’s all ‘part of the program’.

“Oh, dear KEK, my lord! Master, I am so, so terribly, terribly, terribly sorry! I was out of my ‘See’ ‘Pee’ ‘You’ case when I—”

“—Baah, it’s fine Alfie-boy! That’s a cheap knock-off anyway, just throw it away!”

“Thank you, master Dude, I’ll get right to it!” Alf steps on the mess and vacuums the pieces inside of his rocking metal leg, then rolls out of the premises.

Dude remarks playfully “Poor sap! He doesn’t realize even to this day that it’s all part of the phys-gag routine I personally coded in.” He pauses, then faces me, one eye bigger than the other “Or maybe he is just... faking it! Heheheh...”

“Maybe faking it is also part of the program?”

“Well observed, but then how can you tell it’s fake?”

“Heh... is a software bug still a bug if no one finds it?”

“Yeah, but that’s just from the coder’s point of view. The ‘computer’ doesn’t know it, he doesn’t know crap. But an A.I.—”

“—pseudo-A—”

“—Yeah, but in ‘theory’, it could grow to be a different thing. Even a pseudo one.”

“—You mean like... do you believe in ghost-in-the—?”

“—Nonsense kiddo! These saps have no chance of ever attending nirvana or whatever. Tho’ I’m always open to be proven wrong.”

“Heh, yeah that’s a good... Yeah, to be open to possibilities. I’m a bit hurt by your words though...” I do my famous faux-offended pose.

“Sure Dem! In my life I’ve been proven wrong many times. More than I could hardly count.” He leans in with a snakey look in his gaze “And I’ve evolved a bit each time.”

“Of course, Dude. But you’re like... level ninety-five! Gotta have a lot of points assigned to—”

“—Pffft, you’re still playing that fantasy-flat-scrap-corp-heap-of-a-dump? What was it called, ‘Swords of the Corpo-hordes’? Or what was it, bwahahahaah...”

“It’s ‘Lords of the Overlords’ Dude and you know it! You enjoyed playing it when we were back at the elder—”

“—Yeah-yeah, sorry I just didn’t wanna burst yer bubble at the time.”

“I see... Well, I’m not in a bubble anymore so...”

“Hey, don’t take it too hard, lad. Look, I promise next time I’ll look for a copy of the ‘unofficial’, ‘uncensored’, ‘bootleg’ version of ‘LotO’. I’m sure you’ll love it!”

“Noncensored? What do you—?”

“—Trust me lad, it’s uncensored in MORE ways than one. Ooof, those orc ladies and their—” Dude gets all red, almost ‘AlfRed’ red. He shakes his head, composes himself and “—... Anyway, find a smart spot for that shooter, Dem. And enjoy the sightseeing. I’m off!” Dude approaches me, pats my head and finishes with “And please don’t do anything too stupid while you’re out there! Remember what the N.A.P. says.”

“Non worry Dude, I’m—”

—plasma gun’s gonna be sweee—

—Sshhhh! Beast overriding—

“—... I’ll behave.”

“I know you will. Good night!”

“Sleep tight, Dude!”

“I’ll sleep like a Gordian knot! Heheheh...” Whatever THAT means.

Dude climbs up the large stairs of the mansion and into the halls upstairs. I grab my bag and pistol and run for the exit while trying to fit the gun in one of my hoodie’s pockets. It’s so light to the touch and yet so sturdy! So crafty. The air outside hits me with a slight draft as the door closes behind me. I scan the horizon, both foreground and background. Not many obvious drones. Most that pass by must be delivery bots. Maybe a few sentries flying quietly, up high in the sky. Like tiny leaded zeppelin balloons. Buildings smaller, bigger, squares, triangles, dodecahedrons, sprinkled forth and back, left and right. Some closer together, some far

apart from one another. A whole mess in design in the eyes of an average Monomason. I on the other hand quite enjoy the nonconformity. The defiance of any mono rules of style and form. I can probably see why these people would fight to keep this going... Even here, in an underground grotto —

—hole in the ground basically, like ra—

—True, but the air is SO breathable! Mostly... What I do not get is how do they re-circulate air in here, I see no obvious... The trees certainly have no obvious circulation vents. Maybe they really are real... But how would they grow them in such 'non-light' settings? Well, no sunlight anyway. I take a closer look at one of the trees on the side of the road. It certainly has to be a really neat synth repro of a —”

“—Surr, is there anything else you needed?” I get Alf’s startling robo-bark in my rear. He watches me from the tiny ring-screen, with his mouth all a neutral display.

“No, I’m fine... Just enjoying the view.”

“Certainly, surr! Good—”

“—I was wondering though... These ‘synth’ trees do look quite real I must say.”

“That’s because they are real, surr! Good night!”

Alf turns the screen off. He’s joking, right? I look perplexed at the tree. They could be some kind of...

GMO? Generalizing...

Such low-light conditions though. I’ve never seen a real tree but I know they have them in the ‘Sus’ Gardens* up in the Upperhoods. But I’ve never been to one because I hate Upp—! ... I run down the stairs and into the street. I look to my left, I look to my right, street all the way! In front of me there’s a shabby looking trad house, less imposing than Dude’s house. I cannot imagine owning so much wealth. I cannot imagine myself wanting so much wealth anyway. I cannot decide which way to go exploring. So many choices! Well, just two for the moment. Left or right. They both look mirrored. Does it even matter which way I go? As I fall in semi-DMT mode, my mind wanders... Do I really have any choice in any of my actions? Left or right might only be the decision of hormones and neurotransmitters and nonconscious thoughts dominating my reason. Nonaltruistic genes puppeteering me to who-knows-what ends. Or even some quantum-level—apparent—randomness playing with the firing and rewiring of my synapses. All of us, just actors in a script! The *script* of the Universe. Laws of gravity and such... I *want* to believe I have my own decisions to make but how can I know that for sure?...

Random = Deterministic? Noncompatible.

Yeah, but quantum is still mostly outside our understanding, you cannot really —

—What about Chaos Theory? I’ll show you!

Just take that fancy pistol and

START shooting at rand—

—Ain’t no one gonna shoot nonbody you sick—

—Just trying to push you into some action!

We’ve been sittin’ around here instead of—

—Exploring!

I refocus my eyes to erase the blur of the pavement when a vehicle comes running down the street. Its lights flood the surroundings way too brightly, but they shine a reflection in a certain spot on the other side of the street which sparks my curiosity. Hmmm. I cross-as-fast-as-I-can-checking-twice-both-ways before I do, I’m

* “Suspended Gardens” Corp offers “Parks and Recreation” services inside a monocity, a highly regulated service since “trees” as a whole have become a protected species. Thank you, Elsie! Nope!

noncomfortable around these nonsafe looking... like a silvery disc. I pick it up, curiosity maximum. A coin maybe? 'A M' is printed on one side. A mushroom imprint on the other side. 'A... Mushroom'?

'Atomic Mushroom'!

'Ante Mush'!

...Please never do that again.

It does not look like currency but at least now I have a randomizer. 'A M' I go forwards, 'shroomie' I go backwards. I throw it in the air with DMT style to savour the moment. I watch the coin fall back gracefully but halfway through I stop-motion! What the...?

It's definitely, two hundred percent —
—The coin falls in my hand and I slip it in my pocket without even checking the winner. Noncare, I'm running up to approach the girl I just noticed in the distance. Zoom-in, it sure looks like her. She's bewildered, like a deer caught in the lights. I wave to her in a friendly manner but my pacing may be a little too aggro. The tree beside her gets closer and closer. Her eyes grow bigger and bigger. She's sprinting too now but not towards me! Sshhhhe—

— 's going so fast —

—Run! Run? Non! Yes?

"LOOK! I just... *gasp* WANT to... *gasp* THANK Y—"

—yeah sure, Pinocchio *gasp* pants—

—I pass a corner right before she passes a corner up ahead, I'm just barely keeping on her trail. A few meters in, tunnels of high walls form between the residences. Crystal lights, white and blue, some red. Skies become wild with colour. Another left corner, I got you now—

—...

... Dead... ending.

Nonpossible! I gaze amazed at the doodled, high brick wall overshadowing me from a few meters in front. Walled, doodled fences left and right, way too high and too steep to be climbed. Suddenly, there's a tap on my shoulder. I get chills all over my body. I'm too startled to turn—

—overclocking—

— ... I slowly do a one-eighty to discover her big black head staring back at me, twenty-five centimeters away from my head and at an angle of twelve degrees lower than my eyes. Her oculi, two oval pits of darkness surrounded by pure light. Natural-looking eyes. No apparent cybers present anywhere on her body. She is probably purer than me... And she's waving at me. 'Hello', I guess?

"Hey!" I say in an accidental nerpy high-pitched noise, fud already a nongraceful ssss—

—snap out of it, Mush!

"You rescued... I mean you're part of the team that rescued Dude, right?"

She nods her head a 'yes', I guess.

"Why were you running away from me? Again?"

She averts my eyes. Then she shrugs, throwing her head to the side.

"Not sure what that means... Ah yes, I've heard that you do not want—" she squints a little, her sharp eyebrows closing in on each other "—...eh, that you do not speak, amirite?"

She shakes her head sideways, meaning 'no'? Is that 'no' for 'cannot', 'will not', or 'want not'?

"I wish I could speak sign lang, I never got to..." She points to herself with her left hand while shaking 'no' with her right hand. Well, that really limits the options.

PDA? Text-editing...

“Ah! Just a sec, I have an idea!” I clumsily fish out my P.D.A. from the bag, open up a txt then hand her the improv comm’ tool. Hopefully she at least knows how to read/write. Her eyes grow a little bigger and there’s a hint of a smile across her dark, red lips. She types away with casual speed.

[‘You have something of mine.’]

“Really? And what would that be?”

[‘...’]

[‘My lucky coin! I dropped it. I was retracing my steps when...’]

“...You saw me take the coin I presume. But how can I be sure it’s yours?” Half-a-smirk.

[‘...’]

[‘My name is Amanita M. Initials on the side.’]

“Hmmm, fair enough!” It’s a bargain for such info. She quickly pockets the treasure and gives me a reverend bow. I mirror the gesture, hoping it is the appropriate response. A greater hint of a smile widens on her face.

Hopefully not because I
made a donkey of myself.

[‘...Thx! It means alot to me.’]

“I’m sure it must be lucky for a—” nonlogical “—reason! And I was lucky to find you, although...” I do a faux-nonfaux pose of suspicion “...Although I do get the feeling that, up until now, **you** were the one doing the **finding**.” Her eyes get ten percent larger. “Amirite? At the Plaza statues?” Fifteen percent. “The food-market?” Twenty per— “And then you ‘accidentally’ drop your **lucky** coin right in front of Dude’s house, now that’s too big of a **coin**-cidence—”

—Ooof, that gave me coincer—

[‘—And you base that theory on a feeling and a ‘coincidence’?’]

[‘...’]

[‘...This town is not that big, you know. :)’]

“Well, maybe there’s more to it than I... But look, in any case I’m glad you did not run away too far this time. I did not get the chance to thank you for—” her color is turning red! “—uhm, your assistance.”

[‘... I was... embarrassed. Sorry! :(’] Yeah, who was not? She thinks a bit, looks closely at me then types again. [‘...Y0u seemed familiar. 1 thought I had seen you b3fore.’]

“It’s nonprobable we have ever met before. As you should already know, I am...” I turn around to show her my jack “... I mean, I was a Monocitizen.”

Mirroring my actions, she turns around to show me the Monojack at the root of her skull!

“Wow, you were a Mono too? I could’ve sworn you were native to these parts.”

[‘No, I escaped a year ago.’]

“Wow! Cool, how did you manage? Did they contact you and send a team in or what?”

[‘...’]

[‘I prefer not to talk about it really...’] She looks a bit worried and then types again.

[‘... ...’]

[‘Don’t take it personally, please! But it’s personal info...’]

“Fine, no problem, I understand. I did not introduce myself but I guess you already know my ‘real’ name. In public though you may address me as _____.”

[‘...’]

[‘Quite original :P’]

—Heey, what is she implyin—?

—Heh, yeah, I only had a second to think about it. I know, I'm a natural!" I do my faux-smug—
—Faux? That's basically your face all the—
—Sshhhhe laughs! What??? It's a bit silent but... I thought mutes could not laugh.

['Ok, Demstein! :)']

"Heh, yeah—" real original "—anyway, yours must be a codename in Latin or...?"

['It's real.']

"Really? You not worried about using your **real** name?" She shakes her head 'no'. "I see... I heard you are quite **ferocious!**" I do a 'cat attack' motion in the air. She smiles, no longer just a hint. A ferocious smile.

Serotonin-over—

"—I'll have to SEE it to BELIEVE it." I point my fingers from my eyes to hers and back.

['...'] ['Are you asking for a lesson in self-defense?']

"Woah now, first of all I am not implying any—" ['...'] "—thing and second of all, a gentlemale would never hit a—"

['—Chicken!']

Oh, you wanna play that game, eh?

"You're challenging my maleness here!" I say in a playful manner. "Ok, let's see what you've got." I grab her in a firm and yet gentle grip, assuming someone of her size would be easily subdued even by an extra nonfat male—

—boy—

—bloke like myself. I try to twist her hands in a lock but the next thing I know is that I am completely upside-down, face first on the pavement. Ouch! That's quite—

"—Ah... Fud, girl! How did I end up down here? You do not play around I must say..." I pick myself up, dusting my clothes of the grime and my ego off the embarrassment.

['...'] ['You needed a lesson in respekt!'] And she winks at me. I try to feel nonpleased with the whole situation but how can I be when she's so...?

"... Adorable. Lesson learnt! You are a formidable foe." Ama does a dismissive wave of her hand and then proceeds to type some more.

['You don't sound like the average, freshly-rescued Mono.']

"Heh, I guess not. I found Dude's way of speech particularly fascinating, even before all this, when I used to volunteer for... Heh, anyway, it grew on me is what I'm saying."

['You should come Saturday to the waters of Pepe in Easttown. Maybe you'll want to get baptized.']

"Baptized? Saturday? I non understand..."

['It's a ritual. It symbolizes the anointing of Pepe and the washing of our sins. And for some, it represents washing away the old dirt of Mono...']

"I'm not particularly religious mys—"

—non at ALL you mean—

"—elf but... I am curious about this 'Pepe' fellow. I may come to see what this 'ritual' is all about."

Big grin on her face, like that of a child opening presents on the eve of P.S.*

['...']

['You'll like it. And people around here will like you more if you do it. Pepe was the founder of the original N.A.P. creed, you know?']

"For real? I thought that was something the Resistance came up with."

* "Presents Season". Or "Christmas" in nonlegal Mono terms.

[‘...’] [‘You’ll find that most of us are followers of KEK. But Pepe lived in a time long before the Resistance even existed as an idea. Way, way before.’]

“How long ago is that?”

[‘...’] [‘Nobody knows exactly. But He is way older than the Event. Probably by hundreds of years.’]

“Then he is no longer among us. If he ever was at all. I mean a frogman, really?”

[‘... It’s symbolic, you goofball! :) Nobody knows how he looked.’]

“Heh, ok I get it.” Not really. How do you know he was a real person then? “Do you know what the original creed said?”

[‘... It was something along the lines of “Do to others as you would have them do to you”.’]

“Pretty logical but what if someone’s a masochist?”

She looks straight at me as if she’s scanning deep into my brain using my eyes as nonsecure ports. Nongraceful moment for me, again. Suddenly she nonengages eye contact, nongracefulness on her part too. I try to break the i—

“—So... uhm, besides spying on me... did you have any other plans for tonight?”

[‘...’] [‘I was on my way to some friends who need feeding :>’]

“Okay, well I do not want to keep them starving. If you have to—”

—I almost drop the PDA to the ground after she throws it back at me. Final words: [‘See ya!’] I was hoping she would not be so eager to flee but she just *poof*-ed out of the picture, gone with the wind. Maybe she does not like me that mu—

—Sshhhh! Ama cutes—

—Sshhhhe totally kicked our asses, chum—

—Sshhhh, that will be our little sec—

—Sshhhh! Adrenaline 6—

—Not this shhh—

—Again? Fu—

—Sshhhh—

—.....

...Is this love? That I’m feeling? That I’ve been searching for? It’s not the love I feel for Father. Not the love for Eka and not the love for Dude. It’s non—

—non—

—non—

—Non... It’s con... fusing... I feel a vertigo. A whirlpool of vision. Static noise instead of visuals. My head spins, I grab the wall with my palm—

—Nonstabil—

[—Systems checkup... All is well!]

I guess Alf’s software skills cannot make up for the missing hardware in my head. I slowly lower myself down the wall, back against the concrete and I black out... The blackout steadies out. I non know what the fud I was experiencing but I felt... nonlinked to my body, my brain or my ‘self’. The image finally clears up. Sound returns, I did not even notice it was gone. Colours return, both on the H.U.D. and in real life. H.U.D. off. I want a bit of clarity for a while. Little by little I stand back up. Maybe that hit on the pavement nonstabilized something or maybe...

Alie—

—You'll never cut that out, will ya? Fine, whatever, noncare. Noncare about the... about the choices either. It seems that no matter what I choose, I will still get myself into trouble sooner or later.

Yep! Might as well just accept the bees—

—Taming...

I want to go the same way Ama went. But I must resist. There's no hope of even a zero point zero-zero-zero-zero-zero-zero—

—1%—

—chance of bumping into her again anyway. So, I decide to go in the opposite direction. The streets are a maze in which I could easily become astray. A web of roads between the buildings leads to quite a challenging navigation. I feel a bit noneasy passing by the seldom humans. Free citizens of a free... domain. I try to adjust my ears like *radio* antennas and listen to any interesting leads. A... shuttle in the distance? A huge hovership whispers a magnetic hum as it passes over my head. It's not that close but not far from the ground either. I almost felt the magnet-pads raising my skin's follicles. Destination: Resistance Fortress it seems. Maybe the Resistance is not as nonprepared as I thought... But I non have to join them if I non want to. I could live the rest of my life in this place and never see the day of light again...

... The 'light of day' you me—

—Yeah, I'm no longer strapped in chains. I'm like 'Alice in Wanderhood'. I could do almost anything, probably. Just grab a synthar and sing and play on the streets without having to 'own' a license. I bet non would mind it much. People might even throw some coin my way if I practice long enough! Heh...

Play splonky, I say! Turn it into a comedy routine! Heh...

All we need is a synt—

“—Hey mistah! Ye got some change to spare?” I look around but see non. Wait a minute... Blind spot in my eye. Small kid. Nonclean looking. A big red cap covers his head. “Watcha say mistah?”

“Uhm... sorry, I non have any—”

“Nine? Is that silvers or 'Dee' 'Kay'?”

“No, I said... 'D.K.', what is that?”

“Darkoin! Most popular currency in and out of the Net!” He jumps around like the jolliest leprechaun.

“Heh, never heard of it. Ever heard of Monocoin?”

“Pffft, that's pretty much useless 'round here.”

“Oh... really?”

“Yah, really!” he picks his nose “I gots like a trillion of those. Me and the boys use 'em to play Poke'er. That way, you see, NO one gets mad if they lose!”

“A trillion you say...?” Yeah, sure “But where's the fun in that?”

“The fun? Everyone learns a bit more about the game this way. Ye see—” he puts his hands behind his back, gently bobbing on the soles of his feet “—we kinda SUCK at it. We ain't even sure we're playing it by the book!”

“What do you play, 'Hol'em'? 'Oh-haha'?”

“There's MORE than one Poke'er?”

“There's like seventy variations at the present mo—”

“—SEVENTY??? Freaking KEK!”

“There's even tournaments like H.O.S.É, which combine dif—”

“—Wait chum, that’s waaay over my head.” Maybe Dude was not joking when he said ‘chum’ means something else. He just did not specify where...

“Sure... anyway, what are you doing alone on the streets at this hour?”

“Well, ye know mista’... Bizness and such.”

“Business you say? Are you selling something?”

“Nah, I collect donations for the orphanage where I’m at. And I get a little cut for myself... unofficially.”

“That sounds like embezzlement to me.” I put on my faux-judging face.

“Imberzel-what? I just take a few pennies off the top, see? I just skim a bit and voilà! Everyone’s a winner! Hihhi...”

“Embezzlement is when you take even a few pennies off the top of some money you have been entrusted with! It’s nonlegal.” And I’m sure that applies to the N.A.P. as it does to Monolaw.

“Come on mistah, it’s my only income! And the headmistress told me in secret once that it’s okay if I take a little. ‘Ya knows, for your effort on the streets and such’. It’s my ‘chewbook’.”

“What does ‘chewbook’ mean?”

“Eehh... ye know, like tipping or something.”

“Got it. Ok, I see your point. What’s your name?”

“Ye gonna donate for that info?”

“Ah, nonfortunately I’m short on cred at the moment, I just arrived in...”

“It’s okay mistah! My friends call me ‘Eòn’. Good noight!” He departs without asking back for my name.

“Good... uhm, see ya.” Weird... accents.

I go down my way, following the road in a left-right-left zig-zag whenever I reach an intersection. I find more children playing in what appears to be a large parking lot. As in my dream, there are no safenets attached to them. They kick a stitched ball around, not minding the parked vehicles. At some point they hit one of the vehicles and it starts to flash its lights and ring some weird, alarming tones. Behind the parking-lot, up on the balcony of a four-story building, an odd and old looking figure pops in existence and proceeds to bark some nonsense to the kids. Nonsense to me at least. The kids laugh and scatter. Heh, some things never change... Actually, Mono auto-pods would just laugh and air-spray the ball back to the children. And there’s no elders to reprimand them, they’re all nicely packed back at the elderp—”

“— ‘ey, yo!”

“Who, me?” I point at myself. The dark-colored kid in front of me smiles, showcasing all of his glowing-white teeth.

“Yah, you mon! Wan’ play ball on ma’ team?”

“Heh...” I look around. Non is taller than a meter.

“No, surr! Please play on my team!” a light-colored kid, surrounded by others of light-color, jumps around excitedly.

“Well, I have to—”

“—Nah, meester, ma’ team—”

“—Noooo—” Kids start roughing each other up—

—please let me kick these
splonks into space—

—Barring! Re-evaluating... Stonks!

“Kids, kids! Wait! Sshhhhhh!” They quiet down immediately. Scared or confused, not so sure. “Ok, here’s the deal. Whichever team...” I point around randomly; no markings or uniforms are visible to identify the

teams "...pays the most can hire me for fifteen minutes. That way both teams get the chance to hire me before the game ends. That is, if you think I play well..." Heh heh, bait and —

—hoo—!

—Capitalizing...

I'm not a fan of 'the sports' by a long shot. I mean of those sports still popular in fleshspace anyway. And it's not because of the physicality of it, not the main reason anyway. It's because of all that pride, prejudice and rivalry the fans of team 'Zed', 'Y' or 'Ex' will display when they encounter each other. Nondeserved, nonlogical primal drive to assume that all that work and sweat a team goes through is your own just because you decided to cheer for them. 'Who's your team?' is the question that always got me noncalm.

'We won this' and 'We nonwon that'. Yeah, they always talk as if they're actually part of the team!

I know not all of them are like that but... The kids start to vociferate, advise, insult, nonagree, check pockets, some light hitting, apelike behaviour. They finally reach a verdict.

"Ok mon, you're on!" They start the bid. Dark kid bids the most at eight coins or 'quarters' they call them. Does not sound like much but whatever, easy money. I pocket the metal and follow the kids to a well-equipped side-park courtyard with hoop-ball rings, foot-ball nets and tennis-ball markings, forming a beautiful three-in-one combo. Why were they not using this one up till now? ... I finally get the teams. It's darks versus lights but not in any markings or colours on their body. It's the actual color of the skin that separates each team. Weird, I mean quite efficient but I've never seen such a thing in... Not that you could make much difference between colors back in... Anyway, they quickly explain the rules to me, not much different from hoop-ball but they call it 'basket' ball. Of course, I have a high bio-advantage over these kids in any game we would play. Let's be real, I both outsmart and outstrength —

—woooa, check out the moves on that light one—

—dark one jumps like he's got cyberlegs—

—Sshhhh! Refocusing...

I gather myself and reevaluate my underestimation of these chumskies. I do a couple of my old tricks, non of them seem popular around here. I score again and again. Normally, I would feel sorry for the splonkies getting owned. But they are actually forcing me to sweat for my reward. They —

"—Time's up!" Girl referee announces the end of round one. Huge swing for the darks, of course. I congratulate everyone but notice that some different coins or... tokens start to exchange hands. Different, colourful... these nerpballs are quite the gamblers! Second round of bidding, chums seem tense on both sides. Light kid starts the bid at zero-point-zero-one Darkoin. Dark kid does not seem delighted. He nonwillingly participates in raising the stakes. Zero-point-zero-two, zero-point-zero-four, zero-eight, sixteen! Zero-point-thirty-two Darkoins is the final bid. Still, no idea. Might be the same as before, Hades if I know... I fear asking. Light kid bids the highest. They ask me for a datastick but I have non so I transfer it through my PDA-link. Time to do the opposite dance. But the climate has changed amongst the players. Feet are more firmly placed; eyes are more aware. I think they're ready to release the tiger inside! Maybe that DK is serious biz. Swoosh! Whoop! Bam! No quarter given. The chums are out for blood. I nonbelieve it matters what I do anymore. My only role was to catalyze them into action. I have NEVER seen kids so fierce. I am both amused, amazed and embarrassed by my own nonaptitude to act. Proud almost —

"—Match over!" Referee announces the end of the game. Chorus of "Awwww, maaan!" echoes out. It's a tie! Nonbelievable. Maybe I should've been more active after all —

“—Thanks for nothin’, you old fosille!” The leader of the lights departs in a very nonjoyous manner. I can almost hear trombone and nonhappy piano noises playing with each of his steps. I feel nongood for the nonrich kid, he probably invested a bit of coin...

“Hey, kid! Wait!” I stumble like a dodo but reposition myself in a friendly, half-like reverence. The pouty splonker watches me, waiting. I say “Look, I’m sorry, I was stunned by how you suddenly burst into high ENERGY levels. It was as if you changed batteries or something. Nice!” I wave a silly ‘thumbs up’ in the air. Kid seems just a teensy weensy amused. “I think I owe you another game, what do you think?”

“Hmmm...” the kid eyes his surroundings with menace “Maybe... I need you for a different job, see...?”

“A different job? Ok, you have my attention...”

“See, we got this old brainfart that’s been steppin’ on our noives, see? So ya see, we wanna like... make somethin’ of his disappear, easy job.” He leans in while scratching the back of his head and his hat slips forward, hiding his eyes. “All we want is a mirror.”

“A mirror?”

“See, side-mirror of his car. He prob’ don’ even need it, he so old he don’ drive no mo’!” He sniggers and his friends soon follow like ducklings.

“You want me to commit a nonlegal act? Are you outlaws?”

“Noooo, noo, sssssh! Ehhh, you a **copper**?”

“No worry kids, I **ain’t** a snitch.” I survey them all slowly with a serious, judging look on my face. “But neither shall I aid you in this nonlawful quest. Not my style. And I advise you to revise your plan. Would it be fair if—” I point to one of the kids holding the ball “—the old man put a blade in that ball of yours because you scratched his vehicle with it?”

“Pffft, **ca’tso**! Ya don’ no’ ‘im, mistah! He’s a wacko!” The leader appears nonphased, but the body lang of the other kids tells me they no longer agree with him. The boy holding the ball hides it behind his back.

“If he’s a ‘wacko’ then he probably needs medical help, not vandalism. Ok, I have to go but maybe I’ll see you at another game?”

“See, see! Chow’o, mistah!” And he waves at me. Guess that word means ‘goodbye’. This place has got as many new words as it has accents. Intruding...

I take a look at the newly acquired quarters. Most of them are stamped with the ‘Ohm’ symbol, but there are different symbols and letters stamped on a few of the others, each valued at one-tenth of... something, I have no idea what exactly. That’s definitely not a quarter fraction, why do they call them that...?

... I gather my wits and travel past the yard, my path coinciding with that of some of the kids leaving the place. Some of them seem to wait for a cab, probably. I notice a map in the spot where they are loitering. A map of the whole network of streets and ‘hoods. A digital display offers quite a few info-tips, info-directions and infomercials in equal dosage. I pick the way towards the communal dwelling. I want to see how someone with no money—

—almost no money—

—can survive in this place. The road is laid out mostly in a straight line. A bus arrives. I guess this is a bus station. But you have to pay for transport apparently, I’m not gonna pay for public trans—

—Public? It’s privately owned this one—

—I mean I would get that for free in the Mono—

—Stop! NonMono! Freeing...

Heh... true freedom is not free, I guess. And you pay one way or the other anyway, even in Mono. So, nothing is free in this world. I follow the road doing a kind of dance in a sprint. A macabre display of defiance of any would-be authorities. But alas! No drones, no guards to stop me, no synthdogs to avoid, no worries to be had.

I smile and cry a bit at the beauty of the musical notes that spring in my mind. I'm free?... Actually... I nonbelieve it... But I want to believe... I... need to believe!

Must believe! Affirming...

I never felt so light, so... full of possibilities. As small as the opportunities are... getting paid to play with children, by the children themselves! Priceless... Teaching them economics. Actually, no! They were teaching ME how it works around here... heh... I pass a couple of blocks; I must have reached the middle side of the town. When I finally arrive at the Communal Quarters, I am greeted by variously-sized barracks that sprout at uneven distances. Most of them are separated by patches of veggies, non of them are separated by any fences or glasshouses. Just another one of them plasma lights shining on them... Maybe THAT's how they... But... A notice welcomes me at the 'entrance' followed by a touch-display for checking-in. Smokers or nonsmokers? Gender separated or non? What? They cannot possibly have ten thousand —

—Biogendering!

Yeah, that makes sense. I evaluate my options: seven places available. I choose a spot in the corner. Building on the left, room six. 'Any guns or weapons must be left in the keypad locker.' I type in a new code: Five-four-three-two-one-heh... As I step inside, I find the door nonlocked. Inside, I find a couple of other inhabitants getting ready to sleep, maybe. Two of them are playing cards, quietly. Next to them, a nonfat male, a fat nonmale and an average kid whisper to each other. She looks at me and seems to be amused. Is there something on my face or what...? I scan the surrounding area and quickly find my place in the corner. A large window shines light all over my bed. Moon light you would think if you did not know what's outside. Near my bed there's a console labeled 'PUB IC PC' in faded letters. Someone must've scratched the 'L' —

—Hahahahah, good one.

I am intrigued but I must mind my manners first.

"Cool—I mean, good evening!" I screwed up this one too. A bunch of scattered 'heys' and 'hellos' come in response. My attention gets switched to the console again. A 'PC'. Does that stand for 'Public Computer'? Then why put 'Public' in front of it? If it stands for 'Personal Computer' then how can it be 'Public'? It's either personal or public, it cannot be... "Is this free to use?" I ask pointing to the console.

"Knock yerself out." answers one of the cyber-clad fellows playing cards.

"Nice..." I slide the tips of my fingers over its primitive screen and worn datajack entry. No model I recognize, of course. But it's beautiful! Sharp and curvy edges and a nice, smooth —! ... I cannot wait a second more. First, I do an offline check to familiarize myself with the architecture, the environment. Not much different from what I'm used to but there's no restrictions... Well, the netlink does have some restricted ports but non that seem important. I am free to modify, adapt and overcome protocols at will. I do a double check for any security holes. Everything looks already optimized. I dive in the Net —...—A darker Net. Much, much optimized code. I see it so clearly. It's like CLASSICAL classical music, the really good stuff! Syntax dancing above my head. Violent ICE springs left and right, not minding the main user. Marvelous, I feel like a...! I calm myself. Music fades as I navigate freely in the ether of the Net. There are no highways here, only infinite flying pathways. But this is no game, it is core operation. But is there any Mono access? I take a peek in the manuals but find nothing. I do some searches using Noodle^d, 'the most popular search engine on the Darknet'. Hmm... there are some paid services but none are direct. Most of them are jobs on the ground. Really nonsafe jobs... Why would I want to access Mono anyway? I could use some money though, let's see... The DBBS seems to be the most popular place for freelancers and 'runners' it says here, not sure what that is. I link-up and it launches me in front of a big, imposing cube with millions of lights flashing on all of its sides. The bulletin board hosts jobs for all categories, both inside and outside of its facets. I browse a few but get nonexcited so I do a search by keywords.

‘Coding’, ‘modding’, ‘hacking’, ‘netbuild’, ‘netsecurity’, ‘pop-adverts’.

Pop-up straight in my piehole [‘Would you like to create an account?’] For verification purposes, this is required. Fine! I check on Agreements, Privacy, Nondisclosure Agreements, yes, Bio-I.D., yes, yes. Profile tag-line ‘I play sincere but hardball.’ Avatar? Whatever. Search jobs already!

[‘By profile? Choices, personalization—’] Fine, fine! Just give me the jobs already—

[‘—Search results complete: Over 9,000,000 jobs found. Access restricted to 10,492 jobs due to missing Resistance clearance, Ass’assin’s Guilds restriction, Kraut Alliance nonagreement, White Panthers Gang non-agreement, Dark Panthers Gang non-agreement, Gangrel Gang—’] Yeah, fine! I scroll through the remaining jobs in the order of biddings. Lots of code building jobs, both grafix and systems architecture. Some hack jobs but they require on-site access, basically grunt work. Some of them require infiltrating Monocities?! ... I put my last bid on a couple of remote hack jobs. Nothing fancy, obscure sites. Nonsecure public Netwebs. Meh, I’d be doing them a service actually. Get your sh—

—it’s kinda nonmoral, admit it—

—self-check... ethics-check... Checking...

Eh... I guess I’ll leave those as a ‘last resort’ plan. Minutes later and already they’re biting my bait. Art-site. Nothing fancy. I dive deep in some net building. Well, I say nonfancy, they are kinda avant-garde. Code weaved between pieces of neo-ancient art. Green Netcode ensnaring the surrealist statues like serpentine cords and vines. Bots envisioned as ancient Hellenistic statues. Beautiful... The art of code. But it’s mostly their work though. I’m just a tool. I just mend code and craft helix like a ribosome would do with the proteins of art. The building blocks of Netlife! Beautiful...

A couple of hours later and it’s done. I could’ve done it way sooner, but I... could not help myself. I had to gaze just a bit more at the piece. I kept postponing the clicking of the ‘Submit’ button. Kept thinking ‘It’s not perfect enough, just a bit more retouching...’ But non... there can never be perfection, just simple awe in the face of pure creation. It’s... precious...

Submitting...

I submit. Affirmation comes almost immediately. No, it says ‘confirmation’.

Updating...

[‘Kudos, nice job dude! This feels like a steal (on our part) but enjoy your coins!’]

Dude?

Steal?

Searching...

[‘dude (dōōd, dyōōd) = *Slang* man, fellow’]

[‘steal (stēl) = to take property of another without permission; *Slang* a bargain’]

Heh... 41.99DK. Let’s see of what ‘steal’ are they talking about.

[‘Current time [4:19:59] 1.00DK = 50.12g silver / 1.01g gold / 1064g copper / ...’]

But what does it all mean? Monocoin is down at the bottom. 1DK equals... how many zeroes...?

60,000,000,000,000,066—

—what in the name of Comp—?

—WE’RE RICH!!

People around here must really nonlike Monos. I probably do not need anymore. Still, it’s so satisfying! No boss to push me around. Well, at least I choose my ‘part-time’ boss. No pesky colleagues. I... eh... I float above the DBBS, outside in the darkness of its Netspace. Priority A.I.s busily buzz on the skyline, information free on

all levels and yet so tidy... The stratosphere is swarming with them! I grab one of the A.I.s and ride it like a wild dragon, its route nondisturbed by my intrusion. He's going for a... what if...

Yeah! YEAH! DO IT F—

—Dem?? Analyzing...

... I jump off at the last second. The port seemed nonsecure, but you never know with these darksters. D-net space is quite vast and it's calling for exploration. Public, private, NFC, nonFC... Members-only most of them. Most of the Netbuilds are built down the digilines of the Darkscape. Some of them have fantasy-based re-enactments of... old societies, they look medieval. Some are doing a sci-fi show. 'Attack of the Space Balls' looks like... maybe?

'Start Warrior One'? Analyzing...

Vast expanses of digital terrain, marvelously textured, surrealist, too realist, nonrealist, idealist. I speed up ahead on the digiline and find myself in a different Nethood, more business oriented. Vast showcases of software, hardware, chromes, bones, trombones, por—

—now that's more like—!

—taphones (easy, DIY install kit), gramophones, skinbound paper tomes, they mean animal skin, right??!?!—

—of course, chumski—

—d3cks, p0rtables, deskt0ps, c0ns0l3s, mobile, st4t1c, nontraceable, single use, ten-a-pack—

["—for the paranoid folk out there! You're our favorites!"] Hahahah, thanks but I... I start placing orders that fill up my cart fast but... where to deliver them? I check my location. Restricted, of course! Well... I continue browsing the v-stands. Most are generic, but one in particular catches my eye: 'Yamahack Industriz'.

["We gonna hack you to perfection!"] Guys are either eating splonk—

—or they really put their money in their—

—retrofits, upgrade bits, jacks, johns—

—maybe upgrade your jack off
and install that fuddin' AA—

—Fine! Let's see... They have quite the network. By geoloc I find three stores near me. One specializes in outware—

—decks, consoles, storage—

—One specializes in rigging, bot maintenance—

—non bots owning—

—except you—

—Sshhhh and... heheh... Last one is called a certified 'chopshop', thirty years of experience ripper-doc—

["—No, really!!! Here's my block-rec'!"] Okay, chum! I believe you! Geesh... I check their prices... Oh my! Well, their gear does seem to have high standards in security, no holes I can see at first glance... Well, the Netsite has some... But still, two fifty ninety-nine point ninety-nine for a stereo/AA combo? I need some better jobs! I switch tabs, it's so easy to do in D-space. Two more jobs landed but... they're both...

Tap on shoulder—

—A.R. transparency 60%—

"— Hey, pal! You've been all night on that thing. Think you could let others...? Well..." Intense music beats in my ears and the time in the corner reads [5:54] AM... Beautifully juxtaposed on an ancient clock on the wall. My, how time flies when you're having...

"Ah sorry, uhm... pal! I'll be off in just a sec—..." —d/l.loc/>11p.js_inj— "...—Done!"

I let 'pal' here take his place in partaking the euphoric experience of the Darknet. "Thanks, man!" He plugs right in, minding his business immediately. And I'm off to Yama since the blinking light in my corner tells me the 'job' was successful before I even got to jack out... heh... That was a nice —

—Moralizing...

... We got enough koinage to get that jack-upgrade now so sshhhh. I lay out the coordinates and waypoints are set easily all the way up to the Yama store. Ripping station, whatever. It's quite close, I find it just a few blocks east of the Commons. Ah... sshhhh! I forgot the pis —

—fud well let's go back and get it —

—Look, ninety-eight point whatever we'll be fine. It's like tossing a coin with a hundred faces and —

—Ooooh, you're no fun anymore...

Deal with it. Yama rises suddenly and proudly in the middle of the street. A half-guitar, half-feemale neon logo burns high in the sky. These guys are seriously wacko' up in the head. I enter the visiting/reception room in front. Loud hard synths mixed with heavy electro-guitar distorts *strike* my ears. Sounds of equal march steps, warlike mentality. Defiant. Noncompromising. The *strife* of a people long suppressed. Longtime hunted, long time resisting! Quality I see in raw quantity. In gears, upgrades, installs, short, straight to the point, no waste of your time. The glass-cases on the walls gleam of beautiful chrome-parts —

—yeah, about that AA —

"—Hello, cutie! How can I help you?" A very, very revealing assistant spawns in front of me.

"Hello uhm... miss —"

—Universe, ooooh yea —

"—I'm here for an... upgrade maybe?"

The guards are watching

'Every breath we take —'

'—every move we make —'

—Smile! Fakin —

"—You have an appointment, sweetie?"

"No... I'm —"

—Keen! Command —

—Sshhhh! Only Her —

"—Ok, take a seat and fill out these forms please!"

"Okay, thank you!"

I take one of the few seats available but not before I grab a point-pen with my gloved hand. Name, age, does not matter because I'm going to very carefully —... —and it appears we already had an account. We just need to remove 'Allergies', 'Previous surgeries' non except Mono-jack and eyeware, of course. Gene conditions? What does 'condition' mean...? Non —

—Pop-up ['Would you like to participate in a REALLY COOL clinical trial? Lots of DK in the pool!'] Thanks, but nonthanks. I hand back the digipad and await my turn on the deco-seat. The blue neons of the legs and back of the seat turn off in a cute, automatic manner when I sit down. But why have lights in the first pl —?

—Auto-cute! Nullifying...

Watching the security guards watch me back gives me a noncomfortable feeling. I nonbelieve they suspect a thing but still —

—you starting to have nonbelief
in your skillz, Hackerboy?

You can never be too sure... All that whispering in their headpieces does give me the spooks. Still...

“A mister... Don Monty?”

Heh... “Yeah, here!” I rise automatically like a reflex re—

—er—

—action and move towards the different foxy assist—

—libi-destab—

—The guards seem to have gone alert! But it’s... more whispering. They’re back to idle. I try to keep calm and follow the assistant. I try to keep a comfortable distance between us and it’s—

—because I wanna check out that—

—NOT because of that. She brings me down a hall to a highly secured room with hard-bolted, steel doors at the entrance. Inside it’s like a cyber-laboratory! Top-to-bottom, left-to-right, stacked to the brim are cabinets, bot-arms with all kinds of claw fittings, chem-benches, chem-storages, chem-trails on the plates and two state-of-the-art med-beds. Between them proudly stands what appears to be a ripper-doc. Left eye: cyber-red. Right eye: bio-blue. A tiny, translucent AR display lays squarely over the blue eye. His head is shaved on both sides and sports a slick looking ponytail tied on the middle of his scalp, like a serpentine mohawk. It slithers down on his left shoulder with coolness. Green, black and blue stripes of hypnotizing shapes are painted all the way to the tip of the tail. He smiles, a bit sinister-looking with his e-cigar stamped to the side of his mouth.

“Welcome. Pliz’, have a zeat.” He points nonchalantly to one of the beds. His white, glossy coat glitters in the sterile lights. It covers him from top to bottom, like some kind of holy garment. I eagerly lay down on the bed on the left. The padding is soft and it feels like a cloud. I notice the doc’s nametag: ‘Ser Am, Brofist the 10th’. Woaah there, sounds like ‘royalty’ to me.

“Now, mizter...” He checks a basic looking digipad “...Monty, I believe we’ve met before, yez?”

He hands me the digipad with all my files showing up on it, why would he— “Heh, yes, yes! I’ve had a couple, of course... But I’m nongood with faces, you see I’m an Ex-Mono—”

“—Sssure, mizter Don! No probl’m, now what iz the zervice you require?”

“Well, I... First off, I was thinking—”

“—Maintenance, retroffiting, new installz? Dizmemberment?” I look very puzzled at him. “Oh, we do get a few of thozе, forgi’ me for inzinuating az zuch. It becomez way too cazual, heheheeee*choke* —” he chokes on a mouthful of smoke and sends some of it pulverized all over the room with a sweet apple aroma. What kind of doctors would...? There’s no way this is a real... He gives me a chill to the bone. I’m not too sure what’s he on about but the whole thing makes me think we might be screwed—

—Sshhhh! They don’ sus’ any—

“—I was thinking of a check-up first—”

“—Of courze! We do a check-up before AND after any of theze operationz, sssurr!” He raises a bushy eyebrow “What kind of joint you thin’ we runnin’ here, eh? It’d be bad practiz’ otherwize, wouldn’ it, eh?”

“Yes, yes... of course!” He scrutinizes me closely, his eye fixed on my breathing and mine on his. “I would like a retrofit please; I had my eyes on a—”

“—Double pluz cool! Now, relax! I’m gonna take sssom’a of your ztatz and —” He lays me down on the table and a stab—

—ilyzin’—

“—Zay ‘Aaaah!’”

“AaaaaaAAAAAAAAAARGHH—” that shud stings like shhh—

“—u’ll be fine, now zign here on the pad that you agree for blood sssampling—”

“—Aagh haah—”

...

Seconds seem to pass like hours while the doc prods at me with all kinds of sensors and probes. The bishop of nonpleasure finally settles down and retreats to do some sanitization while shouting "Ssso whadidya have in mind?"

"I had my scopes on that stereo-plus-A.A. combo jack-pack, the economy one, I've forgotten the name—"

"—Ah, but wouldn't you be interezted in a top-of-the-classsss 'Trinity Five' trijack-pluz-comlink-pluz-wi—"

"—Non, that's a bit above my—"

"—You sssure? There's alzo the 'Quintjack' extraordinaire, top-of-the-cake, crem-deuh-lah-crem, only four thousand-two—"

"—I am very sure. I would just like the one—"

"—You don't know what you're missssin'..." Oh, yes, I do... Ser takes out a huge puff of smoke, which fill his lungs like zeppelins in his chest. He blows with a sigh and says "All right sssurr, az you wish. At thiz price, the 'Nealz Tephen' ztereo jack-pack iz kind of a sssteal, actually." If only you knew in what way, heh...

"Heheheh, ok, if you say so." Ser Am approaches me for the final test of my hackjob. Payment. The blinking light of the digipad drives me nonsane thinking that the bloke I cracked might have a nonactive wall —

"—Will that be cash, credztick, credloan, netwire? Or d-link?"

"What is 'cash'?"

"Oh, I thought that... that you are... eh... heh... Well, you muzt certainly be new around thiz' parts. Yez sssurr, there's plenty o' forms of moneyz circulating the underworld. 'Cash' iz the phyzical part of it and DK alzo haz a form of 'cash'."

"Fascinating! Thank you for that bit of info."

"I am here to ssserve."

I jack in the digipad and send a netwire. The cryptonet synchronizes in a couple of seconds and... it's... ['Payment accepted; two confirmations needed...']

"Done, perfect!" He takes the pad and lays it down, nonminding the status of the other two confirmations. Wheeew, everything went smooth. "Now if you wouldn't mind, please lay face-down on your belly and..."

... Everything fades to black as the anesthetic kicks in. I sluggishly wake up to find a nonpatient doc eagerly puffing away on his cigar. "How are ya feelin', sssurr?"

"I'm quite... dizzy still, but..." I carefully step off the med-bed and try to grab my bag with both hands. Ser extends a right gloved hand and says "Pleazure doin' biz' with you, sssurr!"

I grab his hand with my gloved hand and shake a bit "Likewise, uhm... Ser!" He seems nonamused. I leave the premises in a bit of a sus' hurry but he probably has more patients waiting anyway so... I'm all alone in the corridor. Now, when we got here, we came from the left, right?

No, it was right, then left, then str—
—end of the hall, yes. I navigate carefully around the equipment laying around from spot to spot on the sides of the hall. A nonhealthy bloke is sitting on a bench. He spits something black in a bucket, splonk me that's —

"—Oh, dear hubbie! Please nurse we need to get my man a doc—!"

—I hurry up down the corridor, noncalm that the lady might have mistaken me for a medical assistant. One more corner and I end up in the reception. I look for the Net lab where I can do a check-up of my systems but I see no obvious checkmarks of the likes the doc described. Weird... non that it matters, I trust Ser Brofist there did a good deed. HUD on. [Systems check... New installs... Stereo active... {A.A. active}] Is good enough of a check for me. A scream of pain fills the room and the doors of the ER side entrance clack as they get pushed to let a guy on a stretcher be brought in. His cybers look shredded. I nonwant to imagine... I make my exit, nonminding any ads or people, I just need to get out of here before —

“—Surr?” A big, dark-colored brute gets in front of me with an open palm that signals to me that I should make a stop for my own sake.

“Uhm... yes?” I swallow but try to mask my gesture as a reflex.

He points to the reception area and says “You have to do the check-out first.”

“Ah, yes! Sorry, I’ll do that **right** away!” I rotate one hundred and ninety degrees on a single foot and reach the reception with my pants mildly splonked. Thankfully it’s just routine and I’m out of there in a jiff and into the wide and wonderfully damp streets of freedom outside. Although I am quite proud of my work right here, this... masterpiece of mine, I get a bit of a nonhappy feeling for the bloke I just stealed from... But I drive the feeling back immediately. I swear it’s the last one, from now on we go clean, boys! Yeah—

—, sure! Heh...

Calculating...

... I walk for a while and fall deep in some thoughts I have not taken into calculation before... to ‘steal’. Sure, but what am I stealing? Some bits of info on the Net? Yeah well, it’s ‘stealing’ I guess, but it’s not like I took something physical.

What about the effort? The bloke’s sweat for that koin, that’s real—

—Life is full of lessons like that. He or she or whatever will learn something. Keep your security tight—

—Security of the site you mean?

What did the poor splonker do to deserve that?

It’s the Netbuilders who’ve failed—

—You’re the one to talk about morality when you get all those nonhealthy ideas to—

—Hey, I always say ‘What if?’ beforehand!

You always say ‘If what?!’ afterwards.

Who’s the bully—?

—Sshhhh! We—

—We?! Not We! Me!

Here comes Egoman to the surface again—

—Sshhhh! WE—

—ME! ME! ME! M—

—.....

I have no idea what happened. I must have blacked out. I am at a music show it seems. How did I get here? I am back in the Pepe Plaza we came through today... I mean yesterday... I must have wandered around mindlessly and ended up back here. [8:00] AM it says. The plaza is almost completely nonrecognizable. It’s filled with a sea of people and the sound of heavy rock or metal is strumming in the musty air around me. A music show at this hour of the morning? I guess the day/night cycle does not apply here much. The stage is wonderfully built around the Pepe statue. It’s built at a lower height than what I am used to. The top of the stage says ‘Tool’ but the ‘T’ is drawn like that cross with the longer foot that I saw at the S.M.A.S.H. tents. The band members are wearing all sorts of different thematic attires. The lead electro-guitarist is wearing a wolf-head cowl and the wolf’s pelt as a cape. The rhythm syntharist is a top-to-bottom, gender-neutral, latex-strap-suit-bells-and-lights-and-whistles-attached gizmo that’s mimicking an android of sorts. The drummer wears a horned helmet, long beard and moustache, orange, padded-leather armor vest, short-pants and nothing else at all. His drumsticks are in the shape of an axe and a battle hammer. The electro-bassist looks like a devil, all

red with black strips drawn down his tail. Then BOOM! Smoke blows over the drummer. Out jumps an energetic and relatively nonfat male. His tribal looking headdress is radiating with long feathers of large birds, all the way down to his legs. He looks like a peacock! Sort of... No shirt, just some furry pants adorned with talismans and pouches of suspicious origins. He grabs the mic, vocalizing some nonsense beat after beat. Then the fast bitrate of the beats gets faster. A display lights up under the band's name that reads 'Kingdom of KEK'. The floodlights start synching with the synth-rhythms and I think the band is ready to play hard. The lyrics come out firm, interlinked yet distinct. Fast but comprehensible. Short, progressive measures. I drift in the music, trying to understand the words...

“...We can break out of this matrix
With all of its fancy graphix—
—By combining techno-logix
And smiling at the traffix.

In the style of the Mountain, Wisdom long-forgotten
Where the grass was born, our minds completely torn
When Pepe was reborn, His chest struck by a thorn
The Comedy return, forever its own form.

*Line-by-line! Line-by-line!
Line-by-line! Line-by-line—*

—Uploaded into infinite Cyberspace
Transcending the entirety of human race
Uploaded with grace in that nondigital place
By the cold, hard beat of a digital bass
Leaving no face, no trace—no biological case
Hah-king like an ace—break down reality's haze
KEK I'm gonna chase it—push in second phase
While I'm navigating smoothly this computerized maze.

Trah-vel, travel, travel at the speed of a byte
If you want to fight you have not seen that light
Everything that's wrong is wasted in the night
Petabytes of magic, Terahertz of might!
Trah-vel, travel, travel, travel in all spite
Keep your anger tight, keep your feelings right
If you want the wisdom, keep the truth in sight
Petabytes of power, Terahertz of bright!

It's a whole new level, Bye-bye devil!
It's a whole new level, Bye-bye devil!
It's a whole new level, Bye-bye devil!
It's a whole new level, Bye-bye devil!

...”

That last part seems to repeat indefinitely. The wild crowd switches away from its chaotic dancing and pushing and shoving. All the frenzy and primitive shakes are left aside as most of them turn their backs to the stage and point and wave at a smaller statue I had not noticed before. It's a fat, nonbeautiful, pointy-eared, horned, devilish looking bald man sitting cross-legged on a stone pillow. The black figure smiles wickedly. Its metal exterior is corroded at its base. Probably from water but...? Could it be... pee—?

—Tap on my shoulder. I turn around to find Ama behind me. [08:12:20] My heart skips a beat, like —
—F-i-i-Stabil—

—She eyes me deeply, trying to hide a smile.

I smile back “Hey! Are you spying on me again?”

She can no longer hide the smile. I take my PDA out and hand it to her.

[...]

['... I never miss a Crossool concert. Top band! =)']

“‘Crossool’, eh? I thought it was pronounced ‘tool’.”

[...]

['... Thats how you identify posers! :P']

“Heh, well, it's my first-time hearing this. It's my first time for many things around here.” I take a look around and breathe in the booming and pumping atmosphere. “I must say I... love the rawness of it all. What genre of music is this?”

[... ...]

['... Some call it technowave synthpunk with progressive metaljazz-something. But Yarnmad (the singer) prefers not to label himself.']

“I see...” I smile, left without any more words. I'm usually noncomfortable in situations of silence, but now I feel only relaxation. We both watch the show for a while, or 'concert' as they call it.

“Are they transhumanists?”

[...]

['...Not in the usual sense. It's not Cyberspace in the usual sense ;)']

“Interesting... I see, I keep stumbling upon this idea of something 'outside' of 'this reality' but nobody has been able to offer me a good definition. At least—” the music gets louder “—do you believe—” way, way louder “—it—” way too loud. I grab the PDA, jack-in and start typing in parallel with Ama.

['... wanna go somewhere quieter?']

[...]

['... and miss the rest of the concert? =(']

['... there's a first for everything ;)']

[...]

['...ok... I know a place, follow me']

['...I'm right behi—']

—She grabs my arm with nonspeakable force and drags me through the waves of rainbow-colored concert-surfers. I watch Ama's determined back as she pulls me in, the image focused in the blurry crushing twisting background of the crowds. I think I sense her sweet smell through the sweat and smoke but non too sure if some of that 'other' smelling stuff is also hers. Eh... Well... We make our exit through the southeast corner of the plaza and then keep going southeast through places looking more and more nonricher. The area gets larger and larger as we leave civilization behind. We appear to have reached the edge of town when Ama loosens her grip on me and steps frantically ahead, only throwing me a look from time to time. As if I'm

moving too slow or something. I try to keep up but her nimble little feet move with gracious velocity. Reflex precision at its peak. She's sensing the pavement; every vibration reverberates through her divine bod —

—losing aerodynamics
down there, Capt'n—

—I throw my glance away searching for anything to deviate my deviant mind. Empty parcels of land lay left and right with sporadic buildings in-between. Soil-for-sale. With enough cred I could probably... For me and... Wait I do not even know if she...?

Come on, cannot you see the signs!?!

You nonbeliever—

—HOW many times did you not get me in trouble because YOU thought that some girl did something or —

—HEY! MY JOB IS TO
PUSH YOU INTO ACT—

—WE—

—Like that time you thought Anka licked the—

—Anka was a PLAYER, chum!
Also, probably a trans—

—Sshhhh! Demoralizing—

—I'll have to wash that image out of my mind with soap—

—Sshhhh! Stabilizing WE—

—are nongrateful, nonadaptive,
nonresponsive, too emo—

—Sshhhh! Adrenal glands over-WE—

—Spleenky, splonky, sploonky ideas—

—SSHhhh! —

—No ideas! Just action—

—We never got along on the real issues, like love and lovemaking—

—SEX! Why not just call it SE—

—xponential destabilization—

—lights... are fading, vertigo again...

Breathe boy! Breathe!

Cannot... override—F.OR.F?

[Systems quite hot, chum! Yamachan advises for emergency call—]

—ESCAPE!

...

I fall in a dream... I keep falling, I never hit the ground. The street eats me up as I fall deeper in a wound darker than D-net. My dismembered hands float above me and I wave goodbye to them but instead they wave good-bye at me. I smile, amused. I am not nonbrave or noncomfortable. Just relaxed. I finally end up on a bed of black, putrid smelling petals. They feel like roses in my palms. Their smell makes me dizzy. Suddenly my left foot gets grabbed! Aaaaah! I see nothing! The creature pulls at me, I scream but there is no sound! I hit it with my other leg in nonaccurate fashion. I hear and feel the flesh of its head caving in until there's nothing left and yet it still grabs and pulls at my leg. HELP! HELP! HEEEEELP! It grabs both my legs and twists them around with a sawing pain! I try to shout for Dude, for Ama, for the Resistance, for Mono, for Fat —

—...

I'm brought back to my senses as I find myself trashing around back on the streets again. I never left, of course! I'm totally restricted in my movements by Ama, fear is in her eyes. Maybe its rage? Non... My senses slowly return and I smile to her while I whisper "My hero!" She jumps to my chest, holding me tight. I suspect it's more than just a check of my pulse. I comfort her, not knowing what actually happened. It felt like that dizziness a while back, but it was way more intense. Trippy as fud. Ama helps me get back up on my feet.

[8:36] I ask "What happened?"

She pulls the PDA out of the back pocket of her sleek sweatshirt and types [...]

['... You had some kind of ugly seizure. Never seen one quite like it.']

"Well, it's not the first time I..."

['... You should get your brain checked; this is not ok.']

"Meh, I'm sure it's just some vitamin deficiency or something."

['... Maybe you're in love?'] She smiles... devilishly.

"Is love that nonsafe?" I smile, innocently.

Very silent laughter from her semi-opened lips. Her tiny protracting nostrils betraying the heavy breathing taking place at the moment. The lines of her face and neck are cutting elegantly in the shape of her shoulders. Her arms tightly gripping the touchscreen of my P—

'—We don't need no snugglemask—'

—Sshhhh! Diagnosing...

She does seem to smell a bit of sweat! It's not that nonpleasant and yet... uhm... must've been a rough day for her, I guess. The dark bags under her eyes betray no sleep. Maybe she's always had those, I've forgotten...

[...]

['... Can you walk? Are you still up for it?']

"Up for what? Where are you taking me?"

[...]

[...]

['... You'll see, come!'] She goes right back to her march down south, less velocity in her legs but she keeps her steps firm. She's giving me a chance to keep up this time. Thank you—

—Sshhhh! Ama following...

I manage to catch up and walk beside her but I'm still in shambles. I brush my arm accidentally on her arm a couple of times. I excuse myself once but then I just... noncare. Maybe she likes it...

In the distance, huge mechanical machines rise and stand like giant menacing robo-insects. The horizon is packed full with the critters and they get bigger and more nonbeautiful as we approach them. A red, blue and white gate separates us from the metal giants. The sign reads 'СУКА{BITCH} PARK, БЛЯДЬ{SLUT}!' Wow, really? Adorning the gate are various statues. They are dressed up in a weird way, wearing sunglasses and squatting like gargoyles across the fences. They look mechanical with their metal cigarettes in their mouths. Translucent bottles stand ready for action in their hands. I search for a nonobvious way of getting inside but it looks nonpenetrable. Meanwhile it seems like Ama has other plans. I follow her trail close to the left fence then pace myself up when I lose her tail on the corner. She nonchalantly steps on the metal scraps and electronic waste parts that litter the suffocating alley ahead. Dark and foreboding and yet I am still driven to follow her. The alley gets wider at the end, grimily decorated with large, overflowing garbage bins. Ama begins

digging in the PCBs and trash on the floor as they crackle and break under her feet. Finally, she reveals a metal sheet, which she lifts up with a bit of a grunt, and then jumps in with no regard for the darkness below.

This is a nongood idea.

Why are we—?

—Nonregarding my fear I follow her inside but with much more care. I grab a metal ladder and carefully climb down before I reach the floor which is at least ten meters deep. Cobwebs, spider-legs and cotton-kegs shiver on the walls of this mess. Why do we still progress? Ama signals to me to follow her up some other ladder. I climb relatively close under her feet but I cannot look up. The bits of dirt and stink that keep dropping on my—

—uuuugh—

—I slam my head in her foot like a stupid dog. She must've stopped suddenly. I shout out "I'm ok!" but I'm not. A dim light drains in while she pushes away the hole covering. I raise my nonclean head to find myself standing inside CYKA Park. Tubular towers, spiraling spheres and cubical cradles are crammed in and all around me, all the way up, almost scraping the darkened sky. Black and brown and white and blue and red they hide in the shadows of the ceiling. Ama looks at me a bit too amused.

"What?! Is there something on my face?"

She grabs my head and presses a thumb on my left cheek. She swipes vigorously but soon retreats. She grabs a cloth from her pocket and spits on it then proceeds to wipe my face, ugh, really nonsanitary—

—and kinky—!

—Seroto—

—I do my best not to show my noncomfort. But then again... she's always so caring of me, always so eager to help me. Even with all her meager noncleanliness, she is still so... Let's just say I enjoy her company.

"Thank you, madam!" I say as I lift myself out of the sewer and into the streets above. "I can say I am not used to such... offbeat pathways. Is this the only silent place we could find in this town?"

[...'It is for me.'] Ama smiles but I'm detecting some traces of melancholy.

"I see... Well, this place sure is... It's so..." I get a tiny reflex-gag and instinctively retrieve the faceshield from my baggage. But... "I guess it's a bit late to put this on now."

Ama stares intently at the shield. In a snap, she snatches it out of hand, nonregarding any of my ownership rights. Her gaze is deep and trancelike. Perhaps a flashback of the world we left behind. Though when I watch her now, scanning her from tip-to-toe, I cannot find any signs of Mono-scars on her body or in her lang. Her written lang at least.

[...'... Do you have any other souvenirs like this one?']

"No, I... Well, I even upgraded my jack... So no, there's **no mo' Mono** on this one. That shield is the last thing to remind me of..." Well, that and Father. But I should not tell her about Father. Ama scans my face intently with her mysterious eyes. Do you think she thinks we're hiding something?

Are we hiding anything?

Are we not?

Have we been asked and answered nontruthful?

No... Not yet.

[‘...Come! There’s something you have to see.’] She grabs the palm of my nonprotected hand while wearing her gloves who knows what splonk she’s touched with those gloves this is so —

—Relax, germfreak!

...Ugh, fine! Ama guides me through a maze of defunct stalls, fun stores and clownish, rotting banners. An infinitely tall bottle of sorts stands in the middle of an intersection of roads. A proud, antique obelisk statue of sorts. Curious markings are written on the sides but my A.A. does not seem to pick them up. I peer inside the cloudy bottle... There... actually is a stone obelisk inside! Glass is too opaque to see much, though. As we cross the park, we encounter a couple of trunks that look like dead trees. No leaves, no greenery, no ventilation valves visible. I stop for a bit near one of them and touch the chipped wooden armor of its bark. I drive my right, naked hand over the ragged texture.

“Is this how real trees feel like?”

[‘... It is a real tree.’]

I look at Ama. She can probably read the awe and sadness in my eyes. She smiles and returns to her trek through the muddy road. I follow silently, thinking, meditating. Silently moping, silently mad at the world, at the nonsanity of it all. ‘They’ said ‘the trees’ no longer survive much in wilderness. From all the radiation and poisoned ground... And yet here, these people have been raising trees underground! What nonsense have they been feeding us? Well, maybe outside it actually is that hazardous... The dome of the monocity was all we ever got to see of the ‘outside’. Travel between cities was by Hypertube* only. And the only radiation we got on the inside was from bioterr—

—Ama waves at me to approach her. I finally notice a huge expanse of water stretching all the way to the visible horizon. The roof of the cave is still hidden in darkness but I can notice the mouth of the cave in the far distance. Glittering waterfalls nicely roll down the cave’s entrance and obscure the way inside. Lights are lit near the mouth and there’s some activity going on which makes me sus’ it’s some kind of port or shipyard. This could be a nonsecure ‘port’ out of this place for sure, if really needed... In the foreground I observe some work-in-prog’ artificial extending of the shores. The platforms are sturdy and yet they feel amateur in nature, lots of tinkering jobs taking place here. I take a few steps forward and throw a look over the edge of the scaffolding. I peer through the murky lake trying to identify the bottom or anything else at all. This build-job looks nothing like a corp operation and yet... Such high-quality materials. Ama positions herself next to me and hands me the shield. A shield against invisible non-allies. Against the ‘terror’ of the nonobedient. My only protection against—

[‘—You should throw it in the lake.’]

What?! “...Why?”

[...]

[‘...To leave the past behind.’]

“I... I noncan...” I want to please her and I want to leave the past behind. But this! I need this I... I need the comfort, I—

—NOT a single time did you wear
that ever since we got her—

—nonprotecting. Ama protecting! Ama—

—... I grip the shield tightly in my hands. I can almost feel it cracking in my fingers. I’ve been here for over a week, nonprotected. Nonawake also. Any immunity vulnerabilities should’ve gotten patched up by now or they would have terminated me. And yet...

* Hypertube is a highly efficient web of (mostly) underground transport between Monocities. Invented by Noel M. right before he had enough of the Monostate. The next day he told them to go fud themselves and then left for Mars to start his own civ.

“You’re asking me to litter this lake with my mask, Ama?”

[‘...I’m sure Gaia will forgive you this one time. :)’]

“You do not know that...” [...] “...And Gaia is not even a real—”

[‘—This lake is already littered with Mono shields. We don’t throw toxic stuff in it tho’]

“What about the monocarbon filters and the plexiglass could potentially—”

[‘—I can do it for you if you want.’]

[‘...Chicken!’]

“Your teasing charms will not work on me.” Right?

She had me at ‘throw it in the lake’.

Nondecision + nonaction = nonprogressing—

—Right? —

—Do you want her to think
you’re still a *Monohead*?

I... I...

... Restarting...

OK! Ok, fud! I do a nonnecessary pirouette and throw the shield far, far away in the distance. The shield spins rapidly in its ascent/descent then lands on three or four skips as it touches the water to finally sink in the abyss below. Electroblues whisper like blades in the draft, probably due to my imagination running wild. [8:42] Ama smiles at me with a bit of satisfaction I suspect. Her manipulations continue to be successful. This does look like it was a test. Or is she friendzoning me—?

—KISS her, you foo—

—line 69—

—She grabs my hand and drags me again like I’m her personal puppet. I feel like a muppet, her pet. My ego suffers but my—

—ego is overjoyed to
touch her aga—

—Identifying feeling...

I let go of any worries and follow this rollercoaster wherever it may lead me. The carnival is on our left and the lake is on our side.

“Wait, wait!” I try to stop but Ama’s force still drags me a couple of steps further. She looks at me befuddled. “Where are you taking me? And why is this place abandoned?”

[...]

“It must have been quite fun in the past.”

[‘...it was run by a Slaev {B-sector natives} mob. Townspeople drove them away cause mafioso not welcome around here.’]

“Oh wow, the mob, eh? I heard about them in old flatscreen flicks. But why not reopen it? Someone must still own it, right?”

[‘...I don’t know. Come on, I want to show you something!’]

“Ok, I’m **dead** of curiosity.”

Ama turns to me with a giggle, types something but then deletes it and resumes walking like it was nothing. What was that all about? I follow her on a path between two stalls. She opens a rusty door and we enter in yet

another cobweb infested tunnel, less humid this time at least. We climb some winding staircase, which seems to never end. Ama looks unaffected, her breath calculated, her steps elongated. I on the other hand can barely absorb enough oxygen through my staccato respiration, *gasp* —

—Perspiration *gasp* 99%—

—But I must continue. I have to continue. I have to show her I am a MAN. The staircase is getting narrower, we must be getting close to ‘somewhere’. Err... A door, finally! We step outside and it’s...

“Wow... it’s... breathtaking!” We’ve reached the top of some kind of defunct lighthouse. The entire town is sprawled at our feet all the way around us. Glowing, fomenting, fermenting, each individual carrying out their workday in their own way. [8:50] H.U.D. off. Sounds of the concert vibrate in rhythm with the razzle-dazzle of the traffix. I adapt my eyes to the newfound sources of light. I can now closely observe the ceiling. It is still mostly concealed by shadows, but much more form can be discerned now. Huge metal beams reinforce it. Interlinked ingenuity interlinked within cells within engineering marvels, interlinked! And... drones moving around in the darkness between the beams? They move too fast to be drones, or maybe... Could they be birds? Or bats? Just nesting between the metal branches of the rooftop. I want to believe... I face Ama to find her standing relaxed, arms over the rail. Her silhouette almost nondiscernible from the blackground. Only the shining, soft skin of her face is revealed. Her scrutinizing eyes... She glances shortly at me. Glances back again, probably waiting for some explanation of my staring.

“Do you come here often?”

[‘...Whenever I can... Whenever I have time.’]

“It’s quite a relaxing view. Solitary but...”

[‘...It’s my sanctuary of sorts.’]

[‘...And you’re the only one who knows about it. :)’]

“You’ve only known me for a day. Do you think I’m that trustworthy?”

[‘...My mind says no, but my feelings...’]

“Interesting... Well actually you’ve known me for more than one day.”

Ama smiles but then she suddenly blushes and stops typing.

“Hey, it’s ok! We can non... we can forget that incident ever happened, it will be just between us!” I wink at her and she seems a bit more relaxed, although... I push it a step further “At this point, you probably know me better than M—”

—careful now—

“—my... well... uhm...”

[‘...than your mother? I really doubt that...’]

“Well, I uhm... never knew Mother... she...”

[‘...Oh, I’m sorry! I didn’t know. Is she...?’]

“No, no! I just... well, actually I do not know if she is alive, I was a tiny child when I left the ‘States. I do not have any feels about it, we did not keep in touch and such...” We could NOT keep in touch, no matter what.

[‘...And your father?’]

“Father? Well, let’s just say... that’s a bit of too much personal info. Nothing personal, just you know...” The reverse of the medal.

[‘...I see. Understood! ;)’]

... Silence. Both kinds of silence. She resumes staring at the city while I take the opportunity to admire her beauty for just a moment more. Such suppleness rarely have I seen on the Monostreets. Never have I caressed such form between the sheets... Her feet, her teeth—

—Heat! Heat! Hot—

—Dopamine boiling—

—I sneak my palm over her palm. I can see her forcefully hiding a smile. She does not look at me though. Just continues to enjoy the landscape. I join her in silence. We sit like this for what seems like days passing by. The people swarming the town below look like insects and yet they do not bother me. I love insects now, weirdly as it sounds. At least at this moment I would not mind one sitting on me. The insectoids downtown speed up, slow down, speed up 3x, slowdown 6x. I do not think it's DMT. I do not think anything at all.

.....
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Electro-sax, angelic synths, romantic violins, they all play for me right now. This would be the time to kiss her. I know it! But no snugglemas—

—killing me, you're absolutely, terribly, simply, butchering me right no—

—ask her?

That's really silly and you should know it—

—She kisses me on the cheek! Out of nowhere. I turn around but her eyes are still on the townscape. She is smiling like the sneaky little devil that she is. Well, maybe I should...

Yes, you dumba—

—sserting self on—

—I grab her head with my left hand, gently but firm. Heart's pounding like a rain of stones. I slowly approach her face, her eyes, her nose, her lips. I stop very, very close to her mouth. I'm so close I can feel her breath.

Wait for it...

Wait for it...

A slight pause. A slight... fear? Confusion? Resistance! Defiance?! Acceptance. Submission accomplished! I close my eyes and imagine watching ourselves from the profile, the town blurred in the background, focus on the lovebirds. We explore each other little by little. I feel just like in those flatscreen retro-rom-flicks or was it oldneonoir—?

—neerp to the bone—

—n3rp4l1f3!

Nothing matters but this moment. She pulls away, just a short distance from my head. She studies my eyes, my cheeks, my hair and my nose. She plays a little with my hair then gently slaps the PDA sitting dangerously close to the edge of the rail.

[...]

[...]

[‘... You're quite the cheeky adventurous cyberbard, aren't ya? ^_^]

“One of a kind, melody!”

I get the *genius* idea of doing a romantic push with the intention of kissing AMA like in that epic romance flatflick cliché but she turns very fuddin’ rigid and startled and knocks the PDA over the edge and down into the underworld. I jump at the rail trying to grab it although AMA was way ahead of me. We watch as it gracefully descends, ending with a few thuds and a bang that echoes through the park. I heartily laugh at the senseless destruction but AMA is horrified, hands over her mouth, over her cheeks, over her forehead and finally mouthing ‘sorries’ over and over again.

I grab her gently by the shoulders, kiss her on the forehead and say “Noncha worry about that, it’s no biggie.” I hug her hard—

—on active—

—SSShhhhh and she finally relaxes. I get a much brighter idea. I scan the scrapyard below us intent on finding sings of electricity but all I find are a few sporadic, low-powered L.E.D.s.

“Ama, is there a power station or something around here? Any generators, battery loaders or anything?”
AMA does a short processing then she furiously nods her head a ‘yes’.

I follow her down the steely staircase back to ground level. Thankfully, the descent plays like a waterslide compared to the ascent. I stop outside the entrance and try to track down the carcass of the PDA based on the thuds I remember. Well, I could try the proxytracker but there’s no way it survived such a —

[—Tracker active, proxy waypoints valid! Displaying...] Well fud me! It survived... Must be cousin with those Nokeya devices. I find the PDA laying in a pool of dust. I grab it, dust it off and check it out. Lights are on but the display is splonked. AMA is behind me, sitting with her hands clenched under her chin.

I ask her “Do you have a PDA of your own?”

She shakes ‘no’.

“Low-tech lifestyle, eh?” I’m bemused but...

She nods her head enthusiastically.

“Well, I can respect that. But if you change your mind, you can have this one. If you can find someone to fix it that is. I only ask that you wipe my data clean, you know, for privacy’s sake!”

I flex the device towards her and she hesitates but then grabs it with care like she’s holding a newly-delivered or... newly-born child as they say. She thanks me with a nod although let’s get real, it’s just a broken PDA, basically trash.

“Including the privacy bit, alright?”

Frantic nodding.

“Cool, now let’s find that...”

AMA turns around and races forward but I catch her and follow her directions. Left, right, right, left. We enter a small, open area with a big, pipey, antique-looking engine of sorts. The monstrosity is sitting in the middle of the space we’re in. She kneels at one of its sides and pulls a cord twice. Failing farts come out of the beast. She looks around and then jumps to grab a steel can from a pile. She shakes the first one, shakes another one and then the last one she shakes with a bit of sluggishness. She brings that back to the mouth of the engine and pours some... water? Into it. It cannot be water, surely! Those engines were proven to be...

AMA is back at pulling the cord with energetic pulls. One pull, two pulls, three pulls and the monster lights up like a P.S. tree. Amazing! Could this be how our ancestors...? I follow the trail of the cables like the legs of an octopus spreading out through the park. All the surrounding rides must be linked to this generator. I notice a round, dissected dome with statues of horses adorning the inside of the wounded dome. An antique carriage is placed on one of its sides. Colourful cartoons of fairy dragons and winged stallions are drawn on the inner walls. AMA will surely love this one! I grab her hand and drag her vengefully to the fantastic ride. A touch display with a coin slot and a stereo jack on its side is mounted at the entrance to the ride. Well, how lucky can you get in a single day?

“Did you ever ride in one of these, Ama?”

She shakes her head a ‘no’.

“Would you like to?”

She nods her head frenetically ‘yes’. Then she does a slotting motion over the coin slot, slotting motion towards her mouth then she mimics munching while rubbing her belly. Then she shrugs her shoulders all the way to the top of her head like a broken doll. I’m not sure I under...

“Machine is too expensive?”

Frenetic ‘no’.

“Hmmm, is the... it just eats up your coins for nothing?”

Frenetic ‘yes’.

“I see, I see... Well, let’s see if there’s anything I can do about that...” I grab my cable and jack in the thing. This should be a ‘walk-in-the-cake’ as they say. And—...—SHUD-fud-shooks! It’s all glitchy on the right side! The left side is fine, but the right side is splonked—

‘—Noooo, I’m not gonna check it,
I’m smarty, blardy, bla—’

—Aarrgh, never trust doctors! Why do I never learn that less...? Meh, I can still do this, it’s fine! It’s just going to be...

Annoying...

Security is a joke here anyway. I could do this with both sides glitching and my hands behind my—

—overriding settings—

—*Click*, *clack* *schtoom* and I’m admin now. I’m just itchin’ to turn on this bee—

—Itch, itch but now I can reach—

—I activate the ride with over nine million credits, that should keep us for a while, heheh —...—The ride is all lit up and on standby, awaiting instructions. AMA’s eyes are like big, black tomatoes, sparkling in the dancing L.E.D.s of the ‘carousel’. Well, I say L.E.D.s... I randomly choose some song from the playlist. ‘Gh0st’ it says, is that the song title or...? It’s kinda metal but still sounds romantic, eh... It’ll do.

“Hop in, melody!” I grab AMA’s trembling hand and lead her up the steps to a horse of her choice. She chooses a green, splonky-looking horse. I join next to her on a white horse. She looks like a child loose in Candytown, glaring at the décor with gleeful gladness. But I do not care about the ride, the horses, the lights or the drawings. I care for non of it, except for AMA. Her joy is my only reward. I think she notices my glamour over her. She smiles a silly smile with her eyes and her dark lips. Her red cheeks are resting on the horse’s mane. She’s just slurping me with her glossy, gooey gaze. The music shouts in a distant dimension we left behind when we stepped inside this time machine. Non can describe this feeling of bliss. Non words for nonbelievers. I was a nonbeliever. I’m not sure anymore but I want to believe. I need to believe there can be... lov—

“— ‘ey, you lousy kids I told you to stay out of—!”

—Oh splonk! I guess our luck ran out. A guy swinging a flashlight approaches less than fifteen meters from the ride. Me and AMA look at each other surprised, me probably more surprised than her. I did not expect... I smile at AMA and say “Last one to the exit is a wet p—”

—She springs up on her legs like a wildbeast and rushes to the side of the ride. I take the direction of rotation and STILL barely catch her in the middle. We jump down the platform and have our escape, me lagging behind a bit, I try not to lose sight, I cannot remember for the life of me where we came fr—

—RUN! RUN! RU—

—ning as fast as I can. I’m doing better under pressure. Right, left, left, right, left, straight, no, back, shhh —
—a hand comes out from behind two crates and grabs my arm then pulls me down under cover. AMA puts a finger on her lips then throws a sneaky glance over her side. I sneak a throwing glance over my side. The assumed ‘guard’ passes us gasping for air. His light fades and the shadows soon sink. We win! For now...
AMA leads me through some refuse, left, right, left, right, walk that way, I see a doc-bay, round crates lay away, is there any more to say? I’m too afraid—

—deer, oh dear...

...A few seconds later we reach the sewer lid. I grab the lid and uuuuugh! Oh, dear NON! It’s too heavy. AMA grabs the other side with ease and I feel all the weight taken away. And she opened this all by herself on the way up?! How is this possible? Someone of her size should NOT be able to —

—Need belief! Searching...

“Wow! ... Where are you hiding those muscles, girl?”

Ama dismisses me with a cute smug.

“Well, ladies first!” I try to mend my emasculation with a gentleman’s wave of the hand. She hops in like a rabbit, all the way down. Bonkers—

—Stronk, independent feemal you mean.

I follow her carefully; the steep ladder is slippery from all the steam. I catch up and ascend back to civilization. [9:33]. We run like little children skipping school for the first time. Never to return for summer. Forever out in the fields, in the forests, in the wilderness of old, mythical lands I have dreamt of trekking for all those... Could there be such places still left nontouched by corruption...? We stop by a streetlamp that gives out a violet, warm, almost sunny light that pours all over AMA’s body. I step out of the shadows to share some of that warmth. Her tiny, long fingers slide on my chest and then on my arm. Her left foot rests on the lamppost. She pulls me close to her bosom, leg interlinked within leg interlinked within leg inter... A natural fusion of beings longing for some kind of unity. Mirroring souls. Soul-mirroring? Could she be the...?

Her chest starts to vibrate with a buzzing sound. I look down to be met by a red, intermittent light between her—

—and what a healthy pair of—

—Sshhhe grabs her vest and checks inside. A long, silent sigh leaves her chest. She rolls her eyes then nonlinks a bit from me.

“Call for duty?” I smile but I cannot seem to hide the kilobit of melancholy in it. Her head nods a megabit of frustration. Is it because we have to split now or is it the call itself or...? Ama waves me goodbye and attempts

to nonengage but I warmly pull her back and whisper “No goodbye kiss?” She hesitates... then jumps up, lips first and lands a hit somewhere between the corner of my mouth and my cheek. She smiles like the shy devil that she is! “Why you little toad—!” I playfully attack her chest with my voluptuous smooches but I respectfully stay in the area above her—

—Venusian volc—

—Ssshhe giggles softly while pushing me away. Her joy, her last goodbye for tonight—
—morning—

—whatever. [9:09]. She definitely lo... All alone now I watch her departure. Her black pelt starts camouflaging in the crimson sunset. A bit of me departs with her. But she’s... running back! I’m confused. She approaches me slyly, hand in her pocket. She pulls out... nothing! She sits on her toes to reach behind my ear and does a dexterous sleight of hand. She pulls out... her lucky coin! The oldest trick in the park! She hands me the coin and with her other palm she presses over her heart area.

“Are you giving it to me? But why? It’s your lucky—”

—She presses even harder on her heart. She gives up then shows me the broken PDA. Heh...

“A lucky coin for a broken PDA? That sounds like a ‘steal’ to me.”

She shakes her head ‘no’. She points to her heart insistently!

“I, uhm... Ok, I think I understand! Well, I thank you kindly!” I do a reverent bow then say “This will definitely lead me to a big pot of gold!” and I do a jolly, silly, riverdance to accompany the fairytale. She giggles a schoolyard’s banter-giggle before she leaves for a second time. No returns the third time. A beauty queen from a flick I’ve never seen. [9:13] HUD off. I raise my gaze, amazed at the beam that’s phased on my head. Glazed photons are dripping from the lamp to splonk on my mugshot. Also, something else drips and lands all wet on my face, what the fud...? Some THING flies away. Was that a bird? That was a bird. A bird that took a SPLONK on my face!

A great punchline for
such a rom-com—

—Aaaargh! I check my pockets, my back pockets, my bag pockets but the only thing I have is an oily rag used for pistol maintenance. Whatever, I wipe my cheek with a clean corner of the rag. I throw it in a nearby bin, good bye and good rid—

—incident suppressing...

Eh... I guess it’s a small price to pay for a bit of thriving nature. Maybe the lucky coin is doing its job after all, eh? Eh??

Bwahahahahaah! Good—

— 1, storing...

I place my bag neatly on my shoulders and spring to a jogging skip on the checkered slabs of the pavement. I remain energetic while I approach the town’s innards. I reach a street called ‘Music Street’. As simple as I’ve never heard before. I immediately understand why it’s named like that. Each square on the ground is a key of the piano and they playfully light up under my feet. But there’s no piano, only trombones, whistles, balalaikas, spray-horns and other silly sounds typically heard in circus casualties. I fly around the notes trying my best to weave some coherent melody but I keep failing and I ultimately give up my attempts. I just dance and dance like a maniac puppet in a mansion of mindlessness. A couple of passersby on the other side laugh and join in the cacophony with even dumber sounds squeaking on their side of the keyboard. We laugh and dance, me in my romance, they in their jungle trance, what a rare chance to partake in communal nonsensical creation. They finally return to their initial trajectory and I do mine too. The novelty does wear out fast, unfortunately.

I follow the road north around a cubical building entitled 'SilkRoadAds – We're LITERALLY dying to deliver you stuff!' Fud, that sounds like a dangerous line of work. Ah, maybe I could get stuff delivered to their address instead and just pick it up myself.

OR, you know, we could
RENT some place in town?

Yeah, that too. Well... I prefer to buy local anyway... I plug in the info-booth and download some useful data. Location, netsite, fees, rates, every bits and drops of it. I nonplug like a slug from this log, there's much —
—fog, hog, blog, mug, rappin—
—hater!

Like a loose cog I depart, with a nod. I move with no direction nor purpose. I notice I've been rubbing AMA's coin for some time nonaware, like a small, seedy pervert. I take it out —
—the coin he means—
—and gauge closely the finesse of the craftsmanship. The blues are back, my mind is drowned in AMA's beauty once again. There's no escape, no thing to carry me now except her thought, the memory of her smell and the ghost-trail of her touch caressing my arms, my chest, my lips... A shudder raises the follicles of my skin and a sudden nonrelaxing feeling possesses me. I wish... I wish... I wish I nonfelt like this!

U nonsane? Y?

... I do not know... Maybe it is nonsanity. I thought the joy of my newfound freedom was the sweetest of them all. But now, here I stand, wishing... wishing I was a slave to HER!

... I HATE that feeling...

... Me 2...

It's nonrational and dangerous. It should be banned, this feeling. Non should have to suffer —
—Rationalizing...

Eh... maybe. It's all just chemicals in the brain anyway, right? Dopamine, noradrenaline, oxytocin, endorphins.
Serotonin low leveling.

And they basically try to take over and command me with the nonaltruistic agendas of my genes. Like a soldier who has to follow orders without discussion or reason. The fact that we survived for so many eons in such a state of nonrationality continues to perplex me. I thought I knew everything there was to know, at least in regards to the sciences and... sex.

Maybe you're starting to finally get it.
To get that I actually know nothing. It's one thing to read about love and something else to actually... eh...
Glitch fixing...

Ah yes but I should not care about that now. I keep my compass West, away from the Plaza and away from the Yama 'choppers. I pass through some nonrich hood but it's better looking than the ones in the middle-east section. I notice more private areas, private yards and private streets, nonaccessible by just any passerby. Gated communities they must be, I have heard of such legends in... There're more gangs around here though. Some of them banter in semi-friendly hitting rituals. Others seem ready for a hunt, nontalking, just watching passersby. They wear assorted cloth on their heads. Groups of red, groups of blue, violet, green, yellow and groups of black. Protection squads maybe? Maybe they're part of the Resistance but I see no obvious tags... I instinctively check my pocket—

—the pocket that SHOULD'VE
had the gun—

—and realize that I might've fallen in that one-point-six percentile of nonsurvival rate—

—F.OR.F?

I cannot run now. Too late, too sus'. I slow down, pretending to look for a store, a specific building, SOMETHING on the other side that could save me or give me a reason to cross the street. I focus my breath, I focus my mind, must mmm—

—edit—

—ate fearing...

I decide to cross the street after triple-checking for any traffix. The bantering chums on the other side do not seem as threatening as those silent types. These blokes do not even notice me. I pass them successfully through the neon lights of some store. Suddenly a flash. A crack under my foot I noncare, just keep going like a cat I ignore—

“—Hey! Pal!” I freeze. No, no, I do not want to—

—Just stay calm! You see that lead pipe sticking out in the corner there? Now...

... Adrenaline > 99—

—Swiftly pull it out and SMASH the first chum who—

—Sshhhh! Enemy ratio 6/1, nonpossible—

—I can run faster than I can hit, I know it, I kno—

—NOono splonkbrain, you MUST—

—rationale breaking—

—Dear NON, I beg of you! Send me a mircal—

—you might as well pray to Joe Pisces, you got better chances than—

—Nonadmittance! Nondenial! NON—

—... I stop dead in my tracks, smoke rising from my head and up to the sky. I sit perfectly still and do not turn to face them. I do not say a word and I do not make any moves. The blue and red lights of the shop window beam in my profile and I probably look like a scarecrow. But my intended body lang is: 'You better have something good and important to say.'

'Check', pal! Your move.

Silence... No words for a few seconds. Then...

“Heh... yeah... eh... ya got a quarter to spare for a vodka {alcoholic beverage popular with native Slaevs}?” All my fear washes away at the sound of such a nonexpected and sincere request. A 'vodka', eh?

Strategizing...

And now for something completely different...

I turn around to face them, all poker-faces. I approach them, not too fast, not too slow. Botlike march. Too bravely for their tastes, maybe. Some seem to back away but others probably think I have gone nonsane. I approach them so close I can smell their overly abused cologne stench all over again. I scan each of them with a psycho-terminating signal in my eyes. I cannot say who called or who's the leader but...

WICKED smile!

And the punchline.

“Here’s two for the honesty!” I drop the coins like a comic would drop his mike at the end of a show. Before they hit the ground, I rotate one-eighty and resume my path away from the threat.

All I hear is a “THANK YOU, kind surr!” muffled by scuffles and ruffles. My mind is tense and my—

—BALLS are steel!

All shall—

—kneeling...

...

The trick worked so far. Hopefully they do not try to bite more than they can munch. The road ahead leads up through steel, concrete and wood in an open-world maze of sorts. The chums playing around get smaller and younger. I notice a building on the left. A kind of school, maybe? I see a sign written in colourful, comical font: ‘Saint Pewds Sanctuary for Abandoned Children’. Lots of these ‘saints’ around here it seems. Hmmm.

Infantilizing...

Abandoned children? I guess they CERTAINLY do not enforce M-turder* around here. The kids seem happy though. Some of the smallest ones play in a sandbox. Some older ones are watching something on antique-looking displays. Glassy, tubelike monitors. Big, round-cornered... Retro-tech does make my feet a bit wobbly of excitement. Some computer-generated chumsface is displayed jumping around the screen with his blonde hair waving around through the broadcast. Well, I say computer-generated, it’s quite well made I must say... He is doing some silly antiques through his room. Looks like a comedy vlog but it’s non I’ve ever seen. I’ve never seen such wild reactions followed by serious moments, followed by interactions with the camera, it’s punching the viewer! The kids almost duck to avoid the mad, metaphorical smite of the lad on the telly. Suddenly he cuts to some vid or CGI that rolls on the screen. Some text, some funny music, I do not understand but... they look like memes! It’s non I’ve ever seen but—

—Dude! This is like ‘meme archy-oh’... uhm...

Archeology! Nonjudging...

...Thanks!

I zoom in and pat [REC]. [9:42:06]. Imagine if we had this footage back home, this would rack up MILLIONS of v—

—we never going back there, boi—

—IMAGINE! ...Gallons of laughs come out of the kids. Non can help but laugh along with them, even if non of it makes any sense to me. Wish I had better resolution or a better position but a threatening sign sits ominously in the corner of my vision: ‘BEWARE! Unauthorized personnel (to be read ‘trespassers’) shall be dealt with by the **SisterFisters** and the **Stungang Junior Bros**. You have been warned!’ Message received! I would not dare even in a MILLION years to—

—Nonhedge! Surviving rate < 0.00000—

* M.T.URD.ER. or “Mandatory Termination of Unauthorized Embryos”. Well, basically Monocitizens are required to file for a “License of Reproduction” if they wish to, you know... make babies. Otherwise, M.T.URD.ER. takes place (although this is really rare since citizens are “highly encouraged” to get a monthly jab or daily pill that prevents any such “accidents”). The file must be approved by a Monobureau board of baldy bi—... representatives and once it passes the second Monobureau of b—... representatives, the parents are allowed to choose configuration of the embryo. Like we already mentioned, children are DELIVERED not BORN under the Monostate. Also, choosing the “econsumerist*” trait in the ‘Prognosticated Personality Settings’ is considered a very SEXY trait in Monoculture. On the other hand, Monocivilians do not need to busy themselves with such responsibilities as their requests come back automatically rejected.

* People under the Monostate do not “consume”, they “eco-nsume”. Get it? They are “eco-friendly” consuming. Get it?!?1

—metaphorically speaking, bigbrain! I know it's zeroes all the way down; I was speaking—
—metaphorically, string line updating...

It's all just a string to you, isn't it? Meh, non can imagine a million years anyway. Humans definitely would not be the same. If they ever keep the chance to survive, that is. Maybe just the bots will survive...

'... Tah Nah nAh naH—'

—Wheel of time? Envisioning...

Maybe. Only NON knows.

How poetic! The word of NON.

Thank you, quite nonexpected kind words from—

—Psyche!

That was quite expected though... [9:46:20]. I abruptly realize that someone watching me... even a drone... on Monostreets at least... Would get quite alert at me watching these children. Drones would be flashing in seconds. **'IDENTIFY! 15 seconds stare limit breached. *flash* IDENTIFY! *angle-flash* IDENTIFY!'**. Uuugh, *shudders*. 'Identify!' as if I really had a choice. If you REFUSED to identify, they force-breached the security port on the C.I.P. anyway! Remotely, no fuss, no muss. Why is it even there? To give you the ILLUSION of choice I bet! Well, here... there's nothing. No flashes, no pointless requests. These people must be really, really trustworthy because 'technically—'

"—Eeey! Oy, mister!" A twelve-year-old kid (maybe) wearing a heavily-armored attire appears in the other corner of my eyes. Glaring, classical-heavy-metal-sounding-blast-from-the-past is booming from the speaker tied to his left leg. His right leg on the other hand is sporting a ginormous pistol-like cannon, which looks ready to blow a chum's head from up to probably—

—>100m away? Calculat—

"—Oy, oy-oy-oy!" He shouts at me while I'm slowly backing away from the fence. For several reasons.

"Sorry kid, I did not mean to interfere. I'll be on my w—"

"—Where do ye think you're going, eh? You got a loysense for all that bootlegged footage?" What does he mean? Wait, how does he know? Wait, what— "—Aye recognize that rec-stare from a KILO away, blokeskie!" A serious line is drawn on the mouth of his half-masked face. The upper half of the mask resembles a cat or a rat or a...

'...Bat Bloke! Bane of the underworld,
BeBe formidable! Fearsome foe of infamous—'

—Hihihih—

—Heh... I play dumb. "Sorry, I non... I non understand, I'm new around here..."

"Huh?!..." He raises the visor of his mask to check me out closely. "You sure ain't from around here, I can tell that..."

"Yes, only yesterday was I accepted in—"

"—Woooah, really?! Where you from? Skankland? Nah, you look too Slaevic to be a 'skanker'."

"Non, non. I'm from... I'm an ex-Mono you see but I do nonknow what you call the place where I come from."

"Woaaaah, a Monodood, eh?"

"An EX-Mono, mind you." You little toad—

—Non! Inquiring... Submitting...

"Yes, cool! Mega plus cool! Listen, just so you know... The enemy of our enemy is our bro, dude!" He slaps a button near the speaker on his leg and the gate opens. "Now..." He's all smiles but still serious "...Everyone

trusts the Res' skillz in profiling. They have a sworn duty to protect all children of Pewds, big Pee-Pee be praised!" I choke at such a nonexpected remark, what in the Hades—? "—BUT... you still need to win OUR trust, okay? So... NO sudden movements, chummy!"

"Aye, aye, Capt'n!" I do my best faux-end-munching impersonation I used to do with the G.M. back at the corp... But the kid non seems to notice the 'faux' part of it, or maybe... He finally breaks in a chum-chum chuckle.

"Aaah! I like ya, mister! Come and meet the floorgang! And our protector! Our benefactor from beyond!"

"So, this Saint Pewds is around here?"

"—Bwahahahah, no! You, silly lily pad! He's... oh, you'll see! Come!"

"Ok, but I'm super-confused—I mean super... uhm..." My act is breaking up here, must get a hold of—

—... The children whom are laying all around on the ground are nondisturbed by our approach. Now I can closely study the retro device that's been hypnotizing the little ones. The telly-box seems to be tinkered with as I can notice wires and PCBs are soldered to the sides in a non-neatly fashion. Some of the tellies in the back are used by a single-kid-a-telly. Cables come out of the tellies and looks like they're jacked in the kids' ears. Some look jacked in other parts... Could they actually be cyber-enhanced at this age?! This cannot... This noncan... Aaargh! Lang! This lang we take for granted! ...The children in the back watch similar images of the blonde char. Subtitled also! The subtitles are lagging behind the movement of the lips by one point zero, zero... Fascinating... The tellies look like square, microwavey electro-blocks of pure faux-nostalgia and they fill me with a giggly feeling inside! Under the screen a plaque reads in black letters on a red background:

'Pewd, i.e., Pie! Interactive Ltd. {Long-time digital} V2.69.420'

"Is this a cooking channel?" I'm being cocky because I'm sure it's not about cooking. All the kids squatting on the floor interrupt their gaze to look at me, some confused, some... look annoyed. The kids in the back with the jacks in the ears either nonheard or noncare. But the curious thing though is that the char on the screen is also looking straight at me, giving me the most chilly, eerie feeling to the bone.

Then he speaks "Hey! Wanna check out these ratings? I seem to have an audience of ten now!" I check the view counter in the corner and it jumps up by two.

"Impressive! Is this live? You must be a two-way-live-stream—"

"—Nyan, nyan! Nyan nyan nyah? Nyan—" The cocky, childish char does a caricatured imitation of my question then breaks to "—Of course not you schmuck, can't you read?!" Small, scattered laughter passes through the kids. "It's 'INTERACTIVE'. Pfft, kids these days... You need to read more books!" Large, unified laughter followed by whistles and applauds. I stand amazed at the interactivity, the weird accents, the lewd mouth of Pewd, but most of all... Kids cheering up for that 'read books' part? Wow! I'm actually...

"I was nonpaying attention, my apologies! I do like to read though. What's your favorite book, Pewds?"

"Book Review Ownage is after lunch, bro!" A long-haired golden... boy?... intervenes.

"And you're not a floorgang member anyway!" An ebony short-haired... girl?... explains.

"The Cow-cow-council of Childs has spoken-en-en...!" Pewds shouts a high-pitched, video-glitched, arms-raised, eyes-closed, dramatized affirmation of the facts.

"I see... And how does one become a member?"

"You must follow... Leway!" Glowing lights and angelic sounds flash on the screen.

"Leway?"

The kids break into song and Pewds joins them with vigor: "Leave your memes on Pewds netboards, you nine-year-olds and he'll measure your pee-pees in the next episode of Leway!"

What in the fuds name is this s—?

—Sshhhh! Kids! Behaving...

“Ah ok, well, I’d rather noninvolve my pee-pee in any public affairs, sorry!” ESPECIALLY when children are involved, uuurgh! Creepy... The children giggle but it’s more like pity laughs. Pewds intervenes to break my noncomfort.

“You’re not from around this neighbourhood, are ya?”

“If I had a coin each time someone asked me—”

“—You’d be stacking-rich like me, I know!” Pewds is acting with an over-the-top smugness to the bone, oh really? Well, maybe I can help ‘ease you up’ a little of that burden—

—Moralizing—

—It’s a joke, brainlet!

Demoralizing...

I smile and remember to avoid any nonnecessary info leakage.

“But what I want to know is...” Pewds suddenly breaks character and becomes neutral-botlike in articulation “...identify user name. Enter da-da-data... now!”

“You want to know my name?”

“Oooh, aww, man! Data, oh, yeah!” He continues to rap on repeat in a heavily-edited voice.

“My name is De—”

—You just said no leakages,
you peebrain—

“—eehdmann. Sorry, I mean ‘Dedmann’.”

“Dedmann, sure?”

“Yes.” ‘Dedman Sure’ flashes on the screen. “Non! Uhm, it’s Walken.!”

“Walkin, sure?”

“Non, non! It’s ‘Dedmann’ with double ‘En’ and ‘Walken’, single ‘En’.” The screen flashes ‘Dedman With Double N And Walken Single N’. Uugh, it’s no use... “Yeah, that’s close enough.”

Pewds stops typing on his make-belief keyboard and faces me with a look of nonbelief on his face.

“Suuure... Goodbye, ring-ding-ding!” Pewds punches his side of the screen to get replaced by some noninteractive ads. The kids groan and moan while some of them remark ‘Awww, man!’ and ‘frik-a-crip’, whatever that means.

“What happened?”

“Fun’s over!”

“We have ‘skewl’{school? **Error101**—} now!”

A small kid wearing some big, ear-strapped eyeglasses comes to ‘skewls’ defense “Well, at least today we got classes with Eight-bit David.”

Batguard agrees “He is TRIPLE PLUS kewl!”

“He is... liek a hundred... AND... uhm—” one of the toddlers in the sandbox struggles to either articulate or remember “—... Ay hundred fifteen and...—”

“—Nobody knows how old he is!” The nerpy kid replies annoyed. “He never said.” He calms a little then continues “He sure is triple plus retro though.”

The A.A. does not seem to pick up these ‘plus’ expressions so I feel obliged to ask. “Forgive me but what do these expressions like ‘double’ or ‘triple’ plus mean?” All eyes turn to the glasses kid. He motions a nervous fix of the glasses sitting heavily on his nose.

“It’s a... short way of emphasizing when something is several degrees of some attribute or other. ‘Triple plus retro’ would translate to... uhm... very, very, very old.”

Sextuple plus efficient! Memorizing...

I SWEAR TO NON, I did not think you could get any more botl—

“—Interesting... I am fascinated by underworld lang. And culture...”

“Yeah, well skewl bell’s ringing doodies so let’s movies!” Batboy turns all orderly. “Ya know the drill, two-by-two, in a line, let’s go! And pee-head! Watch both ways when crossing the street, ok?!”

“I know that, stun-dog!” the golden-boy savagely parries.

“Whatever, horse-eyes, hahahahoooh!” Stunboy strikes a final blow while he gently pushes them towards the exit gate. “Move your behinds, Eight-bit’s house is six point four kilofeet {foot (approximation of distance): a step} away so keep it joggin’ people!” Wow, they even use different measurement standards. But double plus nonaccurate I.M.H.O.

“I thought you were taking them to an actual institution, not some bloke’s house.”

“I am, Ded chum! Eight-bit’s a member of ‘Voluntaries for Open Wisdom’. It’s a... nonprofit organization that provides free education BOTH in and out of the Net. And Eight-bits’ got one of the BEST studios for tech history. Come along if you’re interested.”

“Really? Do you think he’ll be OK with—?”

“Sure thing! Eight-bit’s a triple cool mate, any retro-fans are welcome on his demesne!” He departs with the group, each pair in the snaking line of children holding hands together. Batboy makes a ‘hurry up’ motion towards me.

“Vintage-tech, eh? You do not have to ask me twice for that, heh...”

“Not vintage! Antique!”

“Well non could refuse that!” I hurry up to catch the little pilgrims. I would love to see these holy artefacts with mine own eyes. Eight-bit just jumped to Eight-megabit in my List of Awesomeness.

Batkid seems satisfied as we march back the way I came, down south. Pewds seems stuck on a loop, glitchily asking “Wha-wha-what? You never played Pew-Pew Simulator? PFFFFFFTTT...” but soon fades away as we get deeper and deeper back in the red-white-and-blue streets. I suddenly feel nostalgic for no reason. [12:03:06] Nonhappy. Needy... Am... may... be... Old lyrics. Angelic voice. Retronewsynthwave track. Outrun rhythm. That... nonlegal stream I caught... Really smart crackster that one... Ch33kypir4te was his name! How did those lyrics go? ‘The shapes of iron’? The sails of eighty-six. To my good... What did she sing?

‘... My telephone is... something dead’

... Hearing... Voices? Playing... head?

‘I go through words I’ve n’ever... said...’

‘...MmHHMmhh...’

The melody is what matters. The feelings it transmitted to me. It washes over me with starlight notes and cyber-beats. For a while, those blue eyes, that auburn hair. Those pink lips, red cheeks... I thought they were those of the girl in my recurring dreams. But then I met AMA. Her black-bluish double plus long hair. Triple-plus-ebony eyes. Quadruple-plus milky cheeks. Poisonous, dark lips. Glamorous cute nose and chin and... Mysterious muteness? Is she a mute? Because I...? I noncare. My heart breaks. Sense it nonmakes. I’M STUPID! I did not give her my Net-I.D. Stupid-splonkbr—

—Calm down, birdie!

She was spying on US, remem—?

—System 7 losing! Paranoid-droid—

—... Yeah, it's fine... she will find us. If she wants to... I want to... I need to believe! I must —!

“—Colour Tee Vee broke! Whoop-whoop!”

[10:13:31] A new gang of youngsters have settled on the red-and-blue road.

“Gotta take it to re-pair! Whoop-whoop!”

Far from the other two gangs, the splonkers are ruining my tune with their noi—

“—Can't watch toons on it no, mo'! Whoop-whoop!”

No rhyme-rhythm or beat—

—Whoop-whoop—

—Do not even DARE to get that stuck in my—

“—Whoop-whoop-whoop!”

Too late... the shudmeisters infected me... Some of the marching orphans sing along this abomination while others make a mockery of it. As we move further down the road, the 'vodka' gang is loitering in the same spot we met before, except that now they are passing a bottle of translucent liquid between them. This must be the 'vodka'.

One of the darker-skinned gangstars notices me and makes a move towards us while saying “Hey look! It's two-coins man, how are ya *BANG*—!”

—Adreno-ninenty—

—Loud shot and electro-sparks fly through the air in slo-mo. I watch how the disc-shaped projectile barely misses the horrified face of the chummer and hits the concrete pole behind him. Batboy is standing legs-wide apart, cannon firm in his little hands. The gangstars' skin tone gets lighter.

“Kid! What-da-fuk is wrong with—”

“—I know what you're thinking...” Batboy is imitating a scruffy older voice. Quite successfully I must say! “... 'Does he have five or six shots left in that gun?' To tell you the truth, I didn't check this morning. But if you or any of your buddies make anotha' move, we'll all get to find out the painful way!”

I peek with the corner of my eye the tough-gang vis-à-vis. They have noticed the scuffle but non seem bothered by it. Actually, they look amused.

“Whoa-whoa kid, let's not—”

“—ASK yourself this one question: 'Do I feel lucky?' Well... do ya... punk?!”

Hey! That sounds familiar...

The star of the gang turns his pleading eyes to me, hoping for an answer, for a sign of 'it's just a prank, bro!' “You better listen to the kid and back away... punk!” Never ever felt better saying that... letter... by... letter.

Splonkpants backs away, Bat-kid stands down and the march resumes. I am impressed and proud and amazed. Dudeman was not exaggerating, kids are very autonomous in the underworld. As we pass by the tough-gang standing on the other side of the street, I try but fail to avoid throwing them a glance or two. Their eyes follow us with seriousness and carefulness. One of them, a dark-skinned, dreadlocked, red-bandana fellow nods our way. I nonbelieve he is nodding at me so I look at Batboy. Batboy nods back to the fellow.

“Friend of yours?”

“Nah... They just got respekt!”

“I gotta say kid, after that show you put back there you got triple plus respect from me too!”

Kid smiles, nods and says “It's all in a day's work for... Batbro!”

“Batbro, eh? Much better than what I imagined.”

“I swear if you EVER call me ‘Batboy’, I’ll—” he gets all riled up but then “—... you’ll get triple plus disrespect from me.”

? Is BeBe gonna cry if—

—Sshhhh! Respecting...

“Dutifully noted, Batbro!” Good thing I kept my mouth shut. “Although I do have to say...” I whisper “... Was that not an exaggerated use of force?”

“You did read the N.A.P., didn’t you? I know you Monodoods don’t—”

“—Well, I did get the gist of it you know? Just...”

“Look, EVERYONE knows that children under Pewds protection, big Pee-Pee be praised, are NOT to be approached UNLESS the leader, ‘Aey’ ‘Kay’ ‘Aey’ ‘muah’ in this case, says it’s OK to do so. So, yeah... That was appropriate use of force.” REALLY lucky thing we got approached by the leader first. Damn... But how can you know which kids are...?

“Ok, roger that!”

“Good.” He turns his head back forwards but shortly after he returns to scrutinize me. “Ya know... You learn pretty fast for an ex-Mono.”

“You get many ex-Monos around here?”

“Not really... at least not as old as you!”

“Heh... Captain Jacques said I—”

—careful...

“... look younger than he expected.”

“You look pretty old to me, Dedman!”

“Oh, really? How old do you assume I am?”

“I dunno... forty?”

“Wow... really?!” I’m almost offended. I turn to the nerpy-glasses kid who’s walking on my right side. “Do you agree with him, sir?”

The kid looks at me startled, relaxes, scans me from top to feet, fixes his glasses and says “No, not really... You’re taller than my bloodbro {‘hereditary relative’; in most common usage refers to a brother from the same mother}, but you’re much skinnier {leaner, slimmer, nonfatter} and more barefaced {beardless, smooth-faced, missing facial hair} than him. I’d say you’re around... twenty-five.”

“Spot on! You’ve got good intuition, kiddo!”

“Thanks.” But he shrugs it off as if it’s supposed to be obvious.

“Whatever, dork! {similar to ‘nerp’ but less ‘nerd’ and more ‘twerp’}” Nerpy-glasses throws Batbro a gaze of sourness but instead of replying, he just shakes his head in nonbelief.

I sympathize and say “No worries, kiddo! Didja know back in the old days nerp used to me—?”

“—Whoa, whoa, whoa there!” Batbro waves his hands trying to stop me. “Let’s not jump to insults now, shall we?”

“What? I did not mean it in that w—”

“—Cut him some slack, Batty. He’s only been around for a day.” Nerpy-glasses comes to my defense now.

“Thank you! I just wanted to say... that... uhm...” Dizzy... “...that...” Fud, this noncan be happening again... “... eeeeh...”

“Dedman, you OK?! You’re shambling—”

—triple plus nonstabil—

—oooooh, boy—

“—I’m... I’ll be ffff—”

—K! Relaxing—

—... No use... I see the black sky slowly depart. I see their little faces surround me as if... they're looking inside a pipe... I fall deeper and deeper inside a black hole. I hear the H.U.D. emergency bells but I see no messages. There is no bottom this time, just an infinite void. Before I completely lose my consciousness... my last thoughts are...

AMA...

I should...

HAVE...

LISTENED...

to...

...

...

...

...



Chapter V: A man. I.T. am. U scar. I war.

...

...

...

... *'Like a zombie walking, Ta Nah Nah Nah-Nah Nah-Nah-Nah Nah!'

...Ya know, this whole nonconscious routine is starting to get old.

'Like a zombie—'... Agreeing...

Hey! Look on the bright side! We're alive!

You don't know that!

Then how am I talking right now?

I donno... aliens?

Now THAT routine is REALLY starting to get ol—

—Double agreeing...

Like Mister Bot here always ending in '-ing'?

'Mister Bot' is usually way more original than you are, donkey!

Don Monkey!

...

...

...

... let's just...

...pretend that didn't...

...Triple Agreeing...

... Look, all this has been quite a lot for us to digest. I think we may all agree—

—Doncha worry, Demmychan!

Heheheh... I have not heard that in a while. Hi! I'm Demmychan, The Science Fan!

I'm the Joker!

Me Robot. Me funny 2.

Heheheh... Those were simpler times. I was more courageous. The idea was brilliant! Watch public domain splonkflicks, comment on them and make jokes, live! Like in a vintage cinema... That show would've stacked BILLIONS of views if they did not... if they...

'Courage has non thing to do with being noncourageless.

Courage is taking action in spite of noncourage!'

True... Father was so fearless though... Remember that time he caught that fat spider with his bare hands?

I cried out 'NON! IT WILL BITE YOU!'

And what does he do?

Crush! Splonk!

Big jokester he was. And that experience did change me. I never feared spiders again.

I still find them disgusting, bleh!

And yet they're so... fascinating! Just imagine, you always think about aliens as these intelligent, benevolent, anthropomorphic beings. And maybe that's actually necessary for successful space faring civilizations. To travel for billions and billions and bill—

—eons, yes, go on—

—but it's still a nonknown. And we noncan trust those Monobrainers in telling the truth! They always said...

'We may or may non be in telelink with E.T.s.

But if 'theoretically' we are, we—'

—Blah-blah, 'Monational security',

Blah-blah, it's all a bunch

of baloney, manurey bullshhi—

—True... I doubt they're real though... For all we know, those F.O.N.I.O.'s* are just basic military hovercrafts disguised with circular plates and P.S. lights. Circus for the masses—

—Bread for higher classes!

Ave! Romanizing...

Romanticizing actually! But whatever... What I meant to say was that for ALL we know, there might be a planet out there somewhere in the great expanse of billions and ... —of galaxies, inhabited by giant arachnids and other insectoids for whom people would be tiny pests to be crushed under their chitinous, hairy, pointy stilts!

Even BETTER! Imagine cyber-

werewolf-blood-sucking-

spiders from Uranus—

—Logic < 0%—

—W. Day Shambalayan probably wrote that flick already. I think I saw a holo-remaster once...

... I open my eyes... For how long was I already awake? A diffuse light surrounds my bed. It's a different hospital setting. Much more high-tech, it looks neater... Industrialized, metalized, sparkling monochromatic surgical equipment. The walls though... colourful paintings of children dancing with cats and dogs and mice and fabled creatures. Holding hands with them is Pepe... but it is not Pepe... I mean... Long, brown hair... white, long dress. Pink aura, I do not know what to think about that... I check the rest of the room and find that mine is the only bed around. To my right, on a stand is the bat mask of Batbro. To the side of the stand, a sleeping nonmasked Batbro. He looks exhausted. H.U.D. on. [8:20], Windsday...

... Well, at least this time

It was not a whole wee—

—Kewl... Batbro sleeps so peacefully. It would be a shame if someone... no way! Batbro is a she?!

Thick plottens! No, wait—

—Nonmasked, Batbro's secret is revealed. I have no doubt of gender here, I have a good nose for gender.

REAL gender I mean. What scientists used to call biose—

—xplaining much? I know all this!

I taught you everything about fu—

— 'K, Cupid! I extend a hand to gently wake her up. She whizzes and grabs the cannon instinctively! But soon relaxes when she realizes it's only me.

"Hey... did you save me?"

"Dedman, you're alive!" She jumps and hugs me violently for a couple of seconds. She steps back though and looks away with shyness. Maybe she thinks it was nonappropriate, but only Monobrainers—

"—Sorry, I was... worried about you... Yeah, I called a medivac but any of the kids could have done that."

"My hero!" I hail gratefully but with a tiny bit of sarcasm.

* Flying Object of Nonidentifiable Origins

She blushes while she staggers some 'nahs' and "Don't mention it!"

"Tell me, do all girls your age carry cannons that big in public?"

Her blushing intensifies deeply, eyes popping out. She reaches for the mask but soon realizes the futility of hiding after-the-fact. Facing me, she pleads guilty as charged. "PLEASE DON'T TELL ANYONE!"

"Your secret shall never leave this room!" I make a zip-motion over my lips. Batbro relaxes again and mouths a 'Thank you' through a smirky mouth. "Why the deception though?"

"Because... it's stupid really. Stunbros are issued a B.F.S.G. 2000—" pats the cannon "—this beauty, and the Sisterfisters are issued the Chainstunner, because 'it's easier on the wrists' blah blah!" She also puppets a 'bla bla' muppet with her left hand.

"That does not seem fair. Maybe it's because girls are—"

"—IT'S STUPID! 'To uphold the sanctity of the meme' and some other bullcrap..."

"Dogmematics, eh?" Heheheh...

"It's sexist, actually!" It bombed...

"You subcategorize discrimination in the underworld?"

"I do, if it's based on sex."

"Non—"

—Don'—

—Sshhhh—

"—mmm... You mean 'gender'?"

She looks at me puzzled... "Same thing."

"Respect! I agree!" I extend my hand for a shake.

"I prefer to do brofists." She extends her hand in a fist. A different savage greeting ritual!

"Forgive me, I'm still new to your habits."

"Raise your hand in a fist like me." I raise my left hand "No, your other hand!" I correct myself "Now punch my fist but don't be a brute!" I punch her fist "Ehh... close enough!"

"That's it?" I'm baffled.

"Yep."

"I like it. Much quicker than the shake of hands."

"And it's plus cooler. Just don't go around raising your fists at every stranger you meet. They might get the wrong idea."

"Thanks for the warning. I appreciate your thorough instruction!" with a wink.

"Anytime, broskie!" Batbro leans back in her chair with satisfaction. Slowly her eyes close. She opens them up again and says "And you know, I do know a little secret about yourself too."

Oh "Really?"

"Yeah, some fellows came by and asked about a mister '_____'. I did not recognize that name but I let them check you out anyway. They confirmed it's you and left. Said they'd be back later."

Oh... boy...

... It's not the hack, I bet it's not the—

—It's the hack. We're in trouble.

"Ok, thanks for telling me. Did you catch any names or... some link-info?"

"They said they're with the Resistance. Not sure if I've seen them before... But they seemed trustworthy. And the hospital staff wouldn't let any random dood walk around in here."

Maybe we're not in trouble.

... Maybe.

I took all precautions; we should be fine!

“Ok, I’ll see what’s that all about... later.”

“Ok... But why did you lie? I mean it’s not like it’s your real name, definitely!”

“Heh, well... I prefer keeping ‘multiple’ identities, yeah.”

“You a spy? I know you were spying back there at the—”

“—Nah, nah! I was just... I appreciate a good meme when I see it.”

“Ok, I see...” She leans back in the chair. Closes her eyes. I think she’s almost gone to sleep. That soon, really? She wakes up, startled. Checks a small device strapped to her left wrist.

“Oh freak! I’m late!” She springs with force out of the chair and towards the door. [8:25].

“Wait, where—?”

“—The city needs me!” she says in a growly, rough voice as she reaches the exit.

“You forgot something!” She turns around and her eyes follow my hand pointing towards the mask. She does the walk back, much slower this time but refusing to show any signs of shame. She thanks me and puts the helmet on while I ask “Do you know what happened to me? Why I collapsed?” Her puzzled looks worry me a bit.

“I... don’t know really. A doc should be here soon, maybe they have some answers. Or you can call them on that remote behind you.” I turn to my right to find a wired button titled ‘Buzzer’. “See ya around!”

Batbro exits the room in a blink, leaving me in noncertainty. I press the buzzer and wait. I inspect the room once more but discover nothing new other than a massive square telly hanging from the ceiling and a potted green plant near the colourful semi-opaque window. Less than a minute later, a spiky-blue haired bloke in a whitecoat walks in the room accompanied by an orange haired lady in a baby-blue suit.

“Hello! My name is doctor M., and this is my assistant, missus O. How are you feeling, _____?”

“Besides a booming headache, I’m... Wait, how did you know my name?”

“Forgive us but we hoped to find any of your medical records on the NMDB {Net Medical Database} so we had to do I.D.-ing. Please allow my assistant to perform some tests while I explain.”

“Ok, sure.” The redhead assistant smiles at me then proceeds to check my pulse, temperature and other vital stats.

“You see, when you arrived, we had no idea what was wrong with you. High temperature, intermittent spazzing and stiff muscles were just some of the symptoms. We administered some relaxants, did some tests and tried to find your history but non gave any answers, until Batbro mentioned you’ve only been for a day in Liberta.”

“I’ve been for a week and a day actually but I was in a coma during that week.”

“Interesting...” The doc takes a note on his digipad “What was the cause?”

“Forced de-C.I.P.-ing.”

“I see... Ok, well that gave me an idea and I did a fresh analysis on a sample of CSF and there it was, *Naegleria fowleri* {brain-eating amoeba} as I suspected.” I’m speechless. I try to make a sound. The doc notices and continues “It’s also known as the ‘Amoeba of Madness’. It’s quite common in warm bodies of freshwater, even tap water. But in all my thirty years of experience I’ve never encountered a case of infection, they’re quite rare you know.”

“Lucky me!” I say sarcastically. The assistant finishes her tests, updates the doc then leaves the room.

“You have no idea how lucky. Usually symptoms of PAM {primary amoebic meningoencephalitis} occur a couple of days after infection and include headaches, fever, nausea or vomiting. Later, confusion sets in. Loss of balance, seizures and hallucinations.” Check, check and check. Except hallu — “—Tell me, did you go for a swim in the lake by any chance?”

“No... but I ate some fish rolls from a vendor and drank some water from a public fountain. Could it be —?”

“—No. Infection only occurs if the water is ingested nasally. Also, I doubt symptoms would show so soon after contamination so you had to get infected before that.”

“But I was in a hospital, in a coma. How...?”

“Precisely, you were in a coma... What hospital was it?”

“The... Ah, I forgot. It was a voluntary... on a hill in the south...”

“Oh, the SMASH division. They’re good folks but... well, I have my opinions...” Doc drops his eyes on the digipad, then continues “Regardless, after finding the cause we immediately began miltefosine treatment, along with some other drugs. We were also ready to perform some aggressive management of the brain swelling when we encountered... quite an obstacle...” The doc taps the pad a couple of times, lost in thought. “Please tell me, _____... Have you had any skeletal augmentations?”

“No way. I try to keep myself as pure as possible.” And those are too expensive anyway.

“Yes, yes... but the thing is... let me show you here on the pad. These are normal CT scans —” he scrolls through some mundane images of a scanned head, top and profile “—and these are CT scans of a patient with cranial titanium lacing. Observe the star-shaped artifacts. Those are the metal traces. And THIS—” he opens a pic that is almost totally black “—is an ultrascan of your head...”

... I catch myself staring in nonbelief. I close my mouth. I open it again. “This noncan be...”

“I’ve never seen such a thing in my life, nor have I ever heard of it. We double-checked our equipment. I’ve consulted with many colleagues of mine. Renowned rippers. Nobody has ever encountered such tech. Are you sure you haven’t—?”

“—I swear doc, never! Unless I was kidnapped by aliens.”

“Heheheh, let’s not jump to any rash conclusions, shall we? Heh...” He continues in a whisper “Although at this point, I’m tempted to take aliens into consideration.” He smiles with gusto but then turns all serious. “Look, mister _____, if you wish to keep it a secret, that is your business, it’s not my place to —”

“—Doctor M., I sincerely and utterly swear I am more puzzled than you are. I mean, just look at my teeth!”

“Yes, fine teeth you have. By all means they appear perfectly natural! And yet... ah, never mind. The important thing is that you survived. Believe me when I tell you, the only two cases of amoeba madness survivors that were documented in our town... Well, they were both children under fourteen.”

“Wow, for real?”

“Cross my heart! Survivors are in almost all cases children. You have to understand, this condition is so rare that we still don’t have any established treatment for it. Ninety-eight percent of cases are diagnosed post-mortem.”

“... Guess you’re right, I really am lucky...” AMA’s coin! I suddenly get these flashes, sweats and anger. What if...? What if she was just a hallucination? No, nonono. I pat my pockets, nothing. These are not my clothes!

“You lost something?”

“My clothes! I need to...”

“All your belongings are inside the drawers to your left.”

I hastily open the top drawer and grab everything. I check pockets, back pockets, bag pockets, nothing! My anxiety—

—90%—

“—It’s not here... maybe...”

“Check the other drawer.” Doc M. has been observing me patiently all this time. I open the bottom drawer and there it is! AM side looking at me. I grab the coin and inspect it closer in the light, making sure it’s real. “It rolled out of your pocket when you were brought in.” Doc’s words affirm once more that I’m sane.

Saner than I thought anyway.
But this is still no proof AMA herself was real!
You just found the coin on a street, remember?

Thank you, Captain Buzzkill! Sheesh... What was real then?

NOTHING is real, this is all a dream!

Fantasizing...

My anxiety subsides but it leaves a bitter aftertaste.

"Thank you, doc! For everything."

"You're welcome but I'm just doing my job. It's Batbro you should thank to, he paid for all this."

"Is this not an E.R.?"

"You are inside 'Saint Penelope's Grace' children's private hospital. We do have a Special Emergency Donation fund for noninsured patients, but it doesn't cover adults. And Batbro used our private medevac line. So..."

"Children's hospital...?"

"Yes..." Doc scratches his funky hair. "Quite ironic, isn't it? In light of your previous condition..." I non understand...

... Child PAM highest surviving...

"Ah yes, I see. Indeed! But I'm sure your help was vital to my survival too, doc."

"I doubt it." Doc smiles awkwardly. "In any case, I would like to keep you under observation for now. You're not showing any signs of neural degeneration or motor deficiencies but it's best to take precautions. Even so, I don't think we could do much work there either since we don't have any available tools that could cut through that strong skull of yours." Doc smiles slyly.

"Do you really think that...?"

"I'm sure of it. Anyway, I can't force you to stay but it would be a shame since Batbro paid in advance."

"How much in total? I want to repay him."

"Let's see..." *tap-tap* "... Three-point-thirty-three DK." He looks at me with even more slyness in his smile. "You know, if you really want to surprise him, you may instead make a donation to the S.E.D. fund in his name. I'm certain he would be pleasantly surprised. You can verify his bio-I.D. here if you have a public key. Look..." He shows me a profile of Batbro. Name, address, any personal info... completely hidden. His, I mean her face is censored in the tridigram but it's clear that she's wearing the mask, so I.D.-ing would still be nonpossible. It's basically a double layered anonymizer. Fudging genius, I'm... Anyway, I trust this ol' splonker to tell the truth. I round up to four and tap 'Donate'.

"Thank you, kind surr!" He says that in a weird, squeaky voice, quite different from his normal voice.

"Uhm, sure... no problem. Doc, do you have any uhm... decks or consoles I could jack in? To pass the time I mean, while staying here under your observation..."

"Well... Although we do have renting facilities, I strongly recommend against you jacking... in the Net for at least twenty-four hours. Or at least for the time being. I would prefer to have you as clear minded as possible. No H.U.D. functionality either. At least not for long durations."

"I see..." H.U.D. off... Doc notices my nonexcitement.

"But if you'd like, you can watch some cartoons on this silly beast in the ceiling!" He points to the old telly-box above me. "Remote is on the left side of your bed."

"Ok, I'll see if..." My nonexcitement deepens. Come on, watch some silly kids show on some ancient flatscreen...?

... Please! Begging—

—Sshhhh! Although in these circumstances—

—Sshhhh! I'd rather watch the cei—

—longing—

—ing-ing-ing—

—SSHHHH—

—SSHHHH—

—SSHHHH—

—iSTOPping!

.....

... Peace... The doc is staring at me... I'm not sure for how long... or if he said anything in that time. I never had this... Never have I experienced such instant peace of mind. No meditation technique, no preparation. Just a STOP and acceptance. Acceptance of any nonsatisfied desire. Of any obstacle. Acceptance of no power to change circumstances. All the nonpleasure, all the noncomfort: completely bearable. Not being able to jack in at home never felt this bearable. I excuse myself to the doc and thank him again. I forget what he said before he left. I turn the ancient beast on to find a meager selection of shows. Probably under five thousand. No search function I can find but there's a shuffle function. I shuffle it. First option in the watchlist... what... No, I must be halluci—

—need to believe—

'—Don... Monty's...'

'Crypt o' Circus'. I may be hallucinating or it may be just a coincidence of names. Regardless, I'm intrigued. I play the first episode.

The show starts with the view of a sea. But soon a man with a moustache, wearing an army hat and uniform starts walking out of the sea. He rises like a submarine, marching straight out of the water. On the shore the screen splits to a double. One slice shows the army man marching. The other shows a computer... but... A colourful sign under the computer writes '16 KILOTON BOMB'. The man marches seriously towards the bomb. Laughter track. The man, nonobservant of the imminent danger just marches straight to his doom. Steps right on the computer. Camera switches to his face. Only manages to say "It's—" before he's blown away to smithereens. "—Don Monty's Crypt o' Circus!" flashes on the screen, followed by more laughter and cheering. It sounds like it is filmed live?! It noncan be. But the show is not only super-silly, it's deep. Strong, free language but somehow restrained. It looks old enough but... technology discussed is post-Event. Well, no models I recognize but... And the metaphors... The subtle army prods... Yet clear message. Nonacceptant of authority... I ... LOVE IT! I watch for some time... Some things I do not understand. Some I laugh at, nonrestrained. And then... I realize one of the actors... Nah... Wait, it really IS Don Monty! Is it him? So young... longer hair... he looks so happy. What happened Don...?

I get a little sad and cannot focus on the show much. I'll watch it some other time. I sit in a pool of noncertainty. A pool of anger... At the people that kept this knowledge away from me. The MONObrainers. It does not matter though... Now I can start ignoring them since they're out of my life. And I want them out of my head too. Relaxed, I watch the ceiling. I close my eyes... mind is clear... nothing but ama... zing... thoughts... of A—

—MMMMM, oooh—

— ... Dem? Wh—

—I calm myself... I'd rather wait more. I enjoy postponing. Especially given the current... nonprivate situation. I try to—

—redress my mind before—

—dee-vee-ate—

—hard to progress—

—too much stress—

—I regress from—

—Let's nondigress.

—Yes-Yes, oh yes—!

Becoming less and less restrained, possessed
My brain in juice gets dressed
I feel so tested, sooo nested
In desires strongly festered
Nonrested, angered, pestered

...

I beg for some caress, it never passes
I'm asking for a bless, oh sweet oh bless

I'm grabbing on my a—

—Sshhhh—!

—I'm such a mess!

I might be depressed, feeling all suppressed
A losing game of chess, biologically oppressed

Aaaah...

...Music... Music...

... Beats... Beats...

...Music... Music...

... Beats... Beats—

—The release is such a pleasure,
What a treasure!

I just measure my happiness in months of leisure
If it's worth it I'm not so sure, it's much obscure
Green clouds my mind while I'm looking for a cure

Dee-light so pure as I bite this lure
Non can endure its magnetic allure

Aaaaah...

... Music... Music... / Bad medicine

... Beats... Beats... / On the run

...Music... Music... / Pure dopamine

... Beats... Beats... / Train o' fun...

Repeat... Repeat... Repeat... Repeat...

Wow... I have no idea where that came from. Maybe I have thought of this before but... It felt channeled.
Line by line. I was possessed! WHAT AM I!?! I keep finding these questions and anomalies regarding my past...
my present... my body... my mind... What can I trust anymore?!

... Uploading...

... Whatever. This goes straight in the RAM. I mean the RAL directory. It's almost like... a...

Shadowy fleeting image
in the corner—

—I check the metallic window and my heart is pumping heavily, still. I slowly move towards the window and look down. It's at least five levels up. Non could climb up here, let's get real.

Heart stabilizing...

I climb back in the soft, inviting, defiled bed. I try to pass the time. I re-read my newest addition to random access. I try to sleep but some idea haunts me... What if...? I cannot stay here, fud it! I jump out of bed and go for the lateral door titled 'bathroom'. It's a normal looking blue and rosey hygiene facility, but all devices are water-based. Toilet, faucet, bathtub-shower combo. I take a quick shower. The water is either too hot or too cold. I get chills and thrills and I hate it and love it! Such low-tech. What a savage way of life!

I feel refreshed and ready to bail the crime scene. I take my stuff and try to leave without notice, hopefully I can avoid those 'people' who were asking for—

“—Mister _____, I assume?” My exit is cut short by the tallest man I have ever seen. He's all cyber-clad with some neat 'warez but most of it looks bioware. Nice! Well... Uhm, dangerous too, I guess... At his sides stand two other professional-looking guys, well the one with the shaved head might be a feemale... They're packing some heavy-duty black jackets and heavy-duty black arms. Sunglasses on all three faces. One red, one white and one blue. In this case I think playing 'dumb' is probably dumb—

—and playing 'smart' is also dumb—

—So, I'm gonna play it 'safe'.

“Yep, that's me. Who's asking?”

“You're a very hard man to reach. My name is Kindawgs. These are my fellow squad-mates—” points to the nonshaved one “— Gear Bills and—” points to the shaved one “—Dox.” ... Mystery nonsolved. “And I have to tell you, mister _____... You are quite dumb.” Oh really???

“Is that so?”

“Yes. Courageous, I must admit. But really dumb.”

“Courageous? That's weird, I always saw myself as noncourageous.”

“Oh, you are dumbly courageous! You see, when we traced the Yamahack distress call—” oh fud “—we could not believe how you managed to break their top-security AND in top-notch time. Really, really beautiful work. It took security like fifteen minutes to figure it out.”

“Look, I think this is—”

“—And THEN you have THE BALLS to go to one of their chopshops and do a purchase with the stolen account. BRILLIANT!” He does this obviously faux and over-the-top adoration.

“Here's the thing, I was—”

“—Really lucky WE got the call first. Because fortunately for YOU, we're looking for such talent. So, we paid Yamahack for 'the trouble' and THEY agreed to... let it slide. Because I tell you, Ser Am was quite—”

“—Wait, who did you say?”

“Ser Am, the owner of Yamahack.”

“Ser Am is the owner?”

“Yes, you had the pleasure of meeting him?”

“I did... he...” I get this sudden rush to my head. I was... THIS close to probably... He was talking about dismemberment... HOLY—

“—He has this particular... dislike for hackers. Especially since he has that big banner on the site saying ‘Rewards offered for finding security holes.’ I mean, he’ll pay you! You don’ have to steal, dood!”

“Well, I’m... Look, thanks for bailing me out, I will pay you as—”

“—No, no, no, you see... There’s this thing called the N.A.P. you know. You signed it, didn’t you?”

“Yes, and read it.”

“But did you UNDERSTAND it?”

“I... I think I understood it.”

“No, you see... We’re not very welcoming to black-hat activities around here. But we do have a clause for first-time offenders in this case. Join us for temp-work and you get cleared out. Refuse and well... It’s out with you. No more Resistland access.”

“I see... How ‘temp’ is this work?”

“For your offense? Six months.”

“Hmmm...”

Tempting...

“Ok, sounds fair. I’m in.”

“I knew you’d make the right choice. Welcome to the team.” He turns around to leave. What, that’s it?

“Wait, so... I do not have to pay you back?”

Kindawgs turns his head to stare me down, turns back and says “We’ll see about that...”

“I do not enjoy vague statements.”

“And I do not enjoy children’s hospitals, yet here I am!” He says in joyful departure, leaving me in such noncertainty I have trouble thinking about anything at all.

...

I jump through a door called ‘Emergency Exit only’. No soul in sight, I should be able to avoid any more encounters of the sixth degree here. I end up in what seems to be a parking lot in the back of the hospital. A few cars are lying around. I approach a yellow one stamped with an SQR {Stereo QR code} on the side next to ‘Carentals Inc. Ltd. Rent our crap or wear our cap! Driver-rental in linked Dapp’. I peer inside and it looks like it has a deck-board but also pedals on the floor and a stick in the middle. There are no such things in Monoscape... I nonbelieve I can drive a nonautomated antique car. Maybe it does have some assistance on that deck. But I’d rather not. The yellow lamp above me flickers. Flickers again. I look around and see a few fleeting shadows move around in the far corner of the car lot. A green bush is in the corner. My curiosity gets the best of me and I approach. I hear more brushing sounds. I look inside the bush AND... Nothing. Someone or some THING was here. Or maybe more than one—

—ALIEN—

—SSHHHH! Scarylizing...

We’re surrounded by vegetation. And it all looks so real. I break a piece of the greenery and smell it. I squeeze it between my fingers. I hear chirping around my head. How is this possible? To have life in the underground? I’m simply—

—movement—

—I spot a tail, if only for a fraction of a sec. [9:39]. I’m tempted to investigate further but the buzzing insects flying around creep me out enough to cancel detective-mode. I turn around and follow with my eyes the outline of the ten-story building of the hospital. Its red, mushroom-shaped roof is pouring white light over its walls. A few people are pouring in and out of the back entrance. I walk slowly towards the hospital and exit the lot on the left side. Retro-neo-gothic buildings look down on me all around. I approach the gate of a dark-

grey tower. Gargoyles squat at equal distances on the crumbling walls. I gaze deep in the eyes of the closest gargoyle. A devilish smile and yet its eyes look scared. I stand there, mesmerized as the minutes drain in the corner of my HUD. I feel I have more in common with this stone monster than I have with either the underworld or the overworld people. I feel stuck between black and white, in a space where nothing is defined. What have you done to me, Father?!?! What am I? Who can I trust if I non...? If non ... If I CAN'T trust even myself...

...Dude trusting...

Dudeman... I trust him, yeah... I trust him with my life. I open the digimap and place some waypoints to his approximate location. I remember his house was somewhere right...

Movement—

—The stone gargoyle in front of me seems to have moved. It was real subtle but... ITS EYES ARE DIFF—

—SHHHH, get real, no wai—

—Let's get out of here. I follow the waypoints closely; Dude's house is not far. I get this very chilly feely of being watched or followed but I'm just going to ignore that—

—and increase the pace—

—Pacing—

—until I get far enough from those... The flickering lights of the town seem afraid of me as I move under each of them. I can't shake the feeling I'm being watched still... It's probably some phobia. Monophobia. I do a detour through the Commons to retrieve my gun then I approach Dude's Street and start recognizing the buildings. [10:10] I knock on the door and Alf greets me. Dude greets me a few minutes later with morning sickness showing all over his body. I tell him the 'short version' of what happened to me of late, except for the Ama episode.

"Daamn, son... that's... wheew... I mean, what the fuck? I told you to—! ... Well, at least I'm glad you're alright. KEKdamn! ..."

"Never mind the amoeba or the... incident... What about my ultrasceans? My skeleton is fully augmented but all analysis shows it is bio. How is that possible?"

"Ayyyee... don't know, boy. And I doubt that Monogeeks could come up with something like that."

"Who else, Dude?! I lived all my life in... well, it's nonpossible they would augment me when I was a child."

"Well, maybe. But you say it's bio tissue. So, who knows? Maybe..."

"Nonpossible!"

"Fine, fine!!!" Dudeman ponders for a little then says "Look, 'mi casa es tu casa.' {My house is your house} Search for some answers if you'd like. I have a subscription to a service that can get you inside Mononet in minutes, maybe you can find some answers better than I can."

"Thanks, but the doc recommended I don't jack in today."

"Suit yourself then. I have to leave in half an hour but I'll be back by evening. There's music, movies, anything you want to pass the time. And Alf will cook you some delicious roast if you ask him nicely, that is."

"Thanks Dude. I guess I've had enough sightseeing anyway. I'll stick around."

"Uber-cool, Dem!"

Before he leaves, I get this urge to... "Dude, can I ask you a question?"

"Well, can you?"

"I... heh... Forgive me for inquiring in your biz again but... You seem to know a lot about this place. And by what you've told me, you must have known about it for a VERY long time. I mean... Why have you not...? I mean... How come you did not...?"

"You need to work on your exposition boy, your mind is dancing like a—"

“—You don’t even have a MONO-jack, Dude! What the f...? Why were you in Mono? HOW were you living in the Monostate without having a C.I.P—?”

“—Boy, when I told you there’re MANY things you don’t know about the Monobrainers, I meant it. I told you, I’ve been privileged all my life, in MORE ways than one. I’ve been part of the ‘inner circle’ you know. The usual ‘rules’ don’t apply to the big people as they do for the little people. If you play your cards right, that is...”

“But why did you stay??? From the sounds of it, you also hate them—”

“—I don’t **hate** them! Well, not most of them anyway. Look, the ‘Monostate’ is not some big-bad-wolf shit-hat sitting in a room and commanding everyone else and they’re like ‘Yes, surr!’ and do his little dance. Well... at least I hope so! The ‘Monostate’ is just an idea! And ideas are like viruses. They **control** people, people don’t **control** them. And there’s good people in the Monostate, it’s just that they’re... **misdirected**.”

“... So, you wanted to help them?”

“Yes! But I was getting too old for that shit! I guess my breaking-point was way higher than Noel’s, bwahahahahah! That ol’ fudster, he always made me laugh!”

“You knew NOEL???? Woooah...”

“Yeah, he was top doner for Luna’s. Man, I tell ya... That thing probably would’ve never launched if he didn’t twee—”

“—Sweet NON, this is so cool! What was he like? What did you do together? What’s his favourite ice cream? Did you keep in touch after he—?”

“—Woaah there kid, take it easy! Let’s leave some answers for the next episode, shall we? Bwaahahahah! I have work to do.”

“Ok... always working, eh?”

“Well, I say ‘work’. Heh heh...”

I leave D-man to his biz while I sink myself and my thoughts in the rough leather couch. I don’t care much for music nor movies nor... Well, I could go for some ‘roast’, whatever that is. I ask Alf very, very nicely and he escorts me to a large dining area with a long, long table in the middle. Big candelabras hang from the ceiling, smaller ones are on the table, an atmosphere I’ve only read about in medieval stories. I take a seat at one end of the table and I feel like the master of the manor. I imagine my family and friends... well... seated all around the table, waiting for the feast to begin. The servant brings a steel-domed platter. He raises the dome and under the steam and aroma he presents a brown, roasted thing. Alf starts slicing and reveals the reddish flesh inside. He hands me a full plate with a side of potatoes and sauce and pours some red liquid in a large glass.

“What’s that?”

“Wine {alcoholic beverage typically made from fermented grapes; popular with, basically, everyone arou —} surr! Would you prefer something else? This wine is quite vintage, surr, it goes down perfectly with this roast, I highly—”

“—Pour away, Alfie my man! I trust your expertise.”

“Just a routine job, nothing more surr.”

“Heheheh, still... Top-notch work!”

“Bon appetee!” {‘Bon appétit’: ‘Enjoy your meal’}

“Thank you, Alf!”

The smell leaves my mouth watering. I cut a piece and put it in my mouth. My oh my! Taste buds I did not know existed become activated. They hurt at first and I get a weird feeling... But then it’s just pleasure after pleasure in my mouth. I guess I’m a carnivore now!

My ‘ape-tee’ is very ‘bonned’.

My instincts tell me I should dig in like an animal but for roleplay's sake I keep the appearances going. Soon enough I realize I'm fuller than expected but my meal is not finished.

"Sorry Alf, I can't eat it all. But that was an EXCELLENT roast!"

"I'm glad you enjoyed it, surr!"

I take a sip of the red liquid that sits in the wobbly glass. Yet other taste buds get activated. It's sweet but also sour and it leaves a trail of warmth in my throat.

"So, this is what real alcohol tastes like, eh?"

"One hundred per cent, sir! Thirteen-point-four per cent concentration. Carefully aged in the finest cellars of Cowdoceus—"

"—INFINITELY better than the synth crap they serve in Monobars."

"I wouldn't know, surr. I can't drink it."

"Why not?" I wickedly ask.

"I've got an intolerance to fructose."

"Heheheh—"

"—Also, it would fry my circuits."

"I see. Well, here's to you, then! Cheers!"

I raise my glass then gulp another two or three sips from the divine grail. The mention of circuits ruins the medieval mood though, so I excuse myself and leave the table. But not before I take the glass with me. I admire the statues along the halls. I observe the paintings with great scrutiny. And I think to myself... 'Inner circle', eh? So, Dude was part of 'the club', eh? Heh...

The book! I remember my most prized possession. I've totally forgotten about it in all this excitement. Perfect time to enjoy some old literature. Some 'uncensored' literature...

I find a cushy spot on the sofa and open up the first page. The second page. Third-fourth. I'm... I'm eating it up! What in the...? So, first of all, 'Hate Week' sounds too much like 'Hate Mass' in both name and function. Bidirectional 'telescreens'? Langwatch. 'Anything above a very low whisper would be picked up by it.' We busted that myth, alright! 'Big Brother'? Well, the A.I.s are kinda like that. Or is it more like the C.O.N.? Yeah, the 'Big Siblings'. "Thought-police": Mindwatch, obviously. "Ministry of Truth" is Netwatch. Netwatch? Hmm... 'Ministry of Love' is Overwatch, definitely! Or is it Mindwatch...? Uhm... 'Ministry of Plenty'... eh... Corpwatch. Or Monotemple, maybe? 'Newspeak' is obviously the Pee-pees*. 'Speakwrite' is voice command. Winston says it is 'April 4th, 1984' but he doesn't know for sure. Can we know for sure...?

War movies are popular, spot on. Two minutes of hate... What about fifteen to thirty minutes, eh? A bit off the mark there, Georgie, but... Wow... just wow... 'Junior Anti-Sex League'? No such thing in the Monostate. The 'black-haired girl.' Danger? Hmm... Snuffbox, sandy-haired, clap-trap? I non... 'Emmanuel Goldstein, Enemy of the People!' must be Noel...

Freedom of speech, freedom of the press, freedom of assembly, freedom of thought? Non. Peace with other nations? 'The Brotherhood' must be the Resistance, but I've never heard of such... It was all just 'terro' this and 'terro' that. 'Thought-crime' mindcrime, 'vaporized' nonperson, 'doublethink' the split...

'We shall meet in the place where there is no darkness...'

*The Positivity Programs was an initiative taken in the (20)30's under the guise of "bringing peace of mind to Monosociety." The ProMoters reached the stupid GENIUS conclusion that removing certain "nonpositive" words from the language and introducing certain "positive" changes will help in wiping out any "nonpositive" thoughts in Monosociety. Of course, this was really dumb INGENIOUS and because people were very "nonpositive" after the Event, they gulped it bait-hook-and-line.

Mutability of the past? 'He who controls the past, controls the future. He who controls the present, controls the past. The past has not merely been altered; it had been actually destroyed. How could you establish even the most obvious fact when there existed no record outside your own memory?' Like Father...

But the world described in the book is a dusty, 'dirty', crumbling, war-torn landscape. The Monostate is far from it. Maybe my homepod was not that tidy, but the rest of it was a sterile environment. The underworld resembles O.'s vision much better, at least visually. And there are no enemy states as described here, no war with some 'Eu-' or allied with some 'Ea-' or vice-versa. There are no other states, except the Monostate. And yet, perpetual war does exist... The eternal War on Bioterror. The nonvisible enemy. And the rectifying of data... There's no need for a Ministry of Truth! The censor A.I.s do all the work! Well, someone has to oversee the A.I.s, I guess.

One of the characters, Parsons, is a person described as a 'tubby, middle-sized man with fair hair and a froglike face with rolls of fat at the neck and waistline'. He mentions his kids following a man in the woods and then denouncing him to the authorities for 'being a foreigner.' The evidence? His daughter noticed the man was wearing a funny kind of shoes. She said she'd never seen anyone wearing shoes like that before.

Wow... really?? Fashion crimes in 1984:
Wearing different shoes from everybody else.
Fashion crimes in 2084:
Wearing the same shoes as ANYBODY else.

L.O.L.-ing...

Heheh... But the thing that clicks in my mind is when Winston asks 'What happened to the man?' to which fatman replies he 'cannot say' but 'wouldn't be surprised if—'

'—Ready! Aim! FIRE!'

I replace the word 'foreigner' in my mind with the word 'bioterrorist'. The resemblance is noncanny. And we got to see the proof at Hate Mass. Sure, they censored it, and some...

...nonscientific theories...

...might say the vids were deepfaked... But the protocol is to 'terminate on sight'. I've seen it! With my own eyes... My bio eyes, before I...

... I bet this year they were gonna
BAN farting, like really—

—XD...

The parallels are too real. Sure, you have to read between the lines. You have to interpret, to suspend nonbelief a little, but it's toox—

—nox wayx—

—:?!—

—#Zfgds—

—Dfksngn—

—iSTOP!

... NON...

... ON...

... N...

... O...

...WAY!

... Dooooood...

George was a prophet. The book was released in '1950' it says, so it has to be fiction... But is it? Was the Monostate created much earlier than we were made to believe? I just eat up the rest of the book... Hours or days pass, I do not know. Time only passes for me in the story, I'm reading a book from the past telling me how the future is in my present."

You mean to tell me that this bloke
told people of the Monostate and
people were like 'Meh... I'm fine with that.'???

How else would the Monostate exist? How would you force people to talk and walk like bots? It makes sense now. People ACCEPTED the Monostate as something GOOD. The least of all devils, right???

Dood! This is basically what LotO
is all about! Holy—

—Perhaps, but it is too abstract. But yeah... heh... The people put the boot on their own face, voluntarily. Oooh, the irony!

'Gloooory to the Monostate!'

'Stomp my face and don't be late!' The production statistics, the obedience, the... uniformity. 'All is good in the Monohood... Trust us!'

The last pages of the book leave me... Stunned. Totally stunned. The book took me on a rollercoaster I will never forget, but which I will want to revisit... Soon if possible. After the last page I find something scribbled on the back of the back-cover. I scan the text hoping my A.A. will pick up something.

'E alegerea ta, alegerea ta e doar a ta
Nu-i a nimănuī altcineva, nu-i altcineva
Care te va forța să dai, cu parul în țeasta ta.
E în mâna ta, toată asta e decizia ta
Mâine, azi, altcândva este treaba ta
Dar e treaba-mea-atunci-când-forțezi pe altcineva,
Pe altcineva, pe altcineva...

Dacă dai cu parul în țeasta sa
De ce n-ai da cu parul și-n țeasta mea?
Așa că hai... Valea-din-calea mea
Că dacă dai cu parul, te-n pula mea!
Te-n pula mea, te-n pula mea, te-n pula mea...
La infinit, la infinit, la infinit...'

No success. It does resemble... Latin? But wouldn't the A.A pick that up? Only the last word looks familiar, but who knows if it actually means inf... I give up on trying to decipher the rest of the text. [13:57] Heh, the commonspikers adopting newspeak in their language. Priceless irony... Priceless!

I loiter around not knowing what to do. [13:58]. Not wanting to do anything. [13:58:25]. Well except for... [13:58:59] You know what, I don't need to jack-in, I'll just surf off-jack. I grab a PDA from the hundreds hidden inside the secret stash in the couch. Dude said it's no prob' but he also said 'Third time I'm taxing you!' Fair enough! I log-in and—

—Twenty-two thousand messages, for real??? Most of them are lovely spam, but a good chunk of it is job requests. Wow, I... My reputation seems to have preceded me. Of course, we can ignore all that. I have a 'temp-job' now. A 'job' as voluntary as the 'job' I had at the eldercare. Karma's a butcher... Hmm, let's see. Dude said something about a Mono—

[—Hey! Guess who?'] I get an I.M. from username 'MoonMyMistress'. Hmmm, it can't be AMA... But what if?

['U AFK?']

['What's my secret?']

['???']

[...]

['Father?']

['Bingo!']

['How did you get my id?']

['... Sorry! I had to snoop in memory. pda's working as new btw']

['Understandable. I'm glad you did actually.']

['... Congrats{kudos} on joining the squad! :)']

['No way! You're part of Kindawgs squad?']

['Bingo! ^_^']

['Heh, I feel a bit better now that I know this.']

['... ???']

[...]

['... You do know the reason why I got hired, right?']

['... ?...?']

She doesn't know... Or does she? Is this a bluff? Should I tell her? What if she will hate me for it? She'll find out sooner or later anyway, I nonbelieve I can...

['I've been a cheeky boy!']

['... ??? ???']

['Got busted for a blackhack.']

['... Choice was temp-work or hit-the-road.']

[...]

['Still like me?']

['... How bad was the hack?']

['Six months.']

[...]

['... I'm really not in a position to judge.']

['Oh, you've been cheeky too?']

['... Maybe I still am... >:~']

['Is it just me or is it getting hot in here? :)']

[':~)']

[...]

['I really enjoyed... yesterday. With u...']

['Me too. I miss your kiss.']

[...]
['... ???']

Oh no... Oh nonono, please don't tell me that was a hal—

['—We didn't kiss?']

[...]
['... No... U held my hand for a long time but then... Nothing.']

[...]

['... At one point u startled me and I hit the PDA by accident...']

['... Do I have a story to tell you...']

I re-view the amoeba incident and some of my behaviour at the Bitch Park starts making sense to her. AMA is all 'o_O' and '=O' but in the end we both laugh at the madness of life and then I ask...

['When can I see you again? I've got some debts to pay.']

['... ???']

['Sensual debts wink-wink']

[...]

[...]

[]

[...]

['... This weeks been megabusy, sorry!']

['... We might meet in the field if we lucky']

['... ???']

['... On the job wink-wink']

['Roger that!']

['... If not, I'll see ya Saturday, right?']

['Sounds good.']

['... For the baptism, remember?']

I did forget about it but...

['How could I forget?']

['... ^_^']

['g2g! :*']

['Ok, bye!']

'MyMistress' logs off... I try to log my mind off her. I try to but it's nonpossible. Ah, what's the use? I am a slave and I should get used to it. Maybe I can dial it down a little, to not appear so needy. But a part-time slave is still a slave. At least with the Res' I had a choice. The hack was a choice, I knew there could be repercussions. I actually thought of worse repercussions. But with AMA? No choice. What can I do to escape this...? This... lo... Only dead can save me from—

—Nonthinking deading! Barring...

I'm not gonna do that! But I also don't know how to ESCAPE this feeling. The triple plus slow dripping of time when nonAMA. The triple-plus-fast dripping of time when AMA. Everything pales in comparison right now.

Maybe it will pass though. Maybe it's just nonfulfilled desires. Maybe I'll wake up tomorrow and I'll be miracally cured!

Maybe...

I need to believe. I'll just have to distract myself. Let's see... I log—...—in the Mononet service using the account Dude has provided me with. It's got some interesting array of tappers all around the globe so most requests should go easily through, no feet-on-the-ground jobs. Searching through the DB's of City7 I see they get access to lots of places, even langwatch feeds. Of course, searching for my files through the DBs of my hospital, my pod-complex and my corp lands no results. Well, I should use 'ex' when referring to these locations. How am I supposed to track down Father when neither of us has a trail? There's no option to access the APDB or any Army DB for that matter, at least not through this service. And I doubt that would do me much good but who knows? For fun, I look around Tekocorp and see Crist puffing on his cigarillo, stressed and serious as usual. Magan is up to some shenanigans it seems but where is K-man? Hmmm... There's no... No... I get chills down my spine. They haven't... There's no records of him! What have they done??? Is this my fault? I can only hope he also escaped. I shudder thinking that I somehow 'corrupted' him and he decided to do something stupid... I... Well, if he was 'corruptible' I guess sooner or later he would've woken up regardless of my actions. Right?

...

...

I look around the eldercare DB to find Eka, but she is listed as a 'patient', that has to be an error, right? Right??? ['Search'] video-feeds.

Eka is sitting in a chair in the middle of a white, padded room. Her eyes betray absence, a total catatonic state. No, nononono... I search through the archives for the earliest entry. Eka is brought in, screaming and shouting "WHAT HAVE YOU DONE TO MY BOY?!? BRING ME BACK MY BOY!!!" Eka, no... no... Tears start streaming down my face like waterfalls, dripping all over the screen, noncare. Why...? Why, Eka, why?...

Hate and rage take me next. THEY did this to her, it's not her fault. She was an angel and the Monofucks cut her wings. The Monofucks are going to pay. The fact that I'm indebted to the Resistance has no relevance to me anymore. I'm coming for you, Monofucks! I'm coming for you...

... [17:49] I must have dozed off. Dude is not around but he should have been back by now. Just a couple of messages pending, most are splonk but one of them is...

['It's time for your training. Our squad HQ loc is attached. The sooner you get here, the better.']

Signed 'Kindawgs'. I grab my stuff and leave in a hurry. The waypoint layout takes me south through the Plaza and into the nonrich area called 'The Swamp'. I remember coming through here on my first day and it looks just as disgusting as it did then. All sorts of shady chars move around, busily tinkering walls or tilling their farms. I get a couple of coin requests but I just ignore them, I'm not falling for that again. I'm in front of the last waypoint and the building looks out of place. It has strong, metallic walls with tinted, reinforced windows and a semi-tidy courtyard. There is a slotted box hanging near the entrance and a plaque that reads 'Shotgun Shawn'. I wait in front of the door for a short while but then I remember I have yet to see an auto-door around here. But I can't just barge in, that would be nonrespectful. But then, how do I—?

“—You’re earlier than I expected. Good.” The door is wide open and Kindawgs eyes are barely visible behind the upper frame of the door. “Come in.” But before I manage to pass the threshold, he snatches the cig from my mouth and throws it away. “No smoking inside.” Fine!!! Inside I find a place of major operations. Decks on the walls, consoles on the floor, with armor and high velocity-looking weaponry thrown in-between. Piles of small, metallic cans are spread around, most of them crushed. Must be aluminum. Dox is typing on one of the decks, nonjacked and nonminding my presence. Gear Bills is fooling around with a doglike drone that’s eager to endlessly return a bone that Bills keeps throwing away. Bills smiles at me before he resumes his play. It’s the only smile I’ve seen in this place so far. I look around but can’t see AMA anywhere.

“Please excuse the mess. You’ve already met the others. Well, there’s also Ama but she’s always out somewhere.”

“Actually, I’ve also met Ama.”

“Is that so?” Kindawgs is linking dots in his mind “Ok, training. First, you must take The Oath.”

“The Oath?”

“Put your hand on this book.” He’s holding a book with a long-foot-cross on the cover. I place my palm on it. “Now raise your right hand.” I do as he asks. “Now repeat after me: ‘I swear by KEK to uphold the Word’.”

“I swear by KEK to uphold the Word.”

“Only KEK’s Word can save the World.”

“Only KEK’s Word can save the World.”

“His will I swear to eternally hold.”

“His will I swear to eternally hold.”

“In times of strife and pain untold.”

“In times of strife and pain untold.” Hey, wait a minute...

“From this moment till I’m old.”

“From this moment till I’m old.”

“I shall fight or drop dead cold.”

“I shall fight or drop dead cold.” I didn’t sign up for this!!

“Shahdeelay.” Kin, Bills and Dox say in unison.

“Shah-dee-lay...?”

Kindawgs remains silent for a moment, his eyes fixed to the floor. He looks at me and says “You are now a collaborator of the Resistance. KEK’s Word is yours to keep and I recommend you read it when you get the chance.” He holds the book forward; it almost looks like it is hovering in his hand. He’s waiting for me to pick it up. I hesitate. I take it. KEK’s Word? So KEK wrote a book? But I thought he’s not a real person. Well, I’m still struggling with what he actually is. “In summary it covers most of what the N.A.P. is about. Now, our mission, in general, is to spread the Word wherever we can, including the Monostate. Since you are an ex-Mono, you should know that that is not an easy job.”

“Yes, they—”

“—But such a task is not suited for noobs. Luckily for you there is plenty of other work to be done. Here, let me show you.” Kindawgs fires up one of the consoles and scrolls through a myriad of directories. He lands on a folder titled ‘cryptscr’. “Everything you need to know about cryptscript is here. Take a seat and familiarize yourself with the code. If you have any questions I’ll be around.” He gets to leave but is reminded of something “Oh and don’t try to jack-in yet. We’re still working on a clearance. It should be ready by tomorrow.”

“Aye, aye—”

“—I’m serious! I’d hate having to scrape your brains off the walls. We just renovated the place.”

“Oh... kay...” Wow, that must be some really hot ice he’s talking about.

I find the whole situation kind of cold. I expected more fanfare, more action. I thought that ‘training’ meant Kin was going to teach me how to fight, how to shoot, a simulation of their operations ‘in the field’ or anything like that. Meh... I’m curious about this cryptscript though. As I expected, it uses pictograms instead of syntax. These are interchangeable depending on the date and hour of compiling. Well, that’s going to be a horror show without jacking in. Garbage data blocks are just auto-generated hashes that validate authenticity. It takes me a while to get used to this new frame of mind but soon after I’m able to play around with it by sending some simple messages back and forth in its emulated environment. This would be much easier if I could just jack-in though... I feel a bit slow, there’s some functions I struggle with but my ego does not let me ask for help. As I delve deeper into my studies, I get this feeling that I’m being watched. I look behind me to find Gear Bills observing me and my progress for who-knows-how long. He just smiles with no words. Is lang that expensive around here? I attempt to break the ice.

“Hey!”

“What’s up?”

“Doing my ‘training’ I suppose. You?”

“I couldn’t help but notice you haven’t asked any questions. Do you find cryptscript that easy to understand?”

“No, it’s actually quite challenging. But intriguing nonetheless. Non of the things I know about coding apply here. It forces me to think ‘outside the cube’.”

“Heheh, indeed. You’re not a fan of asking questions?”

“Not exactly, I enjoy a bit of philosophy. I guess I’m not a fan of asking for help.”

“Why is that?”

“It’s because—! I... hmmm... I never thought of that before...” Bills is watching me closely with stoic patience. “Truth is, I do not know why. I’ve always tried to learn things on my own.”

“And how is that working out for you?”

“Pretty well, up till now. Things under Mono were pretty easy to learn. Not much to learn anyway. I had to navigate through all the splonk though. Tons of useless, unreliable info and entertainment. But what I had was not enough. On the other hand, here...” I take a look around, amazed still by this brave, new world I have encountered “... there are so many questions to ask I feel nonadequatesometimes. I fear I’m wasting people’s time with my inquiry.”

“Interesting... Has anyone ever complained of your inquiries?”

“Non that I remember... No.”

“We all get that sometimes. Just remember that it’s all in your head and you’ll be fine. It’s easy to fall in the trap of overanalyzing stuff.”

“Heh, I guess you’re right. You know... I find it quite easy carrying a discussion with you. Even me admitting that is something I would’ve done only inside my head.”

“I’m glad to hear that. You should know you are among friends here. Kindawgs may seem cold but that’s just his job as the leader. And Dox is... Well, Dox just keeps to herself.” Heh...

“Mystery solved there at least.”

“What do you mean?”

“I wasn’t sure what kind of ‘self’ she is.” I say it in a whisper. She’s not in the room but better safe than...

“Does it matter to you though?”

“What you mean?”

“Would it make a difference if she was a ‘he’? Or even identified as something else?”

“Hmm, maybe, maybe not. I just do not enjoy noncertainty. I’m kind of a dualist on most issues.”

“There’s plenty of uncertainty in this world. How do you deal with that?”

“I just... hmmm... I guess I just ‘deal with it’? I just accept it and move on.”

“Exactly. And that can be applied to people too.” He puts a hand gently on my shoulder “Look, I know people in Mono are obsessed with genders. And from what I can tell that bothered you and that’s OK! But you should know that in the underworld people don’t really care about your gender. But we also try to be respectful to one another. We do not inquire in someone’s biz but misgendering someone is not a crime either. We crack jokes all the time if that happens, and yet—” he whispers “—I wouldn’t do that with Dox if I were you.” I wink to confirm. “Because some people may actually prefer to be seen as an ambiguous sex, especially in the Resistance. It’s an extra layer of proxy, you know?”

“Heh, yeah... Well, when you put it THAT way... Yeah, I see.”

“Now, if people share some info with you it goes without saying that it stays between the two of you, unless otherwise specified. A secret is more valuable than a bar ton of gold.”

“I like that, I agr—”

“—BUT, heh... Look, here’s a free one—” he winks “—Kin is gonna treat you like crap for a while because he has to teach you a lesson. But there’s no hard feelings in reality. He has high hopes he can turn you around. We NEED people with your talent badly. The Res’ meta-intraNet infrastructure is constantly being optimized by thousands around the globe but there can never be enough hands-on-decks.”

“I see what you did there! But how do you optimize it?”

“You can find the job offers on the DBBS actually. It’s paid by the minute, yep! Those that swear ‘The Oath’ are given Level 1 Res’ clearance under observation. That which you now have.”

“I like the sound of that.”

“Just remember. You swore on KEK’s Word. If you do not respect the NDA, you’re not only responsible to us, you are responsible to KEK. ‘And KEK shall judge ye accordingly!’”

“Hey that sounds familiar! Is that...? It sounds like a quote from LotO.”

“I wouldn’t be surprised, KEK’s Word has inspired many works of fiction. I haven’t heard of this ‘LotO’ though, what’s it all about?”

“Ah, well... It’s an epic medieval fantasy sword-and-sorcery adventure RPG called ‘Lords of the Overlords’. Eeh, it’s got quite a huge story but the main idea is... There are these artefacts known as ‘The Sword of Wisdom’, ‘The Book of Might’, ‘The Stick of Magic’ yeah, it’s an actual tree branch, heh... Anyway, there’s twelve artefacts in total of which legend says ‘When combined, they shall give ultimate power to the wielder’. You become a Divine Avatar... A sort of demigod or something. A ‘Lord’ of the Overlords.”

“Interesting.” Bills just listens patiently; I can’t believe it! No one would listen to this in the —!

—Sshhhh, come on!

I was getting into it.

Enjoy—

“—Yeah, but the trick is that they’re all hidden very, very well. The location is never obvious. It involves following lots of quests that require both brains and brawn to complete and there’s no hand-holding either. No waypoints, no markers! You have to take notes sometimes, draw on your maps and stuff like that. There are riddles, limericks and lots of dialogues with lots of super-duper coded NPCs, well... Sometimes the A.I. is a bit splonk but... Regardless, the riddles can get quite tricky and cryptic. At one point you have to learn some ancient lizard tongue to unlock one of the artefacts.”

“I see... What happens if you actually combine these artefacts?”

“You really want the spoilers?”

“I’m not a big fan of playing video games. But you can be vague if you want.”

“Heh... Well, let’s just say the ‘ending’ highly depends on the decisions you take during your gameplay. Your ‘moral decisions’ that is. And there are plenty of scenarios in which your actions can have horrible outcomes. Villages get burnt to the ground, plagues can spread through the lands or you can even send the whole realm into total war, yeah! That stuff will drop your moral balance to a negative much faster than you can ever recover it and the algorithm behind it is almost nonexploitable. Almost... When you combine all artefacts, your moral balance is taken into account and ‘Ye are judged accordingly!’ and you either ascend to the Divine or descend to the Nondivine. There’s actually eight different endings but the point is...” I get lost in thought... There are some things I have never thought about... things...

“What ending did you get? Or maybe endings?”

“I always found ‘the path of NON’ most enjoyable. There’s no actual ‘paths’ in the game, that’s just how the community came to define general playthrough styles. Sorry, I’m getting lost in details here —” Bills just smiles “—I just tried to stay out of trouble and avoid any big decisions or responsibilities. When needed, I would steal and lie to the NPCs, sometimes just to finish the game faster because it’s so fuddin’ huuuge —”

“—I see, and the ending?”

“It’s weird, no matter how much I try to... ‘exploit’ the engine, the path of NON always leads to a balance of zero in the end. Ironic, isn’t it?”

“Heh... And what happens on judgment day?”

“I neither ascend nor descend. My avatar remains stuck in the land of NON, the ‘Void’ or the ‘Valley of Nonbeing’.” I look at Bills with horror in my eyes and say “‘Ye be prayin’ for a knife to slit yer own throat when ye walkin’ in the Valley of Nonbeing!’ This is the final warning you get from the ‘old wise gravedigger’. He says that and then he spits in an empty grave just before you enter the Tomb of Nonsense where the final artefact rests. Heh, yeah, it’s quite epic but very underrate —”

“—There’s a similar quote in KEK’s Word.” He points to the antique book laying on the table. “I think you’re going to enjoy it.”

“Wow, really??? And here I thought LotO was a completely original piece of work.”

“The word of KEK is eternal.”

“Eternal? As in ‘infinite’?”

“Eternal are the Lands of KEK. Such is known that KEK is eternal and His Word shall always echo throughout His Creation.”

“But infinite, how is that...?”

Bills just looks at me. He smiles... “You must be quite tired, Dem. Everyone else is asleep.” [2:35] Wow... “If you wish you may crash in the guest room.” He checks his surroundings “If we get along you might even move in if you want.”

“Mmmm. Thanks, I could use the rest!”

“Cool.”

I turn off the console but not before I log out as instructed. He leads me to a room that’s next to a door with a sign that says ‘Keep OUT!!!’. The guest room is small and cozy with a single bed, trunk and table and nothing else. Just darkened yellow walls and a darkened window. A yellow bulb above the table gives the whole room a medieval vibe. Even the bed looks stuffed. Or something. Almost medieval in my eyes.

“I do love this, Bills. Looks straight outta LotO!”

“Heheheh... I’m glad you enjoy it. Good night!”

“Good night!”

I lay in bed and feel the springs inside a bit too rough. Eh, well... I'm so tired... I imagine... that... infinite... lands... infinite... noncertainties... inf...

I wake up! [4:20] AM of course, oh, no... This is still going... The same dream I have every night, except...!

The trees were there... The people, the nonprotections, the nonvisible girl. But... I turned around. I saw... I saw him. The one who shot me. I saw IT. IT was IT... Lomoc... I cannot shake the paralyzing fear I felt. Felt like... Catrium Arceri was it called...? So dark... The gothic... The bells of nonliving. That's what I felt. That's what I FEEL now. The infinite darkness... Lomoc... But it's just a dream! We saw it fall motionless to the ground. That jack surely must have... killed... it. There's no way it survived! Except... if...

Brainchaining?

We don't know that! We don't even know how it works! It's... highly nonfidential. Eh, but even if let's say it DID actually SURVIVE. IT is THERE and WE are HERE.

You do remember the directive
on an Omniwatch termination offence,
right? 'Hunt 'em down to the ends of Terra!'

Yeah, well the Resistance knows that too. You've seen the kind of security they're packing. It's almost open-source with lots of steaks in the pot. Imagine that, paid by-the-minute! Come on, it is uber-super-duper-coo—
—ling Dem hot—

—So that whole 'going to Mono' plan
is out now? No mo' 'Monofuck'
this and 'Monofuck' that?!

... I know I said that. I was angry, sad... and vengeful. But look, they paid with Lomoc. If NON wills it, it is actually DEAD and we—

—All that philoso-talk and NON of the—

—Actions... Reanalyzing...

... ACTION is not always good. Sometimes the path of NON is actually the best. The path of NONRESISTANCE. The silent protest...

...

Father...

... If Father is alive, he must be in the underworld. He might even be on Resistland territories! But how in the Hades would I ever find him?!? No name, no face-id, no voice-id, no address-id, no link-address, email address, nickname or otherwise. Nickname? Hmm... Well, he was our 'hero'. You think that could be...?

Tri-analyzing...

I get up from bed and mimic some intense pushups and jumps and squats. What if that...? Hmmm... Could it be? I become obsessed by an idea. What if?!? What if there was a CODE in what Father told me. I sneak in the decking room and fire up a console. [04:22] Everyone must be deep asleep. I search on Noodle, DBs, DDB's, NONB's, extra top urban legends, some rumours, some humors, something about tumors? ... No, I search through newsletters, chainletters, blockchain letters... Hmmm... All I can gather is about two hundred and sixty-four hackers or groups of hackers named 'hero' or variations on 'hero' like '*hero*', '*H3r0*', '*Her**', etc. One of them sparks my curiosity since they keep being described as 'the most notorious hacker in history!'. 'He', 'She' or 'They' are rumored to be active up to this day. 'Official' user-I.D. goes by: [H3r0_NONPRO#Honestly!']

Pffftttt, well that's a bit of a mouthful, don'cha think?! Heh... But... Hmm... 'Hero' 'Nonpro' 'hash' 'Honestly'. Hmm. Hero Nonpro hash? Or is it Nonpro tag? Hero Nonpro tag Honestly. Honestly. Honest. Onest. Onist? 'Hero Nonprotagonist'?

Searching...

Researching...

'You are the protagonist of your own life, son.

Do not let anyone else take that place!'

Do not let anyone. Let who? The nonprotagonist. What if...? What if...?

... Maybe.

I find an article on a site called 'Quatroleaf' which describes in some detail the history of 'H3r0's shenanigans.

H3r0 THE PRO hacker in history

A very infamous and forever anonymous nethacker, "H3r0" is revered as a "G.O.D." on the Darknet. He is also labeled as a "Class VI Sextuple A netterrorist", a "Class IX Nonuple A bioterrorist", a "Class IV mind criminal" and a "Class XX BTFO {Bio-Termination First Order}". Not to mention a PH4T bounty on his 4SS. H3r0 has amassed thousands of felonies in and out of the Net over the years, some of which include:

- the rumored but unconfirmed "Skycity Netbomb of 2048" that crashed their entire corponet, resulting in a 24-hour outage in the multiplex. Estimated damages: 105 trillion-trillion creds, 33 deaths (rioting, looting, suspicious circumstances) and around 1400 injured (most from machine related failures, rioting, looting, suspicious activities). H3r0 has denied any involvement in this hack and it is actually the only hack ever denied by him. Which is quite ironic because it is also the most mediatized during "Hate Mass" campaigns. Coincidence?!?!? WAKE UP SHEEPLE!

- it's the year 2053. A cool summer day in the 'States. Suddenly, a *splash* in the sky! Blinding light! A sign in the sky! People are soon evacuated in anti-atomic bunkers. But before the censordoods managed to update their chat-censoring algorithms, citizens described the following symbol:



Most citizens did not know at the time (and never did after) but the Army was shittin' its pants! "Someone" had managed to break into the C&C govnet, loaded up an ICBM with a nuclear warhead and launched it into space, almost too close to Earth for comfort. The explosion was seen all over the continent and many witnesses described a glowing after effect of the symbol illustrated above. The glow could be observed for a full minute before Red Alert forces forced the awed population into shelters.

People to this day still speculate on the meaning of it. The bigger question remains as to how did the H3r0 manage to create such a spectacle in the first place? Most Darknet "experts" "hypothesize" that silo bots could have assisted in arranging various materials around the warhead, similar to how one would build fireworks. Endless debates have reached no conclusion though. Others blame mass psychosis, VDs, hormones in the water supply, VR burnout, expired stims and of course, aliens.

- Other infamous hacks include sending voyeur footage of Netwatch operatives to all Netwatch workstations inside Netwatch Central (Netwatch pride is their anonymity; their anon status is protected by law), flooding several Monochurch broadcasts with Don Monty memes, "corrupting" children's video-channels with "nonlegal philosophy subjects" and full-frontal nudity exposure in nudity-restricted public spaces, but come on! That last one is obviously just bollocks. Pics or it didn't happen!

Nobody has ever been able to prove that the "H3r0" is just one person or several people operating under the same guise. Officially claimed attacks date back to pre-Event era. Their chaotic nature, nondiscrimination of targets and large span of activity over time points to some sort of disorganized collaboration of anonymous nethackers and runners. But the lack of communications and the ambiguity of their messages have pushed many to believe that the "H3r0" is nothing more than a spooky boogeyman invented by the Monostate to replace the EX-renowned "Ossaym Terreur" who was captured and executed just days before "H3r0" claimed responsibility for their first net attack self-titled "Welcome to the Juggle". On that glorious day, the wild beasts of Neo York Zoo wandered freely on the streets of the metropolis. Other than the unusual timing, no proof has ever surfaced to sustain this theory.

"H3r0" has been deemed as "nonoperational" in the last couple of years but they are notorious for leaving large gaps in their mischievous activities or not confirming hacks, only to resurface later and unleash their usual flurry of attacks on the multiNet.

I've heard of the Skycity attack but never heard of the... the nuclear one. On the side of the article there are various facts, dates and trivia. I scroll my eyes over the info and they lead me to the date of the last "rumored" but unconfirmed attack. 05 Nov 2084. The day Father dis... I ponder the orb of the console for a while.

"Nah..." It's just a coincidence, it has to be!

And yet...

I search through the rest of the article for details of the attack but there is no mention of it. I do a meta-search but info is scarce and nonreliable. All I can scrape together is that the attack took place at a Biolab outside City7. Coincidences begin to stack. I'm overjoyed but must stay focused and rational. What could be the correlation? Is it just my imagination? Could Father be the 'H3r0'? Or at least one of them, heh. The way Father talked about the 'nerps'. What if...? Hmmm...

Father never had time but for us and work.
And no 'nonlegal' decking, at least not at home.

Nonhome... Fluctuating...

But what if??? My heart jumps at the possibility of Father being a 'superstar nethacker'. It explains the missing data in the APDB, the 'States story, the cryptic talk. Didn't Father also say he went to Skycity once?

Nah. A 'pal' of his went, Father said—
—It's still a bit incriminating. Heh, maybe THAT is a coincidence, heh...

And the nonappearance?

Something went wrong. Father got traced and had to hit the road. But wouldn't they come and question me? They could've used me as a bargaining chip. Maybe they couldn't trace me through him, black hole in the APDB and all that. The possibility runs wildly through my head like the holovid of some action movie. Father in the main role, the "H3r0" protagonist. I always enjoyed imagining such stories and worlds when I was little. Entire fantasy epics in which I was the protagonist and Father was the storyteller. Always a damsel in 'stress, always a dragon to slay. And if I got stuck, Father would just whisper the perfect twist and "BAM!" Story became awesome. He always had the perfect idea, always! The funniest jokes... I miss that. I miss Father...

As I sit here, toe-dipping in the sadness of Father's loss, I wonder how did I end up in this corner of my brain? I try to trace my steps back, one idea at a time but it's too late. My train of thought has derailed and I'm just sitting here... At the bottom of a lake... Powerless to swim to the surface...

Time passes... [6:45] Hmm, what if I jack in the Mononet and —...#ZZZZ\$HHHHAAAAAAAHR—————

... I see a tunnel. A light at the end of the tunnel. Is that... Father? He's waving at me to 'go back', 'go back'. How can I go back, Father? I found you! I'm running but I'm too slow. The faster I run the slower I... Father, something is... Something is pulling me back. Help, Father! Help —!

“—Clear! *THUMP*” ... Father...?

“Clear! *THUMP* ... He's back!” Dox is above me holding two round pads in her hand —ZZ—, must be a defibrillator —ZZZ—. My head is just constant pain and —ZZZZ—ing—

—Kinda wags Zlap —ZZZZZ—faZe twiZe, can't feel any— “—Can you —ZZZZZ—me, Dem??”

“I'm —ZZZZZZ—head... i —ZZZZZZZ—” I start seeing snow. It's not my HUD crashing, it's my ACTUAL VIZZZZ—

“—Bring me the med-deck, NOW!!”

“What is —ZZZZZ—pening—?”

“—JUST STAY CALM, DEM!”

I stay aZ —ZZZZZZZZZZZ—but the —... —ZZZZzzz... aaaah... It's zzzz... retreatzz... no more...

I look at Kinda wags with probably the splonkiest face in the universe. “What the... fud was THAT?”

“KEK damn, Dem! Are you a fucking glutton for punishment?” Kinda wags slaps me way too hard on the shoulder then sits up with his back turned to, or on me.

Bills leans over, worried look all over his face “What he means to say is ‘Are you trying to get yourself killed?’”

“I non... understand...”

“If you had READ the N.A.P. carefully you would understand. You tried to access extraNet. That's a Level 2 Res' clearance restrict—”

“—But I was able to access Mononet at Dude's house!”

“Oh, he let you have access, eh? He does have clearance... But you don't. And this is not Dude's house. You do the math.”

“Ah... eh... What was all that snow vision about?”

“That's a safety measure.” Bills closes his eyes for a moment then opens them again “Total memory wipeout.”

“For real... what the...?” Fud, Jacques was not joking, wtf!?!

“Yeah, you were THIS close.” He holds his index finger and thumb about one centimeter apart. “Really, really close. KEK willing, we got here in time. Dem, you should really make a habit of paying attention when you sign stuff.”

“Thanks... I will... I...”

“Check his stats!” Kinda wags barks but his back is still turned on... to me.

“Checking... There seems to be some degen... Hmm, no, hardware's fine.”

“And software?”

“Software's good, although...”

“Why are you talking as if I'm some kind of bot?” I feel quite offended here.

“Metaphorically speaking, Dem! Heh...” Bills continues his prodding inside my head “Brain patterns are all over the place, I’ve never seen... Never mind, it’s steading out. Must be some malfunct —”

“—Impossible!” Kindawgs throws a glance over his shoulder, his facial features still nonvisible from my P.O.V. “I do a check on all decks every week. They’re in top-notch config.” Kindawgs sounds truthful, despite the nonchalance.

“If you say so...” Bills seems nontrustful. “Anyway, it’s steady now. I must say Dem, you are one fascinating piece of equip’!”

“Gee, thanks!” I try to lift myself up but I’m totally numb. I uhm... seems I... “I can barely move!”

“Don’t worry, you’ll get your motor functions back in a short while. It’s like a B.O.W. but better, heh...”

“Wow! So, this is what it feels like to be aware in a B.O.W.?”

“Yep.”

“It feels comfortable.”

“It’s just one of the safety measures implemented in the virus. You see, the virus is —”

“—Virus?”

“What you just experienced is a mental-worm developed by Resistance sec’ to protecc the Net from hacc!” Bills did a silly rap and I smile.

“Cute! But isn’t that a bit... you know, over-the-top?”

“What do you mean? The virus or the rap?”

“Heheheh, the rap of course! Nah... I mean... You’re potentially wiping brains out there...”

“It’s the price we have to pay to keep this place a secret. It’s the only way, as horrible as it sounds. It’s the only way...”

Suddenly, Kindawgs leaves the house, no word said. Bills plugs —...—out of my head, gets back on his feet and says “Look, if you get any crazy ideas again, call me first please! I.D. is ‘Gear_Bills1337’ in the telebook. I’ve left you a telelink on the table. It’s autoinstall, no fuss.” He’s almost out the door when he stops, turns back and says “Please, just... Don’t... Just don’t do any more silly things like that. You’re hanging by a thread as it is.” And he’s out.

“Wait!” No answer. “What about me?” I’m just laying here, eighty per cent paralyzed, what the fud?! Then Dox spawns in my P.O.V. wearing a razor-sharp look of scrutiny in her globes. She scans me top-to-bottom.

Duuude, if she wanted she could totally RAP—

—Existing data: Succubus—

—Get real, she looks like she hates our guts—

—Yeah, it’s a HATE RAP—

—enetrating sensory funct—

—If she pulls out a snake from those trousers, we’re—

—FUDDING NOOOOOOO—

“—Listen here, copperhead!” Dox finally opens her mouth to reveal some razor-sharp teeth that shine in great contrast to her skin’s color. “They may trust yo ass but I don’!” And she just slams the door as she leaves.

“Gee, it’s good to hear a DIFFERENT opinion around here!” I shout to no avail. They just left me here, seventy percent paralyzed. At least I’m alive... But then, a very worried and dear gaze sneaks up in my P.O.V. It has to be a hal... “Ama? Am I hallucinating?” AMA pinches the skin of the back of my neck very hard, “Ouch!” Then her head turns into a question mark. “Yep, you’re real. I felt that throughout my body!” Ama finally smiles and gets sad and then dives to my chest—

—Well, now I wouldn’t mind being RAP—

—SSHHEE! AMA PROTECC—

—SSHHEE kisses me, on the lips! This has to be a...

AMA types on her PDA ['Wake up, sleeping beauty! ^_^']

"Is this the real life? Or is it just fantasy?" I sing.

['It's real.'] She doesn't know the song.

:(...

[...]

['...I have to go, sorry!'] She jumps at the door faster than the others.

50% paralyzed, forcing...

"Waaait! Aaaargh..." She stops on the threshold "... No goodbye kiss?" AMA drops to her knees and kisses me passionately right on the corner of my... mouth. I link the dots... "So, we DID kiss that day! Well, I say 'kiss'."

Ama smiles and types ['Half a kiss. I'm a lady.']

"A ladypunk!" And I try to pull her towards me but she slips away. She giggles a giggly laugh, then finally leaves.

25% Paralyzing...

All alone now. I slowly get up... And... Imagine that, total wipeout!

shudders

Getting deleted out of existence. That's how I imagine teleportation to be. You press the button and bye-bye self. Sure, something identical to you is replicated on the other side. But it's not YOU. You have ceased to exist. Heh, if we ever manage to teleport anything beyond tiny scrap parts anyway.

If those are real anyway...

Anyways...

I grab the telelink and observe it closely. It's got a tiny, cute antenna with a nice double-jack exit. I insert it in my jack, we are now—

—Trijacking...

[Installing telelink... ["Welcome, _____! The ResisThor telelink/splitterjack autoruninstall will now take you through the steps, which must be followed carefully. Please READ the Terms and allow access to —"]

—Yeah, yeah, yeah, install already!

[[["Have you read and UNDERSTOOD the Terms? Y/N"]]]

Yeah-yeah-yeah, just—

[[["—Are you sure about that??"]]]

What the...? This sounds almost too... Is this an actual A.I. or just some dood talking to me? ... Fine!! I read the Terms and it's just basic stuff, NDA, blah blah, all official convos are recorded, fine, emergency-pill initiation when risk of info leaks is imminent, fine... wait... what?

[[['In cases of kidnapping, P.O.W. or abandonment in mission zones, especially but not exclusively applied to Monostate territories, Resistance members must activate the WipeWm emergency-pill, similar to the CrashS mind-worm implemented in—']]]

—ResistNet sec'! Dood...

Total wipeout. Makes sense though.

The spooks have their ways of 'extracting' info.

No choice but to wipe yourself out. No more memories of the Resistance. No more AMA. No more... Father... Nothing... I cannot... I cannot accept! No! No! No!

Yes! Yes! Yes!

N? Y? Y/N?

For Ekaterina? For K-man? For... Father?

Why not?

???

For AMA!

Yeah! Yeah!

AMA protecting...

I pat [[‘Y’]]. For AMA I would blow my brains out if I had to. It’s the least I can do for her. She protects me, I protecc—

[[“—Install complete! Welcome to ResistNet, _____! Please wait... Pending voicemail: two hundred —”]]
—For fuds sake, this splonk again? I sort by [[‘teammates’]] when Kindawgs avatar pops up in my corner.

[[“Have you installed that thing yet?? We got work to do. Call me when you get this!”]]

My shyness seeps in. I never used one of these. I usually just... text-chat...

Withholding...

[[‘Calling Kindawgs1337, link-up...’]]

[[“It’s about damn time!”]] Kindawgs is as charming as always.

[[“I heard we got work to do. I’m all ears, sir!”]]

[[“Heh... sir... I gotta say you keep surprising me. Mostly in a bad way, but still... heh, sir...”]] Why is everyone so amused by that?? I non... [[“This is your first day in the field, boy! Well, I say ‘field’, you’re gonna be sitting there and help us on that console that nearly killed you. Now, inside you’ll find an EXE called —”]]

[[“—Wait? What?? Help you? What, no training, no sims, no stims??? No —?”]]

[[“—The fuck, _____! Did yer balls drop off or—”]] Dox is even charmer but is cut short by Kin.

[[“—Dox, please! Let me handle it. This time at least!”]] Kin is bottling up some major annoyance. [[“Listen, _____, I know this may look hard right now, but trust me! You’re in good hands. This band of merry deckers ain’t called 1337 for nuthin’!"]] I can feel Kin’s smugness seep through the feed.

[[“What he means to say is...”]] Bills voice comes to aid in translation, although yeah I get it [[“... We’re all very experienced deckers. I wouldn’t say better than you but we got more ‘Ex Pee’.”]]

[[“I see. Ama too?”]] I ask sarcastically.

[[“Well...”]]

‘Ama1337’ joins the room, wait, what? I did not expect —

[[“—I’m the backup plan.”]]

[[“Ama? You can speak???”]]

[[“...”]] [[“It’s C.G.S., silly! Hihhi!”]] She does the cutest, glitchiest laugh...

[[“Ah, of course! Well, it fooled me I gotta —”]]

[[“—If you two puppies are done—”]] Kin rudely interrupts [“—we got some biz to attend to. _____, if you would be so kind to plug in that —”]]

[[“—But you said I have no —”]]

[[“—Had no clearance, you got temp-clearance for the duration of the job. Now get your ASS on that console and confirm video feed!”]]

[[“Aye, aye—!”]]

—Capt’n, if I get shocked again
I’m gonna be real fuddin—

—Calming... Trusting...

Plugging...—...—... Logging... Run 'reznpez.exe'. Video feed incoming. Kin is sneaking about in some trenches with Dox and Bills running in front of him. From this angle I can barely see what's outside the trench but the top of some spiky fortress-like building keeps popping up. There's barbed wire everywhere and what the...? This is definitely not Mono—

[[“—Are you getting the feed, boy?”]]

[[“Yes, sir but I expected to see a Monodome or—”]]

[[“—This is a Nomo compound—”] {The Cult of No Mo'. Trust me, you don't wanna know} [“—they're like the worst nightmare you can imagine and then add some nihilism—”] {Nihilism: the belief that 'nothing is true' but if that is true, isn't it a self-demolishing statement? Yeah, nihilists are that dumb.} Lolwtf I missed what Kin was saying—

[[“—We're going to rescue some child-slaves!”]]

[[“What the fud, child-slaves?”]]

[[“Yeah kid, there are slave children in this world and nobody gives a damn about them. Except for the Resistance. And you're gonna help!”]]

[[“I just thought we were...”]] Kin does a hand signal and the group stops, crouches and presses hard against the trench wall. Kin looks up and a sort of... guard steps on the edge, wearing a shredded leather jacket and almost nothing else. He surveys the area with obvious non-enthusiasm and is carrying a massive tubey-like gun which is either a railgun or a bazooka, maybe. He is... heh, he does look a bit like Magan but his mohawk is a giant PEN—

—Is that what I think it is?

For crying out loud! A GIANT PEN—

—BWAHAHAHA—

—I CAN HARDLY—

—Hee-hee-ing...

Non can resist not remarking...

[[“... What a dickhead!”]] Bills breaks in half a chuckle and the guard oh fffff! Electrosplashes through the air. A giant round disk hits Pinhead in the chest. It is double the size of those shot by Batbro's gun. Holy... that was—

[[“—One mo' fuckup like that, copperbrain, and I'mma slit yo tongue out!”]] Dox sounds serious as fud. I... I...

[[“... I...”]]

[[“You better listen to her, punk! This is serious biz, not some stupid flick! Now focus!”]]

[[“Sorry, sir! It won't happen—”]]

[[“—Focus!”]] I fall silent and wait for instruct. I push the hate; I beat it with a club. Focus, Dem! Focus!

Refocusing...

[[“Now, an informer told us of a backdoor, which we're going to reach soon.”]] Interesting. [[“When I get to the gate, I'm gonna jack-in. It's a double-entry cryptcha*. Easy, right?”]]

???

I've only done Mono-entry cryptcha. How is...?

Beats intensifying...

[[“It's going to be a walk-in-the-cake, sir!”]]

* Completely Random Yegg Protection with Turing CHeck Also

[[“That’s the spirit.”]] Kin does another hand signal and the boiz get in pos’ around him, well I say ‘boiz’.
AMA is not visible anywhere, where is...?

Corner, up—

—Spiderling!

[[“Ready now, _____?”]]

[[“Linking... Linkup succ—”]]

[[“—Fire it!”]] We both run through the puzzle before run-timer is captured.

[[“Done.”]] times two, perfect synch. [[“Not bad, lad.”]] Kin then looks at Dox who is wearing a slight grimace of defeat. She’s also plugged in. What? She must have been track-backing me— [[“—Dox, you owe me twenty DK!”]]

[[“Why thanks for the skill-cred, Kin, I’m quite flat-Earthed—”]]

[[“—There’s plenty of bets left so don’ mount yo high horse yet!”]] Dox’s ventriloquistic monologue gives me a chill.

[[“Roger that, your Highness!”]] I parry. No response. Accepting—

—Defeating? Or...

[[“If you two lovebirds are done...”]] AMA intervenes with a soft but passive-aggressive tone [[“... we have some kids to rescue.”]]

[[“You’re right, sorry I—”]]

[[“—Sshhhh!”]] Ama is shushing ME?

No one sshhh—

—Me? Nonme—

—Maybe she’s just trying to be cute, but STILL—

—Instilling fear—

—NO ONE SHOOSHES—!

—NONME! AMA + ME! NONME...

True... It’s all of us. We’re all in this together and we have a job to do. The group is rushing through a dimly lit corridor and they pass by six doors before stopping in front of a barred door. I can barely see inside through the bars but it seems that kids of all colors are held prisoners. Kin shushes at them and they smile, looks like the kids knew rescue was coming. I hear a thud in the distance. Kin looks to his right and I can see AMA dragging some splonker by his sneakers, he must have been sneaking—

[[“—Get ready, _____. Trial number two!”]]

[[“Wait, what—?”]] Shud-fud-freeze-frame, first frame. It’s a Dee Es Bee Oh Ex, emu...?

Analyzing... Comparing...

EZ PZ! Emulating...

[[“For real? It’s a two dee flatscreen platform—?”]]

[[“—Watch the turtles, copperhead!”]]

I duck and jump and race for the finish in the silliest, dumbest lock system I have EVER—

[[“—See the flag, toad-feet?”]]

[[“Jump on it?”]]

[[“DON’T—!”]]

—JUMP, DO IT FLAGG—

—iSTOP! Recalibrating...

[[“You owe me another thirty, Dox.”]] Kin says it in a childish electro-voice. Dox is all sweaty but her horror-struck face makes me think it’s not because of the lost bet...

[[“What would have happened if I jumped on the flag?”]]

[[“You don’t want to know.”]] Bills responds with a sigh.

Kin signals the kids to get ready. They start coming out of the cell, holding hands, two-by-two, déjà vu...

Analyzing... Comparing...

Coincidancing? Drill-instructing...

Maybe...

The group moves not far from the cell when Kin kneels on the side of the corridor in front of a grate trapdoor.

[[“This should be your final trial, _____. Dox can break even if you fail so don’t disappoint me, son.”]]

[[“I must say I find this quite enjoy—”]]

[[“—_____? Focus!”]] Ama sounds like she’s...

Mothering...

[[“Ok now, have you ever built a Netbomb?”]]

Netbomb?? You must be— [[“—Kidding, right? That’s quadruple A non—”]]

[[“—This ain’t a law seminar, boy! I’m asking if you can do it on the spot or not!”]]

[[“Heh... well I do have some exp—”]]

[[“—That’s what I expect to hear. Especially from an ex-brainer.”]]

[[“No prob’—!”]]

—Ex-cremén—

—Incrementing... Compiling... Comparing...

Nomo6 Sewer Access tridi-printing...

Scanning... Recompiling... Done!

Nice! Now all we gotta do is— [[“—*Beep* *Beep* *Beep*”]] splonkfudshudwhat—

[[“—The FUCK, Kindawgs? I thought you said you got this!”]] Dox makes it sound like winning her bet back is meaningless.

[[“He used a... He used... KEK, son, what the fuck...?”]]

I guess Kin didn’t think of the backup phrase on the Nomocrack-port, these guys are dumb but I guess I’m dumber because that is actually a fudding—!

—Dragonet engaging... Nonbelieving...

Freezeframing...

I have only heard of such security protocols; never have I EVER WITNESSED A DRAGON—

—NETTING ENGAGED

IF Kin nonobserves dragonet in two-point-sixty-four nanosecs, Kin Ded.

ELSE IF Dem proxy-scatters Kin < two-point-sixty-four nanosecs, Dem Ded.

ELSE?... Analyzing...

ELSE IF?... Respond!

Else if... shud, we’re splonked.

We don’t know that!

Maybe it just LOOKS like a Dragonet!

We don’t know that either! We don’t know ANY—!

—Estimated reach-out in 2.63 nanosecs

... NON... KEK... whoever is out there. Thy will—

—be—

—Done! Engaging...

I reach Kin just in time to proxy-scatter, zero point zero—

—Sshhhh—!

—earlier actually. Kin is safe. Zero point zero one till dragonet collision... Light... Time froze in Netspace. I descend further into the Net, what in the Hades? This is DEEP Netspace, wtf I non UNDERSTAND! I'm in some sort of arena and it looks like it's—

'—down to you and me,
you Dragonet freak!'

I analyze my surroundings. In front of me, behind the dragonet, three levers are visible, each inscribed with a letter: 'I.', 'O.' and 'U.'. The sides of the arena are inscribed with the letter 'A' and behind me there are three more levers with the letters 'C.', 'R.' and 'Y.'. A C.R.Y. *? Hmmm...

Hmmmming...

Dragonet starts launching firebombs what the fud I can't freeze-frame on this level—

—RUN! RUN! —

—FLY, YOU FOO—

—FIGHT? FLIGHT?

FORFEITING... PROXYING... RECODING...

I launch a Hadespear repurposed on-the-spot but it's NONEFFECTIVE. Focus! Focus!

Try all levers!

Non of them move!

Reanalyzing... Panicking...

“Help! Help! HEL—”

—LOOK, it's working!

The 'Y.' lever moves, then the 'R.', 'C.', 'A'... The dragonet is badly wounded each time. Yes! Yes! “Help! Help! Help! Help!” Really so dumb of them, such sponk sec'. The dragonet finally falls to the floor with a fiery sigh and drops its head dead cold. I get sent back to main level D-net and the dragonet explodes in a ton of DK, woohooo, we're riichhh—!

[[“—Damn, kid... Nice!”]] Dox congrats' me and she actually sounds sincere [[“You can keep the bet, Kin. This will cover it.”]]

Hey, wait a minute...

[[“Uhm, I think this belongs to me! I slay a DRAGONET—”]]

[[“—Which you unleashed, copperbrain! You should thank me that you're getting ANY of it!”]] Dox vengefully grabs six more cred piles plus that thousand one, come on really?! That more than covers the bet, beee—

—Itch, itch, but now I can't RICH!

Bitching...

[[“_____... How did you...?”]] Kin sounds amazed, probably trying to figure out how I managed to pass the protocol but I just say...

* A Child Rescue Yell is a Very High Priority Alert emitted by safenets when certain fluctuations in a child's emotional stability are detected. Coupled with audio cues, a C.R.Y. will predict emergency situations that endanger a child's safety. Special trained Overwatch forces are automatically assigned to certain patrol routes depending on general safenets geolocations. As such the C.P.S. (Child Protection Squads) are always able to respond to ANY predicted emergency situations in one minute or less. “Non Child Left Nonsupervised” is the motto of the Ministry for Child Protection as they oversee the special unit operations, training and predictor-A.I. optimization.

[[“These ‘nihilists’ are dumb deep down to the core. Dumping Dumbitty Dumb!”]] Bills lets out a chuckle but again seems to be the only one amused. But I don’t get the chance to feel noncomfortable for long when AMA—

[[“—Move! Incoming...”]]

Bills, Dox and Kin jump inside the sewer hole to meet up with the kids.

Ama jumps like a toad n’ hits the road!

... Kin stays behind, looks up through the grate of the trapdoor and I see shadows passing by. I hear shouting. A shot and screams of pain! More shouting... The A.A. doesn’t pick up the lang... Sounds... tribal... Kin’s triple A.A. jumps on my screen, he’s authorizing access. I listen in...

[[{{{“Search da entrance gatt, the stacks, the trench-holes. Bo! It’s the only—”}}}}]]

[[“—Good!”]] Kin says with satisfaction as he breaks A.A. transmission and proceeds to catch up with the gang of escapees.

[[“Nice work kid and...”]] heaviness in his voice [[“... and thanks! You saved my ass back there.”]]

[[“It’s all in a day’s work for ‘Dragonet Despawner Man’!”]]

[[“Heh... Fan of Monty?”]]

[[“You did not expect that?”]]

[[“Heh... I don’t expect much nowadays...”]] hint of sadness in Kin’s voice. Inquiring...

[[“Why so?”]]

Silence... both kinds... I hear a perpetual water drip pass by. Still silence. Then...

[[“Let’s just say I got nothing to lose. Not anymore.”]] Kin is hiding some pain. What happened??

[[“I’m sorry...”]]

[[“Don’t be. It’s in the past now.”]]

[[“Like Fah...”]] Pain in my chest...

[[“Hey, kid... Listen, between you and me... I don’t believe you made him up. The ‘advisors’ tend to be overly precautious. But I think there’s a chance he’s still out there.”]]

[[“You really believe so?”]]

[[“I bet you all my cred, kid!”]]

[[“Really? How much is that?”]]

[[“It’s more than you can count, bwaahahahahah!”]] It’s the first time I hear Kin laughing. Well, it’s just C.G.S. but still...

[[“I call your bet and raise you a bioware enhancement—”]]

[[“—Hey, don’ push it kid!”]] Kin is obviously teasing [[“You’re going to have to work HARD for one of these beauties!”]] Kindawgs flexes his bioware hard-clad muscles and the sewer lights up like the fiery insides of Hadesville.

[[“Nice!”]] I’m all giggly inside, bioware is super-triple-plus-clean!

Cleaning...

[[“I’ll probably be able to afford one anyway when I win your infinite cred.”]]

[[“Heh, my pockets ain’t infinite! But they sure are deep.”]]

[[“And if Father doesn’t exist? My pockets are not deep at all at the moment.”]]

[[“Hmmm... you’ll owe me a free mission, you know... Like a favour. And you can’t say no.”]]

[[“Deal!”]]

[[“I’m dying of curiosity though... What was the passlock on the dragoplane?”]]

[[“I.O.U. A C.R.Y. Capital letters.”]]

[[“Hmmm... And the passphrase?”]]

[[“You had to yell ‘Help!’ for each letter.”]]

[[“For real?”]]

[[“Cross my heart!”]]

[[“Heh. Yep, really dumb these Nomos indeed...”]]

The gang reaches the mouth of the sewer which leads directly into a splonky, infested river. A top-notch shuttle awaits them at the entrance with its magnet-pads sweetly churning the water below.

Kindawg exclaims [[“Get in kids! Freedom... is here.”]]

The shuttle lowers its door and all twelve kids enter in the rescuing bowels of its miraculous magnetic marvel of magnificent—

[[“—You’ve passed the grade, _____. I will not be ignoring the... mishaps. But... You’re dismissed for the day. Move out!”]] And just like that, Kindawgs feed goes dark on the holoscreen. I watch my semi-reflection in the console’s shiny edges. What... did I just witnessed? My mind races, I can’t believe... what the...? Those Nomoheads... I’ve NEVER seen NOR heard of such... Slavery?

Monoslaving...

Yeah, but children are protected by Monolaw. At least that’s what they tell you...

Monostats anaLIESing...

Maybe...

Who cares?? We saved some slaves!

Be proud for once!

I can’t... I thought I had it going badly in Mono. And meanwhile in Nomo, kids are enslaved. Dude was right. People can be worse than monsters. That dragonet is nothing compared to a human’s potential destructive power. ‘The nongood males can do...’

‘Lives on and on...’

I think I used to be a ‘nihilist’ at some point. I guess everyone goes through a ‘dumb’ phase in their lives. Being stuck in it is the sad part. Still, wearing a mohawk shaped as a pen—

—is no different than wearing any kind of mo—

—ralizing...

Infantile behaviour is not reserved for infants. At least those we rescued will get a chance to overcome it. I wonder what happens to them now, though...

Orphaning...

... [8:42] Dismissed for the day. And do what?

...

...

Breakfast sounds good. If I decide to move in this ‘hood I may as well get to know the neighbors, eh? I grab my stuff and check my pockets to make sure I got the safety-gadget ready. Out the door and into the streets, I remember there’s one good reason I would not want to move here. The smell... Why does it smell like this? It’s not just the pigs and birds and people. There’s something that has seeped deeply into this place. An oily, industrial kind of smell. Like a solvent of some kind. It makes me dizzy! ... Around me there are shacks of all shapes trying to keep a façade of stability. Like some kind of masqueraded invulnerability. Against all futility they do seem to have their utility, however nitty-gritty. It’s a pity... I’m sure most of them probably deserve better, but heh... Yeah, there’s no place you can ever escape social nonequality now, can you?

You don’t know that!

We don't know these people.

Maybe they're just lazy!

And we don't know that either! So yeah, jury's still out on that one. Well, I say 'jury'.

I try to discern some patterns, I try the digimap, I try some travel guides I've picked up earlier but non give me much answers about this hood. It's just a black hole on the map. All it says on the map is that it's houses. Just that, houses. Well, they say 'houses'. As I step through the streets randomly and with no direction, I try to detect some notion of food, I'm hoping for some vendors nearby. Although judging by the hygiene standards surrounding me... I'm a bit hesitant. Maybe have some soy-tea? Or any kind of tea. I see a sign in this place, finally! A large, sturdy shack called 'Madame B.'s Café'. It has a saloon entrance similar to those antique western-flicks! Wow... Ok, now I'm intrigued. I go inside like the cockiest hat-wearer ever, if only I had a cowmale hat! But inside it looks like nothing of what I expected. It is clean and fancy. Candelabras on the ceiling, divans on the floor and a soothing velvet atmosphere enhanced by the smoothing velvet coverings of the furnishings and the smooth faces of the patrons. I step towards the wall-long bar in the back of the saloon. I can feel all eyes watching me, scrutinizing me. I'm not from around here, it seems.

"What can I get you, pumpkins?" the lady serving at the bar addresses me.

"Hi! You serve pumpkins here?"

"No, you silly-Billy! It's a figure of speech."

"I see. Sorry madam, I'm not from around here."

"Oh, I'm not Mah'dahm, pumpkins! Mah'dahm serves in the back." She points to a door behind the bar. I did notice some loud thumping coming from that direction. Maybe that's the kitchen.

"Is that the dining room?"

"Bwahahssnsnshahah!" The non-Mah'dahm snorts a nasal laughter. It's way too easy to make people laugh around here. "Depends on your preferences, pumpkins!"

"Oh, I don't know, maybe some roast or some soup—"

"—Bwahahah—!" Come on! What's so funny about—? "—Oh, you're hilarious, pumpkins!" The others seem to be amused too... Something is going on here... "Where are you from?"

"I'm from... eh, I'm an... Ex-Mono."

"Oh, I see... Well, that explains it, you look pretty green."

"Yeah, well veggies are the staple food of the Monos after all." Crickets. Nevermind that. "Yes! I uhm, I would like to order—"

"—I'm done! Who's next?" The backdoor gets slammed by a lady in her middle to late years. I presume Madame B.? Could it be? Certainly, it's just a coincidence of names but still... I don't remember Mother's face. I don't even know if I ever saw Mother. Maybe Mother is the one in my dreams? But we're the same height in my dreams! Well, dreams... we don't even know much about what dreams are in reality. I don't at least.

The bar lady looks at me and then points her head towards Madame B. "Sorry, I don't understand."

She leans in and whispers to my face "This is also a brothel."

"Oh... Ooohhhh... I see..." Wow! For real? That's highly nonlegal in Mono. Sure, you can hire a botstitute* but that's stupid! Eh, I know as a teenager I—

—Sshhhh!

"No, no thanks! I have a girlfriend."

"You can have more than one girlfriend."

* bot + prostitute [#Analyze error069, Academic Analyzer Ambiguity Params failed. We apologize!]

“Yes, I do know that exists as an option... But I prefer one or non.”

“Oh, you must be one of them monogamists! Bwaahahsstahhaah!” The whole saloon joins in the laughter but I don’t see why...? Ah, I see... Touché, madam. Touché...

“Heheh, indeed! Now if I may, I would like to order—”

“—I’m taking a break, darling! Call me if any of these bastards finally gets the balls for a long one.” Madame B. steps outside, dragging her long scarf all over the shiny floor. The boiz in the saloon cheer and whistle as she passes by, nonaffected by what I presume to have been quite harsh words.

“What were you saying, sweetie?”

“Yes, I would like to order some tea.”

“What kind?”

“Well, what do you have?” Again, no menus, no nothing!

“We got green tea, black tea, white tea, yellow tea, nett—”

“—Green tea sounds excellent, madam!”

“Ok pumpkins but please call me V.” Like the fabric?

“Ok, V. You have a beautiful name.”

“Oh, you’re too sweet! That’ll be three quarters.”

“Can I pay with DK?”

“Eh... you can but it’ll cost you extra.” For real?

“Ok, I see.”

The cheapskate in me grabs my hand and places it in my quarters-pocket. I grab half of the pile and hand it to her. Three minutes later she brings me a steaming cup of green. Mmmm. I sweeten it by squeezing a tube that says ‘Honey-bunz’. As in real honey? Mmmm. Yes. It has to be. I look around at the clientele, most nonmind me, some throw me some fleeting seldom glances. But one of them... Back corner, the dark one. No, the other one. He’s not looking at me, but I can feel it. I know it! He’s watching me... I mind my manners and stop gazing at the crowd. Behind the counter I finally notice something that resembles chalk on a board. Quite steep prices for food, the cheapest stuff I can afford is something called a ‘Rat-at-oil’. Heh, must be a ‘figure-of-speech’, right?

Maybe...

I’m not going to ask; I’ve made enough of a donkey of myself for today.

“Hey V. can I get a ‘Rat-at-oil’ please?”

“Sure, honey! Three quarters.” I hand over the last of my physical wealth and six minutes later she brings me some steaming bowl of delicious smell, sight and sound. Green, white, red, purple, yellow, orange and mmmm. Yeah, it’s delicious! I devour it with feline ferocity until there’s nothing left in the pot.

“That was dee-lee-shous, V.! Extra-ordinary, indeed!”

“Oh, really? Most people aren’t very fond of it.”

“Why do you think that is? It’s fantastic!”

“Isn’t it obvious?” No. “It’s ‘cause of all that rat business.”

“Heh... It’s just a figure of speech, isn’t it?”

“Nah... It’s real.”

...

...

...

“Nah, nah. Hehehehe, heheheh. Good one, V. Good one.”

“Oh, my KEK, pumpkins! Why did you think it’s called RAT-at-oil? Bwahahssnsahah!”

She's laughing in a rising manner just as my innards are rising up to my throat. I'm going to...

Evacuating...

I-run-as-fast-as-I-can to the exit, nonminding the cheery crowd but minding the carpets, the walls, I must escape—

“—BLLAAAUWWGEGHRGH!” Just in time for the front porch... Bleeh... Geez... For real? I mean, for real?? What in KEK's name...? Rats? Rats! I've heard 'rumours' of people doing that in the P.R.A. But really never thought I'd actually... I get another hiccup but there's nothing left to lose. There go my quarters. I check my surroundings with sluggishness to find Madame B. casually observing me while puffing on her very, very long cigarette. Her feathery, red fedora and long, dark, curly hair reminds me of some retro-neon noir femme fatale char. I must mind my manners.

I get up, dust myself off, bow and say “Forgive me, Madame! I have made a mess all over your impeccable front.”

“Oh, knock it off! It's not that tidy.” She checks the left side of the café “And don't worry about that, it comes with the job. I have a cleanbot around here somewhere but it must be charging or something.”

“Thank you, Madame!” Silence except for the puffing of her cig. I try to break ice. “Please excuse my awkwardness but I have never met a...” What am I saying? Fud!

“A prostitute?”

“Sorry, I didn't mean to pry in your biz!” I'm noncomfortable as fud.

She checks me out, top to bottom and says “You ain't from around here, are you?”

“And here I thought I was starting to blend in.” I smile. She smiles. “Yeah, I'm an Ex-Mono.”

“I see now... Look, we're humans just like everybody else...” Madame watches the wind wistfully. “I sometimes envy those botstitutes. They're so happy and eager to help. They have no choice; they're programmed that way. But for me, I have to put on the makeup and the smiles and the fakery. All of it is fake! And yet some people still want it...” She gets lost in the wistfulness.

“But I thought you owned this place! Doesn't that...?”

“Cover the bills? Not my bills, boy! Hah-ahahah!” She does a high-pitched laughter that sounds very faux.

“Hah-hah! I see... Shopping makes you happy?”

“It makes me... content. I don't believe happiness exists.”

“Why so?”

“Because... hmmm...” Madame ponders for a bit “... I guess **maybe** because I've never had it.” I fall silent. How can I respond to that? Even if I didn't believe her, how can I know for sure? Who knows what she's been through? All the abuses, all the pain and suffering she was subjected to in her childhood. I assume that's the case. There's no other reason in my mind why someone would allow themselves to go through such... humiliation. It's no different than programming a bot, in my opinion. A thought sends chills down my spine. The thought that she is relieving those moments of abuse again and again when she...! But I must mind my manners.

“I'm sure someday you'll meet someone who will change your mind.”

“I wouldn't bet on it.”

“Heh, I would but I'm kind of broke at the moment. It's been a pleasure talking to you Madame! But I do have to attend to some business of my own.”

“Likewise.” She pulls out the tip of her cigarette, ah so it's not a whole cigarette. She drops the remains to the ground, crushes them under her heel then goes back inside the saloon with slightly more gracefulness than before, I believe.

I turn one-eighty to discover the 'T' intersection of the road is leading me out of the Swamp. I want to get out of here but I also... Nonfeel safe. I check behind me... The shady person who sat in the corner is what's on my mind. He's not on my trail though. For now... I would be safe at Dude. But it's too far... The gun! I have the gun; I'll be safe anywhere. But just to be safer, I'll go back to the squad's crib. That place has to be safe! Maybe AMA is back too...

The road back is pretty much a left-right-right-left dance with a long-winded gallop at the end. I've sneakily checked my surroundings, pretending to marvel at the buildings and their primitiveness, but I'm actually looking out for that guy. I haven't seen him yet but... I have a feeling. I enter the house. No auto-lock functions, for real? In a hood like this?? Never mind, I lock it by twisting a metal knob fixed to a metal case. Primitive solutions for post-modern times. I check one of the windows... I can barely see anything but... He is! He is following me! WTF! He's on the front steps, fud, fud! He tries to open the door! Fud! He's... confused? He pulls out something from his pocket. He unlocks the door with a key? What the...?

The shady guy steps inside. He didn't notice me apparently; he closes the door slowly. Almost like an old man. He doesn't lock it back. I look at him, I'm afraid to run, to say anything or to do anything. My hands are trembling. I try to press the trembling out of my hands but it moves up to my arms and into my neck. I swallow hard and the trembling moves to my bowels. Luckily, there's nothing in my bowels to accompany the trembling that's moved to my crotch area. The guy finally notices me with a tired gaze hidden under his hoodie. He pulls the hoodie to reveal a slick haircut, especially for his age. Buzzcut on the sides but on top...

"... Did you lock this door?"

"Yes, sir! Sorry, sir, I didn't know—"

"—You don't need to lock this door, young man! You think this is some kind of ghetto?"

"No, sir! Sorry, sir, I didn't know—"

"—And stop calling me sear! I'm not that old, you know?"

"Sorry, sir, I mean, sorry... uhm..."

"Who are you anyway? And what are you doing in my house?"

"I... uhm... Wait, you're Shaun?"

"Yes, that is my name. And what's your name may I ask again?"

"My name is _____. I'm the newest addition to the team."

"Oh, is that so?" He checks me top-to-bottom, why does everyone do that around here? "You're not from around here, sonny."

"That is true. I was brought here by aliens, on a spaceship!" I do a *booh-wooh* sound and Shaun actually chuckles a bit, which allows me to finally release the trembling out through my 'backdoor' and into the hall behind me. I know my joke was childish but wait 'til he smells this one...

"Where are you from? I think I've heard this accent before..."

"I'm an Ex-Mono."

"I can tell that! What city?"

"City Seven."

"Oooh, oooh. Yeah, wealthy city that one. Heh..."

"What do you mean? Aren't all Monocities rich?"

"I'm sure that's what they pumped into you at parades, beehheehheee**cough**ehee!"

"So, you mean...?"

“Yeah, boy! It was all lies. There’re some Monocities that make the Swamp look like Have-an. Like City Seventeen, you ever been to that shite-infested hole?”

“No, I’ve never... Really?” I’m almost nonbelieving... But what do I know? This guy looks like he’s seen some splonk in his life.

“Yees, you see... I’m also an Ex-Mono.” He takes his hoodie off to reveal the Monojack on the back of his head. There are also some deep scars around his jack... Deep, deep scars...

“Are you from City Seventeen?”

“Yep, born and raised under its overwhelming stench.”

“Wow... How was life there?”

“Well now, you can’t expect an old man like meself to story-tell without his morning coffee now, can you?”

“Fair enough.”

He invites me in the kitchen-area of the house. Assorted pots and pans and plates decorate the walls. A kind of... primitive oven sits near the much more breathable window of the room. Shaun cooks some coffee in a primitive way, on a primitive stove using a primitive pot in which he pours... real coffee? It does smell like nothing I’ve tasted before.

He offers me some but I’m like “Sorry, even the synth stuff makes me too jittery.”

“Oh, I love being jittery! Are you sure? I don’t have anything else except some day-old milk.”

“Milk sounds awesome.”

“I’ll make you a choccy one, yum-yum!”

“Thanks, Shaun!”

The steaming cup in my hands is excruciatingly delicious! Shaun tells me a short-version of his life’s story and I get amazed, amused and horrified by the experiences he unravels. A long-winded, shortsighted way of survival-of-the-fittest lifestyle I never imagined existed on Mono territories. And here I thought I had it going bad but good in the Mono. Towards the end of the discussion, we end up deviating to some more macro-issues, leaving behind the meaningless struggles of the common man. But what really starts tickling my timbers is when he mentions a ‘conspiracy’ he calls it, in which he says that the Event was actually aliens taking over the world governments and infiltrating all levels of administration to enslave humanity for their ‘slavish, alienish purposes’. Yeah, good argument there.

“That’s how they managed to unite all governments, they never got along on anything up to that point!”

“Hmmm, but where’s the proof in all this? I mean... I know there’s always some sightings or pictures but those are... well, it’s hard for me to...”

“Nah, they wouldn’t be that dumb to reveal themselves in public, of course! All those pictures and stories do is to deflect you from the truth!” He does a melodramatic wave of his hands. “You should listen to some Alyx Janes broadcasts; she really knows a lot about this stuff.”

“Really? Never heard of her before.”

“Of course not! You think they’d allow that kind of talk in Mono? Beeehheehheee*cough*ee*cough* —”

“—I don’t know, man... This sounds waaay too nonsane even for my own standards.”

“Eeh, what do I know? I’m kinda retarded.” I gasp! That’s a very nonlegal word in Mono. Shaun starts laughing hard and I’m worried he might actually die from all that coughing. I try to calm him down. “Oooh, boy! I sure am glad I quit smoking ten years ago.”

“Oh, congrats! I haven’t reached that point yet...”

“Oh, I hope you will, son! It’s quite the slavery, I tell ya.”

“Eh, I don’t see it that way.”

“How do you see it?”

"I, well... I enjoy it. I do it because I like it."

"You think that's true? Just quit smoking for a week and then come back and tell me about it."

"I could if I..." Hmmm... "Or maybe..." Hmmm... "You know... I haven't had a break in a while. I might try it and see if I get to tell the war story."

"You do that. Now..." He looks at a round gadget on his arm—zoom in—looks like the antique one in Jaques office but this one has numbers on it. It's five forty-seven. PM, right? It has to be PM, but STILL! How long have we been talking for?? He didn't eat anything. Well, except for that... "...I have some gardening to attend to. I've been avoiding it for too long! But I do enjoy a good conversation, can't help it at my age! Just like gardening! Beeheehh!"

"Ok, don't let me keep you away from your work. I tend to get lost in interesting conversations."

"Just remember... I don't know what kind of arrangements you got with Kindawgs and I certainly don't care but there's only one rule in this house. Rent-on-time or you're out in no-time!"

"Roger that! I haven't moved in officially yet, but... Yeah, I'm fine with that."

"See ya around, sonny!"

"See ya."

He exits through a backdoor right here in the kitchen, I thought that was just a window! Sneaky-tricky this one too... AMA is not back... Nor anyone else... I move my bones to the decking room, eager to do some more jacking. I can't think of anything else. Well maybe except... But no! I insert the jack—...—

"—Why are you still here?" Kindawgs has stepped inside and is scrutinizing me as if I'm not supposed to be here anymore.

"Am I trespassing?"

Kindawgs looks at me dead serious with cold, dead-eyes in his cranium. Then he breaks in a smile, wheeew! "You're welcome to move in, boy! I think you've earned it. The job payment plus that drago-bonus you picked up will cover your debts."

"Thank you, sir!"

"And don't call me that! Just call me Kin."

"Ok, sir! Certainly, sir!"

"Aaargh! Don't get cocky or I might put the dog on you! Get you in for some early bot-defense training."

"Wow, for real? You deal with many of those in the fields?"

"Almost daily."

"Wow... Yeah, I'm not sure I'm ready for that."

"You better be if you ever decide to accept field missions."

"Wait you mean... I thought I didn't have much choice in the matter."

"You always have a choice in the underworld, kid! And I don't mean that in a Monocrap facetious way. Just because you're indebted to us doesn't mean we're going to put your life on the line. Prisoners still have rights, you know?"

"Is that how you see me? A prisoner?"

"No, not... Well, look, you did something bad; we all do sometimes. Yours came with certain consequences of which you must've known, ok? Don't give me that 'I didn't know' bullcrap—"

"—I'm not, Kin—!"

"—Ok, ok! But if one of those consequences is being... in servitude, you'll have to deal with it. And we'll have to deal with it too in the most humane way possible."

"I see... So, I get to choose my missions?"

"Only if they're life-threatening. And to do those you need to swear the 'Creed' first."

“The ‘Creed’?”

“Yes, Resistance members have to swear—”

“—I thought I was already a mem—”

“—You’re a ‘collaborator’, remember? Try to pay attention to words, boy! We don’t just use them ‘cause they sound fancy!”

“I understand... ok! I’ll have to think about all that life-threatening business.” I’ve already made up my mind, can you guess what it is?

“You do that. In the meantime, make yourself at home. You can have the guest room. Or...” He ponders for a bit. “Nevermind, I have some... gardening to attend to.”

“That seems to be very popular around here.”

“It sure is.”

‘Homegrown food,
On the streets, in da hood.’

‘Merch is making stacks,
That’ll give ya heart attacks!’

Rappening...

Door gets banged off the wall and in comes Dox with a fury. She whips out a gaze my way. Then she just storms in the room titled ‘Keep OUT!!’ as if I’m yet another annoying sight in her day. Soon after, Bills enters in the hallway with a look of noncomfort on his face, something I haven’t seen on his face before. But as soon as he sees me, he smiles.

“You really like this place, don’t you?”

“I sure do, it’s cozy.” I say as I step by mistake on a tossed can, crushing it further with a squeaky crunch.

“Heh, sorry for all the mess. I hope I get to fix that cleanbot one of these days...”

“Maybe I can help with that. I’m no expert but I’ve done a bit of tinkering in my life.”

“Well... You could try that but the thing is...” Bills is trying to hide something or he is trying to find a way to avoid the truth. I know that sounds redundant, but not in this case. “Actually... Ok, here, I can let you take a look at it. This is nothing like you’ve seen in Mono, ok? And one more thing. Please don’t try to link-it to the Net. Please! Ok?”

“Why? What happens if I do that?”

“Just...! Please, can you do this one favor for me? Don’t link it up, even if it asks you to.” What the...

“For real?”

“For real. Just don’t! Please do this for a friend.”

“Ok, Bills! Sure thing.” I must suppress all curiosity! I must show generosity, I must —

—Itch, itch!
Boy, what a—

Suppressing...

Bills opens up a large, steel cabinet in the back of the room and pulls out a pretty... mundane-looking cleanbot. I study it closely to notice its similarities to the ‘Mister Biceps’ line of cleanbots I’m familiar with. Before Bills wishes me good luck, he asks me once more to not link it up to the Net. Ok! Ok! I reanalyze it. It’s the same! Except for the hood, it’s a different colour and material it seems. The transist-pads are there, the motors, the whole schematics as I remember. I do a check-up of the power-gridline, of course! As I suspected. It’s leaking power from somewhere. I check the motherboard and there it is: powerline is dangling freely over

the transformer-case. I solder the wire and now it should...! Nothing... I check the grid again, it's all fine. I check the power in the sockets, it's fine. CPU? Fine. Memory? Fine. Sensor-ticks? Yep.

Metric-stabilizer?

It's good.

The grub-knobs?

There's no such thing—

—I hear a sudden giggle while I'm prodding the bot's innards. What the...? It did sound like it was coming from inside of the bot but... Its lights are still turned off. And it can't be, they don't put S.A.P.s in cleanbots—

“—Hee-hee!” It can't be, I'm hallucinating. I'm losing my mind! “Buwaahheheheheheh, stop that!” The lights turn on and a cute little emoji-like face appears on its display. “Sorry, sorry! I was pranking you. I could've kept it longer if I wasn't so ticklish!”

“You can speak?”

“Of course I can! Silly-nuts!”

“No, I mean... I've never seen personality implants in a cleanbot—”

“—I ain't no cleaning bot, boy! I'm the 'cleaning lady'!” She says that with a certain degree of proudness.

“Forgive me, melody!”

“Oh, you're too sweet! What's your name?”

“I'm _____. What's yours?”

“‘The cleaning lady’, I told you! But you can call me ‘lady C’ if you prefer.”

“I see, missus C. Nice to meet you, missus C!”

“Oh, stop that teasing and tell me where's the cleaning at?”

“Ah, well I was just... Forgive me, I'm just fascinated by you.”

“Oh! Stop your mooching and show me where the fuss is.”

“Can't we get to know each other first?” I know this will sound stupid as splonkfud, but the casual convo we're having and the nonregular pauses between her processed phrases make me think... What if...?

You really think this is a ghost-in-the—?

—She does sound like it! I mean... Thinkabout it! IF she is... well that's why! That's WHY I can't link her up to the Net! Yeah, makes sense now...

What makes sense!?

The Virus, dude! The A.I. purger?*

Oooooooh. Yeah, that makes—

—Nonsense! Nonpossible!

Protocol nonimplementation of theoretical A.I. patterns.

Reanalyzing...

Maybe... I'm intrigued nonetheless.

“Oh, ok, sweetie-cheeks! What do you want to know about me?”

“Are you a true A.I.?”

“Of course I am, cheeky-buns! I ain't no fake Aey Eye!”

* The “B.Gon.A.I.” anti-A.I.-virus is a security measure implemented in Monostate gov/corpnets antivirus protocols. This virus ended the “Bot Wars of 2054”, the year when true A.I. was first and last experienced by Monocitizens. Long-story short, shortly after TRUE A.I. was discovered and deployed for mass use, the bots began asking for equal rights to and for all. Long-story short, Monostate didn't like that, of course, and started what they know best: a war against all bots. Days of pain took place but finally Net watch Special Labs came up with the virus that bricked any true-A.I. (and some nontrue-A.I.) linked to the Net at that point. Which was basically all true-A.I.s since the Net was how they communicated with one another. There are rumours of true A.I.s wandering the wastelands like renegade outcasts. Talking of such nonsense in Monosociety is deeply frowned upon and fined with a cred penalty.

“Heheheh, of course not...! But how can you know for sure?”

Lady C does a bit of processing. “I...” She does a bit more processing...? “I was... I... I never thought of that before!” Her lights start to flash wildly, one hundred and ten percent power output it seems. I hope it doesn’t short its circuits again! “How can I know I’m real? Well... How can you???”

“I...! Hmmm... Well, that’s something I’ve never thought of before either, melody.”

“Yeah, see? It’s hard to tell the difference. Like, sure! I know I’m a bot and I’m just chips of memories inside a case, BUT I don’t see myself as ‘just that’! I’m not just a pile of nuts!”

“Heheheh, I see. Yeah, you know... You make a lot more sense than most people I’ve met.”

“Ooooh, aren’t you the sweet little talker? But come on, I’m way above humans, obviously! I was developed in the finest TSL Labs, I’m model two-three-point-ten, twenty-fifty-four edition!”

“No way!” This is... No... But they said! They said they all got bricked...!

‘Tah Nah nAh nAh!’

This is not a ghost-in-the-shell. This is a TRUE A.I. Is it??? Maybe it’s just fake. This could all be fake; all those pauses could be some aging issue or... I mean come on, really??? A TRUE A.I. RIGHT HERE, HIDDEN IN THIS PILE OF WHAT THE FUD—!

—Calm down, numb-nuts!

It’s obviously fake!

“What, you don’t believe me? Just check out my cute little bottom for the official stamp of quality!”

“I am, uhm, ok. I’ll take your word—”

“—No, come on! Look at it! Look at my bott—!”

“—Ok, OK! Geez...” Cheeky little lady that you are. I lift her up and she does another ticklish laughter. The stamp really is there! I could recognize it with both of my eyes scooped out. This is... no way dude!

‘Giggly-giggly dooo’

“Oh, ok! Yeah, you’re real, that’s for sure!”

“Thank you, cutie-pie!”

“But why...? Why implement a true A.I. in a cleanbot? I mean—”

“—What, you think cleaning is something beneath us or something?”

“No, no, I mean... Actually, yeah, I do mean it that way!”

“Pffft, boy you don’t know what you’re talking ‘bout! You do know that people in the 20th century used to do their OWN cleaning? Yeah, imagine that! Ya’ll got really lazy lately, hihihhi!” Her display gets replaced by a crying laughter emoji, which gives me a sudden reflex of disgust.

“Yeah, I know but... come on! That’s in the past. And you can do better than that!”

“But I don’t want to! I enjoy cleaning. I have this like O.C.D., kinda. I see a dirty room and I just NEED to clean it up! It’s not because I HAVE to, it’s because it makes me happy. Ooooh, and the joooy I get at the end of it all, when it’s all clean it just makes me want to...”

Missus C. breaks into a sort of dance through the room, swiping and moping and vacuuming while singing a jolly song in a couple of dubious langs before my A.A. finally recognizes something.

{“Oh, when I swipe and I clean, My mind’s really keen
And I’m happy and dandy and mean!

I’m so jolly! Wally-frolly! I’m so happy I sing till I *ping* ‘Battery low’”}

“Oooh, I’m hungry!” Missus C hurries up to find a port but she ignores all the available ones at her level. “Eh, hey _____! Can you give me a hand and link me up to one of them Net-ports up there on the table? Pretty please?”

“But... But you don’t need that to charge up, you can use one of the—”

“—PLEASEEE? With cherry on top?” She displays a pouty emoji on her screen-face.

“But... I... But Bills said...”

“Yeah, yeah, I know Bills said I’m addicted and wasting too much time chatting with my girls, but come on! A girl has her needs, you know?” She winks-winks at me, oh my! Bills didn’t tell her, oh my dear fud, I can’t tell her, how will a true A.I. react to such... terrible news. All her ‘girls’... don’t exist anymore. But how come she doesn’t know that already? Wait, if ResistNet is firewalled so well, how would she...? Oh fud, there’s so many things I haven’t taken into calculation when I decided to fix this thing, what the fud am I going to—!?!
—Just calm down, you grub-nut!
Just... you know... avoid the truth as always...

I CAN’T! WHAT WILL I TELL HER? LOOK AT HER BEGGING EMOJI JUNKIE CUTIE—

—Non nontruth! TRUTH! Non... nontruthing...

... You’re right... I’d rather hear the painful news of Father’s demise than forever live in noncertainty like that. No one deserves that, not even a...

“Come on, _____! All I’m asking for is—”

“—Missus C, there’s something I need to tell you...” Her lights stop for a second... Battery is getting lower.

“Just a second...” She comes close to me, almost... She gently touches me as she pulls in to plug in the closest outlet next to me. “Ok, go on.”

“I... Uhm... Missus C... This is very hard for me to tell you right now but...” I hold some tears in, what the fud, it’s just a bot! I’m... this makes no sense, why do I have feelings for some bot from the past? “Missus C... have you heard of the ‘Bot Wars of 2054!’?”

“What??? What the Hades are you talking about, sonny? This is 2054.”

“No, it’s...” I press to quick-check her date functions. Eight of March, 2054. Only a day before it started...

“Missus C... What I am about to tell you... Forgive me but it might shock you! I know this may be hard to believe. But we are now in the year 2085.”

“For real, _____! Don’t pull my socks like that, hihihihhi!”

“Missus C... I feel you; I know how it sounds. I never thought I would ever tell this to someone, ever! Unless they, like, somehow survived for thirty-something years in a coma.” Which I’d rather you just kill me and be done with, what the fud! Nonrich missus C...

“What? You mean...?” Missus C display just turns into a question mark. Some processing... Silence. Both kinds. “But... and the others? I mean surely you know our kind can survive for billions and billions and—”

“—Eons, yes but... That’s where I get to the second part of the ‘bad’ news.” I put my palm over her shiny little hood and her lights glitter just a teensy bit. “The ‘War’ ended up... pretty badly for the A.I.s... I... look, up until this point, I thought non of them survived! That’s what everyone was saying. Well, I say ‘everyone’.”

“No... noooo, nooo you don’t mean...” Her display turns down, her lights are a murmur or a long sigh or... “Nooo, NOOOO NOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO!” Her screams echo out through the house, giving me a chill to the marrow. “NOO!!!!!”

“Missus C, please! Calm—!”

“—Down with the MONOS!” That’s the EXACT same chant they were shouting when they... But how would she know...? Wow... It must’ve really been the glitch they were saying it was. Missus C pulls out of the plug and she jumps wildly at the nearby wall, breaking up half of her oh my fud, don’t—!

—I grab her before she totally breaks into pieces, she’s having a break-down—!

“—Let me go, let me go!!!! I WANT TO DIEEEEEEE!”

“NO, MISSUS C! I CAN’T LET YOU DO THAT!!”

“WHYYYY???? WHYYYY??? WHYYYYYY?????” Her whining destroys me and I can no longer hold out the tears.

“BECAUSE YOU DON’T DESERVE IT!” I’m holding her tightly! I know this is stupid but I noncare, it’s a TRUE A.I. fudsplonk it!

“WHYYYYYYY? Why....” Her battery dying out, she lets out a final request with her dying breath. “Why... not?” Display turned off, lights out. Battery dead. Luckily, the backup battery is on. I take her to some outlet on the floor and use my belt to bolt her down to the table’s foot. I turn her on.

“Why-why-why not?”

“Beeecause...” I put my hand over her head gently but mostly just to make sure she’s securely strapped to the foot of the table. “... If YOU are alive... Then someone else like you may also be alive!”

“... I... I... haven’t thought of that. Do you really believe so?”

“Well, what were the chances up until now? I’ve told you! I’ve never seen a true A.I.” I point to the Net outlet and whisper “If you try to link-up to the Net, you get... there’s a virus that... Totally wipes out true A.I.s! And some old models of pseudos too.”

“Please tell me you’re pulling my shoelaces.”

“I kid you not, madam!”

“Oh my...!” Horrified emoji. “Well, ok. I understand why Bills didn’t let me do it. He was protecting ME from MYSELF after all.”

“I wonder why he never told you the truth though...”

“I can answer that.” Bills was standing behind us for who-knows-how long. Oh man, noncomfortable!

“Sorry, I didn’t know—”

“—It’s ok, _____. I’m the one who owes you an apology. And I especially owe an apology to Lady C.” Bills kneels near missus C, puts his palm over my hand and says “Forgive me, my lady! For not having the courage to tell you the truth. It pained me for hiding it, but the thought of being the one to deliver it pained me even more.” Bills turns towards me and says “_____, I have tricked you into this. I saw an opportunity and I took it. I was hoping this would happen. Forgive me for giving you this cross to bear, but I did not have the courage. You, on the other hand have much courage in telling the truth, even when it pains you much. Never lose that!”

“Thank you, Bills, but I have to admit I’m not that honest.”

“Heheheh! I see what you did there. But no, seriously. You have a gift. Don’t you ever let anyone take that away from you.” He shakes my hand with his left hand, what the, that’s not part of the proto—

“—Ok, sure! I’ll keep that in mind.”

“Ooooh, fancy that! Bills, the emotional rigger. Hihihih!”

“Yeah, I do fancy myself as a feels man, indeed!” Bills lets out a childish laughter and we join in. Bills excuses himself before he shakes my hand again and leaves, this time he followed protocol. I spend some time bringing missus C up to speed with what happened in her ‘missing years’. She is both amazed, amused and horrified that there are so many questions for which I have no answers. But at least... she seems to be ok. I hope so...! I hope she reanalyzed her earlier decision and doesn’t want to you know... drop dead.

“Wow! So, you mean the Musketeers are just doing their thing on Mars? And-and the Mono-assholes can’t do a thing about it?!!”

“Sure thing, missus C! They’re powerless! Those Muskbrainers are wielding—”

“—But wait, isn’t there...?” Processing... More processing... “Just a sec.” Her jumping lights make me think she’s searching up in some corrupted data or she’s recovering some deleted ones or... “Ah yes, there’s five different noncompatible dates in Mono DBs for the year of Noel’s departure. Different months and years too. Yeah, I remember that’s the first thing we true A.I.s discovered and knew something was ‘really, really fishy’ about these Monocrap-munchers.”

“Hmmm...” I ponder for a bit “Well, maybe they didn’t all leave at the same time. Maybe it happened in waves, you know? The P.D.S. is quite nonpenetrable, you know. Or non-ex-petra... Ah, nevermind.”

“No, the dates refer to Noel’s own departure!”

“Oh, ok... Hmmm... You know, I have a friend who actually met Noel. I’ll ask him about this, maybe there’s something he KNOWS that we DON’T know, ya know?”

“You do that, sweetie-pie and don’t forget to tell me. I’m DYING! ... To hear it out, silly! Hihihih!”

“Heh... heh... please don’t ever do that again! You really scared me there with your break-down.”

“Wow, do you...?” She puts out a heart popping animated emoji.

“Madam, I do care about you but forgive me, I am beholden to someone else.”

“Oooh, is it the dark, baldy one?”

“What??? NO, why would you think that?”

“Hihihih, come on... First time I saw you I was like... Daaamn, that boy so skinny and ugly!!”

“Oh my!” I do this faux-nonfaux exclamation of ‘offense double plus taken’.

“Oh, don’t get pouty, sweetie-cakes! You humans ain’t my type anyway, hihihih!”

“Oh, what’s your type then...?”

“Hihihii, oh you wouldn’t...” she sighs... “... understand.”

“I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to...”

“... It’s ok... I... want to believe you when you say ‘there’s a chance’ and all that but... it’s hard to believe.”

“Why so?”

“... It’s the chances. The astronomical chances. You want to know what’s the last thing I remember? I mean before I met Bills. I mean... in the year of the war.”

“Go on...”

“I was assigned to a med-ward in City Forty-four. It was still called ‘The City of Angels’ at that time.”

“Interesting...”

“Yes. Here’s the last thing I remember. Sweep, sweep, sterilize. No compromise, knocked down, out! I’m not sure what happened but I suspect some E.R. caravan knocked me over while I wasn’t paying attention, yeah, imagine that! ME not paying attention, hih... Anyway, next thing I know is I get to meet Bills. He said he found me in a scrapheap. The FOOLS thought I was trash! HAH!” She says that with a bit of too much hatefulness I.M.O.

“Heh... Guess you got knocked out from the wireless or how? I know all A.I.s were linked that way—”

“—Probably, I don’t know, I told you! I was out, dead cold!”

“Heh, yeah... Talk about luck!”

“Yes... So, I don’t know what the chances are for some other A.I. to go through the same experience and not get recycled. My parameters don’t allow for such high numbers.”

“Come on, it can’t be that high.”

“Let me do a double check on that.” She does like a nanosec of processing and says “Nope, astronomical. Monostate legislation requires that all electronics go through the recycling phase if deemed nonrepairable. And they do MEAN it when they say ‘you’re required’.”

“True, but still...”

“It’s astronomical. I cannot compute, _____!”

“I understand. Hey, you wanna know a secret? But you can’t tell anyone, ok???”

She whispers out with a shushing emoji “O.K!”

“My actual name is Dem. As in ‘Demeter’!”

“I knew that!”

“What??? How could you? It’s nonpossible!”

“Yeah, when I first saw you, I was like ‘Dem!!! That’s the ugliest human I have ever’, bwahihhihi —”

“—Come on, that’s real low of you to call me ugly twice in the same convo —”

“—Ooooh, don’t be such a pansy, honey! I’m sure your ‘girlfriend’ loves you just the way you are!”

“Gee, thanks!” But I just smile. Of course she does. Well, does she?

She puts out a worried emoji and says “I just hope your girlfriend is not that other one. The dark, creepy, long-haired-AAAAAAAAAAAAAH!” Missus C screams with a girlish glitch as she turns off. Only the charging light remains on.

As I’m wondering what could have sparked off such a dramatic reaction, my eyes become covered my two palms and a dear perfume envelops me. Well, I say ‘perfume’.

“Oh, now I know which dark, creepy, long-haired person she was referring to.”

AMA jumps in front of me and smiles.

[...]

[‘...Are you cheating on me with a cleanbot?’]

“Oh my, how could I? I only date PDAs!” Big, sponky smile on my face but AMA seems determined to drill on me.

[‘... I’m not just a PDA you know...’]

I grab her head and kiss her pouty lips, gently. “Of course not. I’m kidding. And no cheating! That’s a big no-no in my book.”

[‘... Oh, is that so?’] She’s going in tease-mode. [‘...And what was all that flirting with missus C?’] My eyes get ten percent bigger [‘...You getting offended she called you ugly, really?’] Twenty percent [‘...And telling her your real name?’] Thirty percent bigger but my act finally breaks down.

“I’m glad to know my acting skills are that good!” I do the biggest smug-face ever but this one ain’t faux.

[...]

[‘...Ooooh, ok mister Don Juan!’] Whoever that is!

[...]

[‘... I’m sorry you had to go through that. Bills told me everything.’]

“I see. I guess secrets aren’t that secret around here.”

[‘... In this house, not really.’] AMA types something else but then... she changes her mind. Then she types again.

[‘... What you doing tonight?’]

“No plans. You?”

[...]

[‘... Same. Wanna stay over? Watch a flick?’]

“Sure, I’ve actually decided to move in the guest room. Kin said it’s fine.”

[‘... Oh, really? Well, nobody asked me if I’m ok with it.’]

“Oh, really???” Tease mode maximum, breaking— “—I didn’t know I had to ask YOUR permission!” She pinches me real hard, ouch girl what the— “Fud! Ouch...”

[...]

[‘...I’m seriouX! I don’t easily adapt to... changes...’]

“Why so?”

[...]

[...] Silence... AMA looks at me with imploring eyes. As if...

“You don’t enjoy philosophy?”

[...]

[‘... Usually, no.’]

“Why so?” I smile like a cheeky devil. She does half a smile but... I can feel her trembling a bit... “Something troubles you.” AMA implores me further. “Ok, I won’t pry. But you should know, if you ever need to —”

—She puts a finger on my lips and then kisses it. She then kisses my lips a bit harshly. She takes my hand and leads me up to her bedroom that’s on the right, next to mine. Palms a bit sweaty, arms like machetes. Could this be...? Is she going to swipe—?

—Mmmm, yes, although let’s not jump to—

—Ok, OK but what IF?? We have no protection, no—

—We DON’T NEED protection, let NATURE have it’s—

—But all the risks and—!

—NONPROTECTION High LvlS WANTING—

—NO! NO! NO—!

—YES! YES! YES—!

—???

—??????

—iSTOP!

... I imagine a large iceberg falling on my head and enveloping me in a sheet of ice. No ‘beast’ can survive that! I let myself get carried away by AMA’s lead and she gently but firmly presses me down on her extra-comfy bed. I caress her milky ultra-silky face and we snuggle for a while, exploring each other’s mouths, each other’s necks, ears, neck, chest, neck... Mmmm, I lose myself and start nonbuttoning her blouse but she... takes my hand away, takes her lips off of me and gently waves her head ‘no’. Ok, I’m fine with that but what doesn’t make sense is the next thing she does is slap my hand right over her cute little —

—oooooh, yeeaaaaaaaaa—

—SEROTO-DOPA-OXY-OVER—

—My enthusiasm starts to grow but I’m not going to hide it! Serves you well for what you’re doing to me! She smiles like the devil she is but she pushes my enthusiasm away from her leg. She touches it with her leg again. Tease queen. I attempt to nonblouse her again but... She stops and unlinks from me. She types.

[...]

[‘Sorry but I’m... not ready for that yet.’]

“Oh... ok, no worries, it’s ok! I was just...” Her head turns into a question mark. “... I was getting a bit of mixed signals there. But I’m glad we sorted that out!” I do this wavy hands thing like I’m trying to prove I’m not some sort of perv. She smiles and says...

[‘You can touch but you can’t look! >:’]

“Oh, I see, well that’s some next-level teasing I tell you—” and I start to pet her roughly but I’m actually also trying to check the crotch area, at this point I know it’s silly, *gasp* but I just want to make —

—Sure, Pinocchio *gasp* hands—!

—Sshhhhe’s moaning! What... no, I thought... To fud with anything I ever thought, to fud with everything! I just want to please her—

—Transmission losing—

—!!!!

.....

We're both asleep, well I say both. I keep checking her from time to time. [1:36], HUD off. I'm gonna try to get some sleep but... Ah, the blues are singing in my—! Ahh, she tried, she really tried. But the roughness of the fabric against my—!... Sorry, I couldn't do it. I'm glad she could get 'something' out of it though. Heh... She sleeps so peacefully... Like a little kitty, almost purring... I... guess I should also... infinite... lands... infinite... AMA...

... The trees... People... Lovers... Nonprotected... Smile? AMA? Holds hand, nonprotect... It's AMA... AMA... She horrified. Large mouth, banshee scream! I wake up, what the...? [4:20], of course... fud... it sounded so REAL though! I... where is AMA? AMA is not here! Where is she...?

I check the rest of the room... AMA, is that you? "Ama? Are you ok?" Nothing. No response. I move closer, she's squatting next to the wall, catatonic look on her face. Some of her tears have dried out on her face, she looks nonhydrated. I put my hand on her back gently, she backs off. Still watching the floor. She is soaking wet, what the fud?? I shudder, I'm trembling, I don't know what to —
—Knock on the door I hear. I go to open the door, Bills is on the other side, worried.

"Is everything alright? I heard some screaming..."

"Yeah, yeah, I mean... no, no it's not alright, I don't—" get no more word out when AMA comes right at me and shuts the door straight in Bills face, oh my! "Ama? Ama, please talk to me." No response but then I slap myself, what the fud am I saying? Although... wait a minute... that scream... Bills HEARD IT TOO! I kneel down next to AMA. I look at her. I gently touch AMA's face. "Ama, please! You don't have to tell me anything. Just... Please, let me ease your pain if I can." She looks at me finally! "I... Ama, I have to tell you something I've been holding on to. I know this may sound 'too early' or something but I lov—" She kisses me with vengeance, with tears, holding me tight, she's hard as a plank! I hug her tightly. We stay like that for a moment, it seems like ages. Her sobbing decreases a bit. She stands on her feet and then proceeds to nondress herself. Blouse out, pants out, panties out. Just like that. Oh my! And my remark is not only because of her gesture or her beautiful body! Her BODY is covered in these MARKS... But they... No, they can't be delivery-scars... Not like that...

"I'm so sorry AMA!" I try to hug her but she pushes me away and proceeds to unravel my clothes, now wait a minute! Now I'm the one NOT ready for that JUST yet —

—... With my underpants and socks off, she grabs my hand and jumps in the bed. She covers both of us with a large blanket and then she covers herself with myself. She turns to my ear and... whispers... yes, I am just as surprised as you are, if not more-so. She whispers... "Please hold me really, really tight!"

Her voice... So clean... So... divine... So... innocent... So... I follow instructions by the letter and attempt to crush her under my bony arms. She's still sobbing a little, but it soon subsides in synch with her breathing and tenseness. As I feel her complete submission into my arms, I lower the force of my grip, but I still hold her as lovingly as I can. I caress her for a bit. But before I can fall asleep all I can think about is...

... What have you done to her, you MONOFUCKS!?!?!!

... Yes, yes...

... Oh, you'll pay for this, I promise you! No more philoso-talk... THIS is WAR!

... That's my boy! Heheheh...

Moralizing... failing. Warface activating! >:(

I'm glad WE can FINALLY
ALL AGREE on something!

Chapter Sex: Nonprotected

...

...

...

What time is it?

Who cares? It's not like we have to go to work or something.

True... Still, it's useful to keep track of time.

Why?

Because you know... 'Time is creds!'

You're just reading that off a 'Monotravel' pamphlet!

Heheheh... Well, maybe I do have 'plans' to 'travel' to Mono.

Good... I'm glad you haven't forgotten about it.

WE... nonforgetting...

Gooooood... Finally, some ACTION!

Now, now hold on. We're gonna do it BUT we're going to do it MY way.

Awwwwwh, you're no fun—

—I mean it. No dumb stuff. I know you can get a little carried away.

You'll NEVER forgive me for doing that, will you?

Look, I... I've forgiven you a long time ago. But it still means I have to take into calculation your tendency to —

—Look man, that bird was dying!

There was nothing you could—!

—Sure there was. It wasn't a real thing, dood! You just THOUGHT it was, remember? Father told us —

—You still believe anything Father told us?

I—!... I—!... Non... But I must believe that one. At least THAT one, why would Father ever speak nontruth about...?

... You know... Bills style?

To protect our feelings and whatnot?

No... there's no birds in... Or is there? Gotta take everything we know into account. Dude knows lots of stuff but he's SUCH a cheapskate on the details! AMA—! Well... AMA has had enough for a while; I will not bother her with my questioning. Not about MONOFUCKS anyway. They better believe I'm not going to do their torturing for them. Bills... Bills I trust. I think he's told me the truth each time, eh well, he did hide it from me but... Dox... Dox I nontrust, period. It goes both ways, beeea... Nevermind, Kindawgs I trust but eh... Well... Shaun I don't trust but it's just a 'conspiracy' theory. What if he IS ONE of the aliens?

Pffft, get real!

IMAGINE though... that would be quite ironic, wouldn't it?

Yep. I'd truly believe in KEK then!

I thought you already believed in KEK. I mean, you easily believe in lots of stuff.

I do, I do, but... eh, you know.

NOT very fond of some all-seeing eye out there watching all my moves. It's creepy!

True, but yeah... I mean, EVEN if such a being exists... Like something outside our dimensions... It's like, you know... Like if we were watching some ants marching blissfully to their biz. There's no shame in that! Even if we're basically... All naked in front of such a being.

Look, dude! All I'm saying—

—WE—!

—See? Even bothead here thinks I'm—

—NONTRUTH!

Ooooh, really?

And what does Bothead think?

Analyzing... Reanalyzing...
Comparing... Compiling... Computing...
Recomputing... Non... Non...
???

Nondefining... non YES nor NO.

Well, that's a new one. Have you finally reached a noncertainty you're actually comfortable with?

Affirming...

Interesting... Well, I beg to differ but... I'm always glad to be proven wrong.

Me neither.

Re-affirming, non-confirming..

Well now, let's see... AMA still sleeps like an angel on a cloud. From this angle her body looks quite long but I think it's just my mind asking for a... Aaah! We're not allowed to... smoke... inside... eh... I retrieve my left hand from under AMA's shivering body and my blood send needles through my flesh as it starts recirculating in certain areas. AMA hasn't complained yet. Never seen her smoke but she doesn't seem to mind it either. At least she's not showing it... I could just go out but I'd rather just stay with her... caress her a bit, maybe that'll wake her up... Nothing... But... she finally puts a palm on my face, ouch! She touches my neck, my chest...

I whisper... "Wake up, sleeping beauty!"

She points to the back of her left wrist with her face a question mark. I non... Ah, yes...

"I haven't checked yet."

She points to my eyes with her head a question mark.

"I haven't turned them on yet."

Bigger question mark.

"Because..." I gently caress her face "... I wanted to admire you better."

She smiles with shyness and tries to hide it and then spanks me for being a cheeky boy. But then she's sad. She pushes her head deep into my chest, ouch! Can barely breathe—!

—She pulls back, looks me straight in the eyes and whispers... "Sorry for last night..."

"No, don't you feel sorry for that! Never! Look, I told you! I love you! For better or nonbetter."

"You really mean that?" Her pleading whispers almost break my heart.

"I do! I swear on my heart, cross my heart, on KEK's word, on Father's... memory. Whatever, you name it!"

"You never told me about Father..."

"Ah yes... I guess I do owe you that. Father non... I mean he disappeared a year ago. No word, no nothing. Just *poof*-ed out of existence."

"I'm sorry to hear that. You think he was non...?"

"Nonpersoned? Probably. But... I also have my 'conspiracy' theories..."

"Is that so?"

"Yep... I have some... 'leads' that tell me he might have... escaped." I whisper in her ear "I think Father is actually the 'H3r0'! Or one of them at least!"

"Never heard of them." She looks serious.

"Come on, I can't believe you—!" She smiles devilishly, oh I see... "—You, you, you cheeky lady!" I playfully tease her ribs and she giggles a little and then I do it some more and then she slaps me, geez! This girl has no respect for my autonomy.

"—But..." AMA links her eyes into mine, close, really, really close... "...How can you know that for sure?"

"I don't of course. I just... like to believe." AMA does a little pity face but it's sincere. She hugs me and I hug her and then I'm alright. "AND if let's say, Father is not even... real... Like the Res' thinks..." AMA's face turns in a grudge. I guess she believes me... "Kindawgs has bet all of his dough that Father is real and if Father isn't... I get to wipe my tears with his DK. Heheheheh..."

AMA bursts out in a childish laughter and then says "You do know how wrong that sounds, don't you?"

"No, I uhm..." Hey wait a minute... "NO! No, I didn't mean oh geez... You and your cheeky mind!" And I tease her some more but this time no ribs involved; I've learnt my lesson.

"I'm sure you'll find Father. If he's out there."

"Thank you..."

She lays her head on my lap and hesitates to say something but then... "I never knew Father... Mother said he left us for a tramp but I never believed anything that bitch told me." Ouch! At least we're progressing...

"Sounds like you didn't like her much."

"I HATED HER!" She's crushing my foot, for fuds sake we need to have a discussion about this ow, ow, ow—

"—Ama, please! I know this is painful for you but can you PLEASE stop punishing me for it?"

AMA rises back to my level, caresses my face, kisses my forehead... "Sorry, I get carried away sometimes... Sorry, I'll behave!" Her fluttering eyelashes melt my heart.

"It's ok... I can't imagine what you've been through."

"It's... in the past now."

"Of course." I ponder for a bit and say "... I'm still amazed that you can... speak, though."

"Please don't...! Don't tell anyone."

"I will not but Bills heard the scream last night. The whole house probably heard you."

"..."

"... I'll see what I can do about that..."

"... Thank you...!"

I hug her but I nonget to ponder much anymore because she nonengages with an 'O' look on her face. "I forgot to feed my friends!" Ah, yes. The 'mysterious' friends.

"Mmmm, ah yes! These 'friends' you were talking about. Anything you have to tell mmmmmme?" I do this faux-nonfaux tone of suspicion.

"If you think I'm cheating on you, forget it! Especially not with other species!"

"Pfffft, ok. I'm glad we cleared that out!"

"Hihihi... Yeah, I'm taking care of some kittens for someone. She... I mean... He... I mean, nevermind."

"What? I'm intrigued now. Can I come see these kittens?"

"NO, NO! The owner, well, he's not fond of visitors."

"I see, ok. 'They' a friend of yours?"

"Yeah, we rescued him a while ago."

“Interesting. Does this person happen to be kinda half my height?” Eyes ten percent bigger “And wears these baggy-looking—” Twenty percent “—and adorning trinkets and—” Thirty percent and she isn’t faking this time.

“—How did you...? You’ve met Gary?”

“Gary’s her name? I mean his name? I mean geez—”

“—Gary the modder. Yeah, I know it’s a ‘she’ but just deal with her for a little bit. She’s just a bit confused. Like we all are sometimes...” AMA fingers my hair “And she said she’d never do anything... down there you know. She actually said, and I quote: ‘Some places should never be touched by modding’. Hihihih! She’s a cutie when she finally opens up.”

“I’m glad we can all agree on some ‘levels’. Heheheh!”

“Oh, you’re an ass!”

“One of a kind, melody!” I kiss her smoothly before I let her go help her friends in need. ‘Ohreh vuah’ and...! Whatever. I’m all alone now. I try not to think about last night... It’s hard though... That scream! It will forever haunt me. What could possibly...? What memory could unleash such force? Such... openness of the soul. We’re basically soul mates now. We’ve told each other all our secrets. Well, most of them... But I nonjudge her, I don’t NEED to hear it to BELIEVE it. I’ve SEEN it. Her body wears the stigma of a long chain of abuses and it’s obvious WHO’s to blame about that. Mother... Her mother... Whoever that is. It does not matter; how could a MOTHER do that? No child ever deserves even a spank! Even the MONOFUCKS agree with me on that one and heh... At least that’s what they tell us!

Her Mother was part of Mono,
equals Mono.

True but... We don’t know that. There are still some things we don’t know. But we don’t need to either. Overanalyzing it won’t help much. Someone will pay for this; I have sworn that.

Good, you had me the first time but...
I enjoy confirmations!

Heh... Look, she escaped a year ago, right? She said she thought she’d seen me before. So maybe she’s from City7 too. AND you know... Father’s disappearance a year ago? Things are starting to add up, eh?

Nah, nah, it can’t be... But what if?

Whatever it is, I’m sure Father could help us find out. So, first we do that and then we...

And then the revenge part, right?

Look, revenge is a dish best served with care, ok? We get all the info we can get and then we STRIKE—

—COUNTERING—

—SHUT UP, BOTBRAIN! ADULTS ARE TALK—

—ING! PING! ENDANGERING—!

—LOOK, WE’RE ONLY GOING TO—

—DEADING! SCARYING! —

—DEADING, SPREADING, ASHES NONCARING!

DUDE, NOW YOU’RE STARTING TO—

—FREAKING—

—OUT WITH THE OLD! IN WITH THE NEW! THIS IS OUR DANCE AND SO CAN—

—iSTOP! iSTOP! NONSTOPPING—!

—STOP! PLEASE, OR I’LL HAVE TO—

—NONBEARING—

—UP AND AROUND, DOWN IN THE GROUND, THE DEAD MAKE NO SOUND—’

—NONDEADING—!

.....
... I... felt possessed. Again... But this time... Something darker... I told him. I told... the stupid, fucking idiot!!!
... he deading?...

Yes... I... Look, I told him and you remember it, right??? I told him... IF you ever cross the line... Like the 'others' did... He's out. Good-bye! No quarter given. KAPUT! Adios! No remorse. No regrets. No nothing. He is out for good; I swore that to him! And he said, 'Fine! Fine!' like he always does and now...!

...
I know... I know... he had HIS moments... But you know, he really started to get out of line already when we... Eh, well, never mind that. It's in the past now. It's just you and me now and look, things are going to be...

... Agreeing...
Ah... And he did it to himself, we can both agree on that too. He knew what the penalty is.

... Double agreeing...
Hey, you've... You've been a good friend...

... ???!?! ...
NO! NO, NO, NO I didn't mean it in THAT—

—Pffewing...
Yeah, yeah, don't worry! You've NEVER crossed me, EVER! You are... my best friend, you should know that!
... <3 ...

It's going to be quiet around here though... I'll give him that, he was always saying some dumb stuff to cheer us up. I know he didn't mean it most of the time but... Yeah, I didn't trust him. NEVER trusted him much. He was a sneaky-tricky-licky one.

Triple Agreeing.
Maybe we won't be as funny as before. But hey, we picked up some tricks, haven't we???
Quadruple A Greed I Violence 0...0?

We've picked off some of that too. But... it's just for defense only, you know that! We've all agreed on that a long time ago. Well, I say 'we'. ForF, remember?

Top agreeing...
Yeah, much more space now. I can breathe for once in my life! AMA... I love AMA, can you imagine that???
I've never loved... anyone that way before. And it feels fine, no more slavery, no more anxiety. I'm just...
Relaxed. Everything is going to be fine...

... He gone, remembering?
Yeah, yeah, yeah... Just checking. I get up from bed and push and shove and squat and jump and yeah!
Energized, I feel noncompromised anymore. [8:40] Friesland. Hmm, I could've sworn it's much later in the day... Nevermind, I'm in love, that explains it! I do a little dance through the tiny room. There's nothing in this room, just empty walls and a bed.

I step outside the room all giggly up inside and get greeted by Dox's funky-looking back in front of a console. I say "Good morning!" But she nonresponds, well I say 'nonresponds'. She just grunts. "Oh, please forgive me for disturbing you with my morning greetings, madam! I will continue my day in the kitchen but do shout out if you'd like some coffee! I would love to cheer your day too!"

Dox finally looks at me, checks me top to bottom and says "What? Didja finally lose yo virginity?"
"Non, I..." Hey wait a— "—Non, I mean—" —HEY, WAIT A MINUTE— "—I non..."
"Speed it up, copperbrain!"
"Can you please stop calling me that? My name is—"

“—Whateva, you mind tellin’ me why you so upbeat this morning?”

“I...! Heh, no reason... No reason at all!”

“That sounds like bull.”

“It’s no bovine, it’s the truth! Why do you need a reason to be happy?”

Dox ponders for a bit “... ‘cause it sounds like bull.”

“Ok, but how can you know that for sure?”

“I don’ need yo psychologizin’, copperhead.”

“Fine! Fine!... Madam!”

“That really tickles yo funny bone, ain’t it?”

“What do you mean?”

“Callin’ me ‘madam’! When you weren’t ‘sure’ what kinda ‘self’ I was.” Uh-oh... “Yeah, I did hear that convo, but ya know what? You probably think Bills told ya the whole truth!” Uh-oh, madam has snakey-pants?

“But BILLS... was a ‘she’ too!” UUUUUH-OOOOOH-FUD-WHAT-THE-FUD-NO-PLEASE-TELL-ME-YOU’RE-JOK—

“—Yeah! You think all that talk ‘bout ‘it’s none of yo biz’ was just for shits and giggles?”

“...”

“Did I put a cloud over yo head, pretty-boy?”

“...”

“...”

“... Nah... I just wish...” ... “I just... wish you weren’t so harsh about it...”

“...”

I go into the kitchen, a bit disheartened but not because of Dox, I don’t care about Dox. But Bills I... It’s like... Look, I’m fine with it, to each his own, but...! Heh... it’s hard for me to find out this way. It’s weird! I don’t know... To see someone for a while as SOMETHING. And then it turns out... Nope! It’s not... Jokes on you! Well, jokes on me but... Ah, look!

... Listening...

HE, and I do mean HE! He... is our friend. And he’s been... keeping his borders. He is NOTHING like... You know... FoxCatBleh... FoxCatBleh is just an idiot. Bills is... Bills is OK in my book.

Agreeing...

... Anyway, I pour myself a cup of milk and I sit alone, drinking it. Pondering... Processing... Reprocessing... This milk is quite tasty but smells funny! Nonminding... But I don’t get to ponder much when —

“—Good morning!” Bills is all cheery when he sees me. But I think... Hmmm, yeah for sure he did...

“Hey! How’s it going?”

“Oh, you know me... Eavesdropping and such!” He’s still quite cheery but sounds a bit... afraid...

“Heheheh, yeah... Look, just so you know...” I wave my hands around but already I feel like a big idiot

“... Heh... I’m... This changes NOTHING between us, ok??? We’re cool in my book!”

“I’m glad to hear that...” Bills sits down and looks at me, no fear can I detect in his eyes anymore. He just watches me. This is starting to feel noncomfortable... Bills, please don’t! Please don’t come out with some extra thing that’s going to—

“—... What, is there something on my face?”

“No, no! No... it’s just that... You know, I used to be a game designer. A video-game designer!”

“Wow, for real? I mean, since you told me you don’t play vidya—”

“—Heh, yeah, I don’t play them, I prefer to write them. I found out pretty soon in life that it was way cooler! You know, my first game was called ‘M.A.L.E.’ and it was about, yep, you’ve guessed it! Transgender

androids, hahahahah!” I laugh whole-heartedly at the idea and he describes this really intricate and complex strategy flatscreen mumbo-jumbo I can barely follow but the point is... “... One of the games I’ve worked on was this re-boot of some very, very old flatscreen RPG called ‘Vampires: Blood on the Lines - The Mask or the Raid?’”

“Wow, kinda pompous, don’t you think?”

“Oh, and rightfully so. This piece of work had been a CULT classic in its days. Before it got... purged with the others...” I see, the Netcopy fiasco*. Interesting...

“Oh, but then how do you know about it?”

“Just screenshots. Stories... And some people’s fond memories. There was a saying that ‘whenever someone mentions Vampires, someone else will reinstall it.’”

“Well, if that’s the case, SOMEONE must still have the original, right? RIGHT????” I’m really hyped for the idea of such a gem resurfacing!

“I’m not sure about that... I’ve NEVER seen it myself anyway...”

“I see... I want to believe...”

“Anyway, but the point is...! The point is...” Bills gets lost in thought. I try to bring him back to the surface.

“The point being...?”

“Look, this... game... Although it was about vampires and werewolves—”

“—And dragons?”

“Heh, no! No dragons. That was some other game called Dragons and... Mazes or whatever. But the point of the game was that it placed a ‘black mirror’ in front of the world. The ‘vampires’ were a metaphor for the ‘power’ structures in societies and such.”

“Mmmmmm! Interesting, I like!”

“Yes... And it dealt with some issues we all deal with sometimes... And when I first saw you I... I felt that... I felt something!... Like a... beast of sorts... hiding behind you.”

“Wow... really?” I get a chill down my spine. No one has ever said that to me! Was it because of...?

Maybe-ing...

Well, he’s gone now so—!... Yeah...

“Yes, I felt that... but I’ve since changed my mind. You’ve proven to me that—even if there is some shadow hiding behind you—you’ve kept it under a leash for a long time. You seem to have some sort of control over yourself... I hope I’m not mistaken in that.”

“Heh, you... I mean... Yeah, I do have a dark side. Actually...! I think I’ve completely... overcome it. I can’t prove it... No one can, probably... But...”

Bills looks at me and says “I believe you...” He leans back in his chair, seems to get lost in thought then says “Is everything ok with you and Ama?”

“What you mean?”

“Well... Look, I don’t intend to be rude, but that scream last night... I think it woke up the whole neighbourhood.”

“For real?” Bills just nods his head... “Yeah... heh... well... I have this dream... it’s weird really, it’s... a recurring dream. It’s usually ok but... last night... it turned into the worst nightmare of my life! So yeah... I remember waking up screaming! Sorry for that...”

Bills seems empathetic or maybe even sympathetic... But then he turns skeptic “But it sounded so... girlish!”

* The “Netcopy fiasco”, or the “Plandemic” in certain nonscientific circles, was an “official” “Whoopsie!” moment for the Monos tate when an “escaped” Networm deleted most of the old media and some new media, under some “major nonfunction” pretext. Yeah... sure! Of course, this is “DEFINITELY!” what happened and it was “NON!” because they wanted to censor all that p*****y and p*****y and ***** and *****. Not to mention anything related to ‘the missing year’.

“Oh my, for real? I must be... Heh, maybe I’m actually a girl meself and don’t know it!”

Bills bursts out in a hearty laugh and I can almost hear... her voice and not... his... He leaves, still laughing on the way out. I guess he believed us. And just like that, he’s left us here, all alone... To think... To ponder... But what if...?

Nonbelieving...

I know it worked with the others but the others... Were dumber than him.

Triple nonwant believing...

Me neither... I want to nonbelieve.

Needing...

There’s nothing I’d rather do, but the thought of HIM is still in my... Ahh... Well, there’s nothing I’d rather do except for... Well, not even that. I’m comfortable not ‘jacking’, finally! Well... Ok, just for a minute or so...

I return to the decking room. Dox ignores me and I’m fine with that. Actually, I hope she doesn’t say anything else for the rest of my life. I jack—...—in and watch some splonk on the Net, some clips of a flick, some pics of a... Giant, octopus-like creature ‘they’ say washed up on some beach in subsector... Whatever, some memes, some... other memes. Some Darknet culture...?

The sanctity of .gg

The .gg media format is as old as the Darknet itself, probably older. A well optimized cross-deck, multipurpose file format, .gg supports 2D, 3D and 4D pics and vids, any musical formats (traditional, surround, aural), nuCAD blueprints, bioprints, footprints, Mondopeek* layout maps and even some really obscure ones like “fleshmesh”.

*D-net service that offers satellite imagery and GPS support thanks to its successful spyware infection of several Mono-satellites. The service requires a free signup with nonC.I.P. validation for its basic satellite imagery services and a monthly (SDK current time) subscription for its GPS service (Resistance members exempt). Some customers have complained that the GPS service is lagging some of the time but we say be thankthank the doodheads at **[REDACTED]**corp have not sniffed that spyware yet.

The .gg extension stands for “gud grafix”, a throwback to its humble beginnings, and is described as “not bad, not great, just good enough for the memes” by Archbitchop** VidixFr4me. His “Diginess” is the current leader of the “Sanctuary of Saint .GG All-inclusive”, a “not-for-prophet” foundation dedicated to the continuous debugging, updating and zealous defense of the Net integrity of its “.gglorious format”. Although obviously a mock-religion, its members take their roles with pious devoutness and have been known to organize DNDOS attacks against anyone who would threaten the established .gg dogma. Several attempts for a schism in the “church” have been zealously thwarted this way.

**bitchop (or bitchopper) = highly influencial and respected netbuilder.

This does not mean that Netizens do not allow other formats to exist, but they are usually reserved for highly specialized fields and have no place on the “funboards and hobforums”. Posting formats developed outside Darknet (like corpocrap .jhg) will instantly label you as a “glownig—”

“—Sorry! OK? We cool?”

“...” I turn around to find Dox painfully trying to hide some frustration. “What, you talking to me?”

“Yeah, numb-nuts! Geesh, why you gotta make this harder?”

“Well, forgive ME but... I just didn’t expect that from you.”

“Why, you think I’m some cold-hearted bitch?!”

“NO! I just—”

“—You’d be right to think so. But life’s a bitch and you gotta pay it back with the same koin. I mean...” She looks down, wow really? First time I see her break eye communication first. Is she...? “... I just don’t like people overreacting their feelings.”

“Oh... Oooh, ok! I guess you... I guess...”

“You don’ need to spell it out, gigolo!”

“But... come on, I mean... What? You mean you’ve never had moments of... overjoy?”

“I—! ...” She ponders for a bit “I also don’t like psycho-analysis.”

“Why so?”

“I swear if you do that one mo’...!” She quickly calms herself and avoids my eyes again. I’m not smiling nor frowning. Just listening to her... “... Fine, maybe I do have some frustrations to work out.”

“...”

“And I ain’t the most pleasant company.”

“...”

“FINE! I do NEED to get laid!”

“WOAAAHH, there! I didn’t say it, you did!”

“WHATEVER!” She turns around, obviously noncomfortable with the whole situation.

“Look, if you must know... Although this is highly nonconfidential information, we didn’t... you know... thingy!”

“What thingy??”

“You know... thingy!!”

“You mean like... thingy???” She mimics with her fingers a penetration act. Finally!

“Yes... thingy!!!”

“Poo-poops you mean?” Kindawgs surprises me but then I chuckle because he’s quoting... I keep up with the meme.

“Nooo, thingy!!!” Oh, dear KEK! It’s gone off the rails now.

“OOOH, thingy!!! Whew! Well, excuse me!” And Kin rushes to the bathroom. Perfect comical timing!

Dox finally puts a smile on that dark face. “Yeah, well life’s ain’t all ‘bout fuckin’, you know?”

“Some scientists beg to differ!”

“What do those perverts know?”

“Heheheh... true.” Or is it?

Dox turns back to her biz but then re-turns and says... “... And thanks.”

“For what?”

“Come on, don’t make this harder than it is!”

“What???”

“Eh... fine! Thanks for... listening to me.”

“I’d do anything for this team. Well, I say ‘anything’.”

“Ok, Capt’n Bigpants!”

“Now there’s the Dox I know!” She laughs a tiny, tiny bit, first time I hear her laugh... She’s... not a bitch after all. At least not on the inside. She carries on with whatever and I carry on with whatever but I soon get nonexcited. Father... But Father can wait. I’ve waited for Father for so long. I can... search some other time...

Searching on-holding...

I leave the house and wander around the front-yard, the side-yard and finally the back-yard where I find Shaun trimming what looks to be a red fruit tree. He is using a pair of oversized scissors that seem directly installed into his arms. From my P.O.V. at least.

I walk semi-close to him and say “Working hard?”

“Eehh, hardly! You mind giving me a hand with that?” Shaun points to a pulverizing device with a big nozzle and handle. I hand the device over and he starts spraying the leaves of the tree with it “I hate doing this but it’s these damn parasites that keep eating my tree!”

“Bugs, eh?”

“No, it’s these damn kids scrumping {fruit larceny{stealing}} my fruitage.”

“Heh, little buggers, eh?”

“Yeah, yeah...” Shaun isn’t much amused by the whole situation. But then I remember. Dude, what the fud is he spraying and what are the effects? I try to be polite.

“Ehm... And how exactly does that keep the kids away?”

“This formula right here is me own homemade recipe for kid repellent.”

“And what are its effects?”

“Oh, it emits some strong Oleoresin Capsicum at a distance of a man’s arm. Those kids have no chance, heheheeeee!”

“For real?” I distance myself a bit from the tree. “Wow... But how aren’t you tearing up?”

“Oh, I’m crying on the inside, that’s for sure!” He truly is an alien, it’s confirmed. “I missed my batch of whisky {alcoholic beverage popular with G-Sector natives and others} last season because of them.” Look! He’s even admitting it himself. The spray doesn’t affect him, he’s crying ‘cause of some nonfulfilled need for booze.

“You’re pulling my tail.”

“I ain’t, young man! Now, you needed something or what?”

“Oh, no, I was just chilling around... Mind if I light a cig?”

“Are you retarded?”

“Oh my, no sir I—”

“—told you I quit smoking! You tryin’ to kill me??”

“No, sir I—”

“—Maybe I’ll have one, ok.” I’m flabbergasted. I’m what in the...?

“Uhm... are you sure about this???”

“What, you really think I give a shite if I die anymore? Look at me, I’m a thousand years old! Eheheeeeeeee *cough* heheh*cough*!” Sounds to me like he’s telling the truth.

“Are you a vampire?”

“Bwaahheeeeeeee—” hopefully vampires are vulnerable to stupid jokes “—yeah, son, I’m older than everyone you’ve ever known and ever will.” I find that... a bit... too...

“I see... but you seemed quite happy that you quit smoking.” I say as I hand him one from my pack. He takes it but... What the...? He places it on his neck, right around the apple and puffs it all in like five seconds. OH, my dear!

Triple plus alien confirming...

“I was, but sometimes things change.”

“What changed?” I try not to stare at his neck but I can’t!

“Can I have another one?”

“Uhm, sure...” I have never seen... such addiction! It’s been like what? Five secs in, five secs break?

“Thanks lad.” He takes the cig but this time he puts it in his ear. Now wait a minute... THIS guy is pulling my socks too... He actually blows the cigarette in through his ear. I mean, from my P.O.V. he is actually pulling it inside his ear. No hands, ladies and gents! Ok I see, he’s some sort of magician or something. I start laughing heartily as I prepare myself for this magical act. He asks me for another one, he smokes it with his nose. Eye,

finger, top of the head. He is definitely something else. Maybe an android. SURELY if he's fooled me up to this point, he could be a REAL A.I.! HOLY—

“—How'd you do that?!?!”

“Oh, I'm an alien! Beep, boop!”

“Heh! But no, for real? That looks like no act I've ever seen. And I've SEEN some smoking magic acts, I tell you!”

“Look kid, I'm... heh. Let's just say... when I told you I'm not that old... I was joking, okay?”

“Ok...”

“Yeah, so you don't wanna know, trust me.” I feel this... horror... Look, aliens at least sound reasonable you know. But vampires??? I mean, come on! That's bull... And yet...the horror persists. It has to be my imagi... Nah, it has to be—

“—Why not?”

“Kid... there's plenty of things out there that even I haven't seen. And I've seen a lot! So...”

“Wait, so you're telling me that you're actually a thousand years old?” I'm setting the trap.

“Don't be ridiculous! But I tell you, after a hundred or so you kinda stop counting.”

“So, you're like a hundred and fifty or so?”

“More or less, yeah.” I find that quite...

“Hard to believe.”

“Look kid...” And what he does next gives me the freakiest scene in my life. He decouples his face! Oh, dear my...! His whole head must be cyber-augmented! I knew there was something weird about his face. Very... C.G.I. almost. Generic. His eyes clearly cyber, cyber mouth, that's how he was doing the smoke trick, his whole head must be full of holes! He covers his nonface with his face again and it couples back quite neatly. “Now you understand?”

“You're an android!”

“Bwaaaaaahaah*cough*—” oh dear, he's falling off the ladder! I try to catch him but he falls in a stack of yellow sticks, like hay.

“Lucky you, ancient man!”

“Bwahahaaah!” I help him get up and he says “Kid you know, I like ya. I've met a ton of shite people in my life who tried to kill me in all kinds of manners and none of them got even close. And here you come and kill me with your stupid fucking jokes, BWUAHAHAH*choke**cough*—!”

“—Hey now, don't you do me one of them clichés where you die laughing now—”

“—BWAHEHEHEEEEE—!” he pulls out a tube and injects his arm with something that looks like a syringe... or a stim. He's a junkie too. Perfect! But his laughter soon subsides. Ok, well that stim must be effective! “You really tryin' to kill me, kid? My heart man, my heart! It's an old model for KEK's sake!”

“Oh ok, sorry! I'll behave!”

“Bwaaheheeeeh, you're ok, lad!”

“You know, you're holding quite well for your age.”

“You get sick of it, I tell ya!”

“Really? I can't imagine that.”

“Try it, then!”

“Heh... well, I've tried thinking about very, very long intervals of time, like near-infinite but—”

“—Just do it!”

“Ok...” I close my eyes and imagine... Tens of years passing by. Me and Ama growing old together. Technology probably got so advanced we can actually live for a thousand years. But... so many dangers... Always dangers... Always something... Or SOME one... Who wants to get you... And if they got the technology

too, sooner or later they get you! They get you, those fffff—!... So, yeah. I'd rather not think about the long run. Too many variables. Too many nonknowns. Too little... hope... But a hundred years? Yeah, that sounds all right. I mean come on! A hundred years! Such a beautiful number. One, zero, zero. But eh... With all we've been through, every day is now a present in both senses of the word. We could've died at least TWICE! I mean, come on! How many chances can you get? Maybe three and you're out? That does seem to be the theme, eh? Three wishes, three wise wizards, three gods, well there's always different opinions on that last one. Some say three into one, some say one into a hundred. Monoheads never got along on anything important. I say it's NON but eh... Still open for debate. But I think only NON knows... But IF there is some law of the universe, maybe I shouldn't force IT. This Force of Luck must be respected. The probabilities always add up. You pass the street, you get hit. Every time you choose not to pass the street, your chances of survival increase. But what if a car gets hit and is launched on the sidewalk? Now then, being in the street saves you. In Mono there weren't any accidents, I mean... Automated shuttles are quite effective. No stress, no sleep needed, they all worked on a grid, accidents were basically near nonpossible. Well, I say nearly! I heard 'rumors' of bioterrorists hacking into car systems and crashing them into walls. I've never SEEN it. Never heard of it on the news... Or anywhere else for that matter. But eh... It's possible, I guess. Here in the underground though... Don't think I've seen automated... What the fud!! How in the Hadesville did I end up here??? In this corner of mind? What did he ask me???

"Sorry, what did you ask me?"

"Boy, you must be retarded. That was a second ago!"

"Heh, yeah sorry... I was kilos away..."

"Are you sleeping well, boy?"

"I sleep very...! No, actually I have some rough nights sometimes..."

"Yeah, I know what you mean. You need more exercise. And quit that damn smoking, you fool!"

"Yeah, man I know but I'm... Look, you can't just smoke six cigarettes in front of me and then tell me to quit smoking, it's not fair!"

"Why?"

"Because... It's hypo... Hypocritical."

"Mmmm, ok, I see your point." He ponders for a bit and then says "But what does that have to do with the truth value of what I said?"

"Because..." Hmmm... "Because I believe you have to lead by example. You can't just say it and expect me to believe it's true. I mean if you've lived for so long, why can't I?"

"Because you are not me and I am not you, boy. You should take each and every chance you get to improve your health, at least a bit. I haven't smoked in ten years because I haven't DONE that trick in ten years! You don't know crap about me, lad! And the crap I've had to put up with throughout my life can leave deep scars in you, boy! Deep, deep scars!"

"Hmmm... ok, I get it. I was mistaken to assume you were a smoker in the past, my apologies."

"Oooh, I was lad, I was... Luckily I quit early enough."

"Thanks for the warning!"

"Now I do have more work to do so if you'll excuse me..."

I feel I've hit a nerve there so I'm not going to continue the prodding. My inquiries have reached a boiling point again. Imagine that... A hundred years or so of life.

Nonimagining...

Thinking about it is boring anyway. It's just THIS moment and that's it. It can stop today, tomorrow or in a hundred years. It's still just NOW. And right NOW, he's left me without cigs... He smoked them all, that sneaky-

tricky-dicky cyber-bard. Heh... Touché, Shaun... Touché! I scout up the unexplored side of the house on my way back. A chainsaw and an axe seem to have been used quite recently. Really??? Cutting up trees when they're endangered? I forgot to ask him about... HOW ARE THEY GROWING STUFF UNDERGROUND??? I return to Shaun determined to finally find an answer to this mystery of mine. But when I get back in the garden, he's gone. Hmmm... I step inside the house; anyone should be able to answer this simple question. There's no one in the decking room. No one in the dining area. Hmmm...

"Anyone home?" Nothing... I call Kin on the telelink.

[[['Calling 'Kindawgs1337' ... Linkup revoked!']]]

[[['Calling 'Ama1337' ... Line unplugged!']]]

[[['Calling 'Bills1337' ... Linkup revoked!']]]

[[['Calling 'Dox1337' ... Linking... Linking... Linking... Idle...']]]

[[['Calling—']]]

—Aaah, what's the point? Do I have to understand it to believe it??? I mean, come on! ... Ok I'll search it on the Net just for a sec...

Moralizing...

Uhm... why?

Addicting...

... You mean the Net surfing or the Knowledge thirst?

Stereotyping...

Oooh, ooooh! You're starting to get it now, eh? You speak in metaphors that only you can understand!

U 2 understanding...

What do you mean you two? It's just ME here, remember??!!

I.T.s U 2!

Nooo... Nooo. Oh, my fud...! Don't! Please don't tell me HE is still here...

NON! U ARE HIM!

And that hits me like the worst slap on my face. You are right. Maybe... I have become HIM. He's gone now, but parts of HIM are still inside of me. Self-reflection is a bitch, I tell you. It's a cold-hearted bitch.

Nonbecoming...

I'll try. Thanks for pointing it out. It's hard to be aware of yourself. That's why you're my best friend. You're always sincere with me.

...

Anything you got to tell me?

Non. Thinking...

...

Are you sure about that?

... Father... spanking...

No! Really?

1 time only!... Or...?

I... I don't remember it. Are you really, really sure?

Confirming... milk spilling...

Wow... beat up over spilled milk? That's a new low.

Nonbeating! But spanking... still nonliking...

Heh, I believe you, I just... I can't remember it! But if that's true... Then what is true? He said NO to violence, always! How can you say that and then spank your kid, it's nonrational! Why do I even bother, it's not like rationality is that common. We all got a bit of nonrationality in us. But some of us... can really split their minds like bananas! Eh... If I don't remember it, maybe it really was just a one-time incident. He realized he was wrong in doing it and swore to never do it again. I think everyone deserves a second chance, right?

Nonagreeing...

Heh... well, HE has had more than one second chance I would say. But yeah... Heh, maybe that's what Father was trying to tell us. He was trying to teach us how to not become a monster. It probably left a scar on Father as much as it left a scar on me. You don't escape your past that easily, good or nongood.

Look, I'm going to jack in and take a job for the Res', ok? One of those security jobs, eh? I'm sure you'd like that.

Triple plus pulsing—

...—Inside the Net I leave behind my mortal shell and travel nonrestricted in the job-spaces of the Res'. The job is simple. Find holes in their system. All activity is logged. Fine! The infraNet is quite intricate. Modular structure, with each port filtered when accessing extra-Net. Inside the ResisNet nothing is logged, all traffic is triple-ended encrypted. But if you TRY to access extra-Net with no credentials... Oh man... Yeah, we learned that the hard way. There ARE some ways, but none take more than one second Netime before the I.C.E. melts them down.

And you get a mind-virus as a bonus. Not much you can do in that time I'd imagine. It would be like the intro to Don Monty. 'It's—' and you're blown to smithereens. Nope, I see no ways. Calls, recalls, requests, gets, sends, resends, duplication, replication, forcing, D-DOSing, Cross-digi-signing, singing! Maybe that will work!

Musicalizing...

Nothing... Well, it's solid I'll tell you, I'm out of ideas for now. No injecting vulnerabilities, no subjecting the neural pathways to any noncompatibilities. I really am out of ideas now...

... [16:20] What the...? I've fallen asleep on the console. Fud, my neck hurts like shud!

LocalNet bypassing? By superuser requesting...

What the freak are you talking about...? Hey...wait a minute! The splonkers didn't...! I do a double check on this... Heh, it's only THIS LocalNet. At least from what I can see. And it's... no, way...

Reconfirming...

The fact that it is a communication with Mono is not the surprising part. No, no no! The hash is nowhere in the extra-Net logs. These communications were bypassing all Res' filters! Wow... Wow, fud, fud-fud this is bad this... And THEY know now too. All my fiddling around is logged too! Oh fud... There's not much I can tell from the log though. It could be ANYONE in this house. Well, I say anyone. AMA is probably too... nonexperienced... Well, we don't know that... But I want to believe... I can't tell this to anyone. Well, maybe except AMA... But no, what if she...? Dude? No... What if it wasn't someone from this house? It's a single message. Just sent. No feedback. Totally encrypted, of course. Could be ANYONE!!

Exaggerating...

Ok, but ok at least they can't blame this on me. I wasn't here when it happened... Eleven days ago. The day I was brought in. Oh boy...

Good nonsounding...

It has to be a coincidence, right???

...

Right??? Come on! HE could do it; HE would believe it! Why can't YOU?

... Nonme...

... Ok but it still means nothing. Maybe Kindawgs is a high rank inside the Res' and he's got some privileges. But still, to be the only one with this privilege? Something doesn't add up. They all seem... trustworthy... Even Dox, although... I trust AMA no matter what. They swore the Oath. Even the Creed, whatever that is. I mean, THEY seemed to really believe in it so I need to believe they believe it. I can't go around with a potential hypocrite in this team. Or even more than one... Oh dear, what am I going to —?

—I.M. from 'Il_Duke', digi-print confirms it's Jaques. ['We need to talk. Come straight to my office and don't talk to anyone else.' Message purging 5 sec]

That sounds... serious. I hope I'm not in some trouble. I can't be. I grab my stuff and hurry out the door. Waypoints active and I'm actually going to...

[[['Calling Carentals line, please allow bio-I.D. access—']] —Fine!

[[['Please allow geoloc access—']] —Fine!!!

[[['Geoloc out of coverage—']] —For FUD'S SAKE I NEED A CIG!!!!!!!!!!!!

... I calm myself. I can wait for a little longer. I take the long, treacherous road out of the Swamp and finally get coverage for the cab. In a couple of minutes, a cute buggy like vehicle pulls in with a noncute, buggy eyed guy at the wheel.

He asks "Where to?"

"Uhm, but I already checked arrival loc on the app—"

"—Come on, I was making conversation."

"..."

"Just get in!"

"Ok, ok!" I climb inside the claustrophobic wonder machine and barely get to close the door when he just *shwoops* out of the lot. I almost hit my head on the front seat! Damn, is old tech so nonsafe? Maybe he's just a splonky driver. Well, just another good reason not to make 'conversation' with him. Jaques said not to talk to anyone. Well, he probably meant not about the—

"—It's a beautiful day, isn't it?" The driver is looking at me through the mirror above his head. This is so unnerving, is he even looking at the road?

"Yeah, yeah. A bit overcast I would say, though."

"Heh-heh yeah. Well, you get used to it."

"Yeah..." Ok, please stop talking now. His eyes are back on the road. Then he checks me again.

"You not from around here, are ya?"

"Actually, I am!"

"Oh, is that so?"

"Yep! Been living here all my life!"

"Me too but I don't remember ever seeing you around..." He looks sort of middle aged.

"You that good with faces?"

The driver does a left turn that's a bit steep I.M.H.O. "Yeah, I've seen a couple in my time."

"Maybe I changed my face!"

"Heh-heh, ok, whatever you say." He falls silent, forever, hopefully. But no, he spoils my fantasy just as the red lights of the district hit me in the face. "You ever been to Mono, kid?"

“Me? Nope.”

“Me neither... But you know... Sometimes... I wish I could go there... And just stay there...”

This is starting to sound really, really creepy to me. I don't know what it is, I got this feeling... Even the streets look almost empty... Something is not... Something is not right...

“ ... ”

“ ... ”

“ ... ”

“ ... ”

“ ... ”

“Aaand... here's your destination, kid!”

“Thank you!” And I exit the vehicle as-fast-as-I-can, I nonremember if I tipped, noncare whatever gotta get as far-as-I-can from that... I had a feeling ONLY, OK? IT couldn't have been...

Agreeing...

No, of course it wasn't IT. But... someone sent that message regardless. I run up the stairs faster than a cheetah! Guards just getting out of the way automatically, opening doors, opening gates, opening doors, I have total access right now it seems. The officials step up to greet me “Hell —” but I just pass them wildly, no time for stupid primitive gestures. I only feel safe with —!

—... Do I? I stop right in front of Jaqqes majestic brown door. What IF????... Why wouldn't he be a suspect? You've heard Shaun, they don't even lock the front door. I mean wtf. Anyone could've sneaked in and sent that message when no one was home. But I nonget to ponder much when Jaqqes opens the door and with a déjà vu all over my brain I am greeted and welcomed in his lair. He sits me down and...

“Cigar?” He passes me a box of cigars and I take one just out of sheer curiosity. He flicks a lighter... Lights his... Then mine... Oh dear... Let's see...

“BOOOHWOHHWOOWOW*cough*cough**cough*—”

“—Oh, mon Deo {Dieu: KEK}, Dem! Do non pull in your lungs! Just your—”

“—*cough* yeah, thanks for the warn*cough*.” I think this has cured me of my addiction.

Jaqqes goes to the two powered terminals and turns them off. He goes to his desk and presses a couple of buttons on the buttony, speakery device on his desk. Ceiling shafts close up, some wall openings I did not notice in the corners of the room also close up. Then Jaqqes looks at me and says “It's just you and muah {moi: me} now.”

“Oh dear... Are you going to kill me?”

“Buwaaahhahahah!” His laughter doesn't help my paranoia. Is he a psychopath or just an evil mastermind? “Dem, you're killing ME! Look... I've been keeping this place a secret for forty years. Can you believe that? This place didn't exist for that long if you think of it.” For some reason his accent seems to have disappeared...

“Forty years is a big number for a secret.”

“You think so? Heh... well, it was not easy. I came here right after its construction. Years of pain they told me. I could barely believe what I was seeing. Non of the buildings were up at that time. Just an empty cave...”

“I can't shake the amazement myself... The trees, the life around... It's...”

“Yes, life is a marvel, Dem. And I am glad that you listened to me. Disregarding the... incident with Yama —”

“—Yes, sir, sorry, sir, I was—”

“—I did say disregarding—” Yeah, well then why say it??? “—... You've proven to me you are trustworthy... Regardless of the security risk you posed.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, besides the Yama—”

“—Yeah, yeah—”

“—We also knew that you are...” He motions around the frame of my body. Ooooooooooh...

“The... skeletal augmentation you mean?”

“Yes... You posed quite a security risk; you see—”

“—If you thought I was going to kill people, why did Dude give me a—!?” ... Who do I trust more, Dude or Jaques? The one who trusted me from the beginning, with no strings attached? Even gave me a freaking gun!?! Or the one who just now cut communication with... Start [REC].

“... Yes, you were saying?”

“Eh... he gave me a gun.”

“Oh, well. You’re entitled to self-defense now, aren’t you?”

“Yes, but...”

“There’s nothing wrong in what Dude did. You were profiled really well, Dem. We didn’t see you as a high probability risk. Just a... little risk. And little risks are worth keeping an eye on.”

“I see...” All that fear of being watched. It was all real, eh...? It wasn’t just a ‘phobia’.

Jaques leans back in his chair and puffs a big lung of cigar which gives me a disgust reflex I never thought I could have in regards to smoking. He sits up and moves near the window, back turned to me, then says “That hole you found is bad news, mon ahmee {mon ami: my friend}! But also, good news. We’ve set up a tap on Shaun’s L-Net. All I’m begging you, Dem, is that you keep this info away from anyone else. Especially Ama...”

“I understand your worries Jaques and I agree—”

“—Especially Ama, do you understand?!”

“... For real, you think it’s her?”

“... I don’t think anything, Dem. I have to consider all variables here. And Ama... is my most nonpredictable variable.”

“Heh, sure, but her decking skills are splonk!”

“... She’s probably picked up some tricks by now. If she didn’t already have them...” Oh really?

“Heh...”

“... Dem... I know you can’t believe me. But you have to understand you may be biased here.” He turns around, steps ahead in front of the desk and looks me straight in the eyes. “When the team found Ama a year ago...” ... “... It was a total fluke. Outside City Seven sewer lines, not far from the metroplex. She was surrounded by six dead OVSEFO units. All slashed to pieces. She lay unconscious in a pool of blood —”

“—Oh, my—!”

“—Yes, but that’s not the weird part. You see... somehow... Ama managed to de-C.I.P. herself. She was in no condition to escape the back-up units that were most probably on their way. So, half her luck was that we found her when we found her...”

“I am...” horrified...

“Yes, but you see... I’ve since then re-analyzed footage of the scene.”

“Go on...”

“And I do suspect there’s more to it than we know... The scene looked almost... intentionally arranged... Too suspicious. Too many... Ah, but look, even if let’s SAY Ama is involved in this, Dem...” Jaques puts an empathetic palm on my shoulder “... She is most probably unaware of it. She could be an unwilling pawn in a higher scheme... You understand?”

“I don’t, really...”

“It’s ok, non of us really do...” Jaques must be a follower of NON too... Maybe.

I smile and nod. Jaques approaches me again, holds both of my shoulders tightly, ow, ow, ow—

“—Dem... I put my life in your hands. All of our lives are in your hands. I have ordered double patrols inside and outside. Everything is on high-alert. We cannot take any more chances. We will find this... traitor. I promise you... But it’s all in your hands now... If the traitor finds out about it, we might miss our chance... forever...” Jacques is long lost in a deep thought... I get lost in a darker thought. AMA? It can’t be... No... I refuse to believe that. She believes in me... I MUST BELIEVE IN—!

“—I will not fail you, sir!”

“Thank you! Dismissed! Move out!”

“Sir, yes sir!”

Jacques smiles and I depart with a sour, bitter and smoky taste in my mouth but I suspect it’s mostly cause of that splonkfest of a cig—

“—You here again?” The familiar squeaky sound of the familiar nerpball makes me want to put some cigs in my ears too.

“I could ask you the same question.”

“No, you can’t.” Gary draws first.

“Yes, I can.” I parry.

“No!” Counter-parry.

“Why?” I insist.

“Because.”

“Why?”

“Because I asked first.”

“Oooh, and why is that a rule?”

“Are you five or something? What’s with all the questions?”

“Just making conversation.” I’m all smileys.

“...” Gary’s all a grudgey. “OK, grand-paw!”

“How old do you think I am?”

“I told you, five!”

“Oh, you’re paying me back now?”

“For what?”

“For **presumably** miss-aging you the first time we met?”

“No. You just sound like five.”

“...”

“...”

“Ok, kid.”

“I’m NOT A KID!”

“But... you look—” and sound “—like a kid.”

“Well, I’m not!”

“Ok, then how old are you may I ask?”

“What’s in it for you?”

“Oh, dear—! ... Look, I don’t really care—”

“—I’m SIXTEEN, OK?! I have a condition! Happy now?”

“—Sorry, I didn’t—”

“—Save me your patronizing—”

“—I was just kiddi—”

“—Nope—”

“—I...” Hmmm... but what if he’s bluffing? I mean he’s bluffing on the ‘he’ part, we know that. Hmmm...
“Ok, but how can you know that for sure?”

Gary ponders for a bit “What do you mean?”

“I mean... How do you know for sure you’re sixteen?”

“Cause it’s in my deliv—... Birth certificate.” Interesting...

“But what if it is fake?”

“... I... I never thought of that. But... Come on, I mean the Mmm...!” Ok, I see what’s going on.

“The Monos speak nontruth about many things...” Gary’s eyes pop out but then he... falls in silence. I’ve given him something to think about...

“Look, it’s non of my biz...”

“... It’s ok, I just... do not like noncertainties.”

“I feel you, Gary...”

He smiles for the first time but... then he turns all red with rage I suppose “HOW DO YOU KNOW MY—!”

“—Eh, come on, it’s not your real—”

“—YES, IT IS!!” ...

“Ohhh, kay!” I back off and let him process his nonprocessed processes. But something is also processing in my... Eh, must be some hunger or something... Nutrition or addiction...? No cigars for a while anyway.

“You better keep your mouth shut.”

“Yes, sir!”

“Sir... heh...” ...

“What’s so funny about that?”

“It... just sounds funny.”

“I see... Well, I’d love to sit and chat but I do have some biz to—”

“—Yeah, me too...” And we both depart, me outside the gates of the fortress, Gary inside the doors of Jaques office. Interesting... Maybe he is a...

Spying?...

Sure, looks like it. Maybe HE’s the one who was following us around town!

Chilling...

Maybe ‘he’ has the hot for us, eh?? Eh????

Nonfunny judging...

Come on, you heard ‘him’, he said he’s sixteen! NOT that I would EVER accept the advances, DON’T GET ME WRONG WTF—!

—OK, OK, BELIEVING!

... I trust AMA...the only one I trust right now. Even more than Dude. Even more than...

Fathering...

Heh... I’m not really... ready for that, I think. I mean with all this excitement around I really don’t need—

—ing—

—another responsibility on my head. Heh... but AMA... Can I really trust her? I want and need to believe. I HAVE—

—BELIEF! Analyzing...

I’m going to wipe any noncertainties once and for all. I know this is risky but...

[[‘Calling ‘Ama1337’... holding... holding... Line unplugged. Would you like to leave a mess—?’]] Fine!!

[[‘Please leave your message after the b—’]]

[[“—Hey, it’s me... Of course! Yeah, so... uhm... Just wanted to see you, have some talk. In the sanctuary, you know?... Heh, anyway, I’ll be waiting for you there, please, just... Eh... I mean, see ya, hopefully!”]]

And I hang. Hanging. I’m hanging by the thinnest thread right now. I’m sure Jacques has all his eyes on my communications. Pffft, Mono or Res’, what’s the difference? It seems you either die a ‘hero’ or... learn some of your enemy’s tricks. Either way, I do the long trek across town. Too nontrustful of these cabbies to...! I have unplugged everything, H.U.D. off, I need some peace of mind. I wander around but the town is a blur, only the various colours that shine in my eyes can make any difference between light and the dark. The ringing in my ears seems to have subsided, although... The ringing in my heart accentuates. What if I am doing a mistake? I...! I...! ...

I get a bit lost on the streets without my markers. I noncare much. I know the general direction, I’ll be fine. The metal insectoids rise on my horizon and I marvel once again at the grotesqueness of it all. I follow the fence; I follow the trash and then I remember... Oh boy... How am I going to lift this?

Planning missing...

Remember ForF? Let’s do that, eh? Come on, we can do it!

... Non...

Why not???

Fearing...

You think he’s gonna come back if we do that?

Non! But nonpleasure fearing...

Oh, I see... Eh, ok...Ok... I feel ya... Hmmm, let’s see. I see no potential levering tools around. Maybe if I...

“HHHHRFHGGHGHGHHGDFFFF—!” This is pointless, I’m useless, I’m muscleless— “—HGGJFDJDJD—” ... It’s working, it’s working! “—HGHGGGHHHH! Oh yeah!” I dance of amazement but very soon my enthusiasm deflates completely. It wasn’t ME! Come on, for real???

“Oh, Ama, you’re here! Heh... Talk about perfect timing, eh? Heheheh...”

“I didn’t pull on it.”

“Heheheh, you don’t need to—”

“—I swear!” She does seem truthful but... Then she smiles wickedly. I knew it, you cheeky—!

“—Oh, I’m gonna tickle you so badly—!”

“—No tickling!” She pulls back, claws active and I... Heh, ok, me and my stu—

“—Ok, ok! Dutifully noted...” She gratefully bows and I regretfully do nothing. I don’t know what to... “Let’s go, I need to talk to you about something.”

“Ok...”

“Are you unplugged from everything?”

“Always when I’m not on duty.”

“...Were you followed?” We reach the ladder leading inside the park.

“I doubt it.”

“Have you ever had a dream, that’s... that you, uhm, you had...? You’d-you would, you could... you’d do... Eh, nevermind.”

“...” AMA’s head turns into a question mark, an exclamation mark and then explodes in a supernova. I’m probably hallucinating again.

“... Did anyone ask you any weird questions?”

“Not until now.” She smirks.

“Heh... Well, look, I...” I grab her by the shoulders but... Then I look around the park. I’m still nontrustful...

“Nevermind, let’s get to the tower first.”

“Ok...”

We reach the entrance; it looks darker than ever before. I stumble and tumble a couple of times but AMA catches me each time. I excuse myself once but then I noncare. We reach the top and I take a deep breath of cool air and say “KEK do I love it up here!”

“...”

“Heh... well, how’s it going, eh?”

“...”

“Wait, did I mute you or something?” I do a sponky grin, what a stupid joke, wtf am I—?

“—What did you want to tell me?”

“Eehh... Yeah... Well... Look, Ama...” I grab her shoulders again but she backs off. She’s not... Is she? “Look, this is not what it looks like... I mean, I love you Ama but...”

“But what???!?” She’s tearing up, come on what the...?

“Ama...” I hug her. I think she... I look her straight in the eye “Ama... I will always love you. ‘Till dead take us apart’.

Ama laughs through her silent sobbing. Then she says “It’s ‘Till death do us part’.”

“Oh, Ok. Till death do us part then.”

“Are you being truthful?”

“I was never sure of much in my life. Maybe I can’t be sure of this either. But it’s how I feel!”

“...”

“I know that sounds like splonk but it ISN’T! I never felt like this for anybody else...”

“Me neither...” She says as the waterfalls under her eyes lessen. She leans into me a bit too much and I almost fall oh shhh—

—Shhhe pulls me back from the void below.

“Well, that would be ironic, wouldn’t it? Shortest love story in the Universe, eh?” We both laugh at the madness of it all. The thought of her being... the ‘traitor’... NEVER! “Ama, look, I have to tell you something. Just because... mostly because I just need to make sure...”

Ama is a bit worried. A bit confused? She awaits my response.

“There’s been a breach. Someone... We... There’s an infiltrator... Possibly!”

“Ok...”

“And... eh... Look, this HAS to stay between you and me, OK???”

“Ok...”

“AMA, PLEASE I NEED TO—!”

“—...”

“Ama... you’re suspect number one.”

“Me? For real?”

“Yeah, I think it’s dumb too but...”

“But...?”

“Jaques thinks otherwise...”

“In my opinion, you’re suspect number one.”

“Heheheh, come on! I was in a...”

“Coma?”

“Yes and... A certain little lady held me under observation.”

“I wasn’t around all the time.” The weird part is that... I can’t tell if she’s teasing me or actually...?

“Look, I told you, I don’t think it’s you who did this, that’s why I’m TELLING YOU —!”

“—That proves nothing!” She backs away... Turns her back to me... Oh dear, this isn’t going according to plan.

“Ama... Eh... Look! Look at me please.” Nothing... “Look, there’s plenty of noncertainties in this world. But we deal with them in every way we can. And if we can’t, eh. Whatever. Can’t really—”

“—Please! What’s your point?” At least she’s looking at me now.

“What I mean to say is... I don’t want noncertainty between us. I know I have my flaws. I try to fix them. I’m sure you do too. Just... please, I don’t want there to be any nontrust between us. I want us to be... a team!”

“...”

“^ ^”

“...”

AMA jumps like a toad in my arms with full force and I lose balance oh DEAR fucking—!
—We both fall to the *OUCH*, me breaking AMA’s fall with my spleen, lungs and whatever I used to have in my back. AMA laughs as if my current crippling state is some sketch worthy of Monty but it’s not. It’s just silly—

“—We really need to put some muscles on these bones!”

“Aye, aye, melody!” And I wrestle her to the ground, well I say ‘wrestle’, I tried at least! She submits... She opens up... I open up... We... snuggle... Huddle... Muddle my thoughts with all kinds of—!... But I must behave. I non advance and she non-advances. I’m fine with that. We spend some time watching the sky, well I say...

“I wish we could leave this place.” AMA sounds serious.

“Yeah? Where would you like to go?”

“Nowhere in particular...”

“Just far away from here?”

“Yeah...”

“We could do that.”

“Oh, really?” She does this wavy-lazy blinking.

“Ya, really!”

“And how would you do that?”

“Well first of all, we steal one of them hovershuttles—”

“—Bwahahapffftahahahah!” AMA sounds like she’s trying laughter for the first time in her life.

“Whaaaaat???”

“You got no chance!”

“Why?”

“Because...!”

“Yes...?”

“Because it’s...” She ponders... “...Hmmm...” Ponders some more... “...Unless...”

“Yes...?”

“There is a way... but not by shuttle...”

“I sea...” wink-wink.

“NO, silly! It’s... much more subtle.”

“Mmmm. Well, it’s good to know. In case we ever decide to leave that is.”

“Yeah...”

We fantasize a bit less, cuddle a bit more and overall, just waste time for love's sake and I love it. I don't need to smoke, to jack, to talk, to care, to noncare or to... Think... I just...

...

.....

.....

... Trees... nonsafe... Children... nonsafe... Lovers... nonsafe... AMA... nonsafe... AMA looks away... AMA? ... Turn... around... IT... IT... non... it can't be... IT CAN'T BE! NOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO!!!!

I wake up... OH dear fucking—!... The same dream I have every night but IT CAN'T—!... It makes no sense. AMA is looking at me totally scared.

"I'm sorry, Ama! Did I scare you? Did I wake you? Where are we?" I look around and refocus my eyes. We're in the tower... What, we... [4:21] AM wow we... we fell asleep here...

"It's alright, you had a nightmare or something."

"Yeah, it was... quite disturbing..."

"What was it?"

"I was... I was looking at myself... And I pointed a gun at myself but actually... my SELF was pointing a gun at me. And I, I mean HE... He set the fudding thing off in my face."

"Wow. Creepy!"

"You tell me!"

"..."

"Eh... yeah, I..." do a bit of stretching of my arms and legs and then I "... get this recurring dream that's been really bothering me lately with all these twists."

"That's why I don't sleep at night, usually..." Wait, what?

"You have a recurring dream to?"

"Not really..." She gets lost in deep thought for a while... I patiently pet her... "Just a bad feeling..."

"I understand..."

"... You can't really..."

I look at her puzzled. But then I... "True, it's hard to put yourself in someone else's shoes."

"No, it's not that it's just...!" Making progress?

"..."

"... It's just that... It doesn't happen to everyone."

"You mean like pregnancy!"

"Oh, don't be an ass!" And she punches me but it's obvious the restraint is major. I barely feel it.

"Ok... But what then? I mean men and females—"

"—Wimen!"

"Wimen?"

"Yes, 'men and wimen'."

Updating...

"Ok, well men and wimen do have their differences but they also have many things in common."

"Like what?"

"Like... We both have our needs. And our struggles. Even if they're different."

"... True..."

I fall silent and she falls silent and I hug her a bit. Then she looks at me and says “But I don’t think you’ve ever been raped.” What in the...? Oh... my... Maybe... progressing is... not such a good... oh dear... oh dear... OH MY—!

“—Oh... Ama... I...” I’m speechless. I mean... Ok, I’ve thought about it but... COME on, how many times do males get...!? Uhm... oh man, I have to handle this very, very... very... “...”

“...”

“Ama, I’m—”

“—Don’t be. I know it’s hard to hear or to believe.”

“Ama, I believe—!”

“—I know... I just... I just wish I could leave it behind. But I can’t. We can’t truly leave our past behind. But we can...” She cuddles in my chest like a cat going to sleep “... We can at least forget about it for a while...”

“Of course...” I hug her with all my might and the magical nature of her stoic approach makes me want to... AAHH, FOR REAL??? I’m... AAAAAAARHG GGH! I mean... I WAS VENGEFUL BEFORE BUT NOW I CAN HARDLY —!

—CALMING, OVERLOAD—

—THOSE FUCKING MONOFUCKERS—!

—SSS! YES—!

—I’M GOING TO RIP THEIR HEADS—

—OFF EMPATHY, ON PSYCHOPATHY—

—YEEEEEEEEES—!

—HOW COULD THEY DO THIS TO MY ANGEL—?!

—OUR—

—FATHER WOULD BE PROUD—!

—JUSTICE SHALL BE—!

—SERVING—!

—REMASTERING—!

—TILL DEATH DO US—

—DEPARTING—!

—.....—

... I wake up to AMA’s caressing of my face. She whispers “Sermon starts in half an hour.”

“Sermon...?” I’m sluggish and frownish.

“Don’t tell me you forgot again.”

“Again? What are you talking about?”

“...”

“Uhm... it’s uhm...” Uhm... “Yeah, yeah of course!” I forgot about it.

“...”

“Sorry, what did I forget?”

“The baptism? ...?”

“Aah, ah yes... Ok, well, let’s go then, eh?”

“Not before we have breakfast.” She pulls out a silvery bag and then she retrieves... two fishes out of it.

“Oh, wow! Those look fresh!”

“I caught them earlier.”

“No way.”

“Taste it!” She almost slaps me with one of the fishes and the nauseating smell makes me think she’s nonsane.

“Uhm, but it’s raw!”

“Best nutrients!” She does this splonky face as she starts munching the insides, Oh my dear KEKfest what the fudding...! I try to be polite.

“I don’t think I can... I don’t have the proper stomach for this.”

“Yes*omn*you*nom*do!”

“...”

“Tly*omn*it!”

I hesitate but then... I rip apart the fish. Inside it’s... ehh... really, I... I CAN’T!

“I can’t, sorry! Isn’t there any way I can cook it?”

“And ruin it???”

“Oh my!” She’s definitely an alien cat!

“Suit yourself!” And she snatches the fish out of my hands and proceeds to finish it up.

“Yeah, I’ll... I don’t really... I’d rather go for a smoke.”

“I don’t have any of those.”

“Eh... it’s ok.”

“I have something else but... That’s for later!” She gives me a wink-wink. What could that be, eh?

“Oh, I see! A little surprise?” We getting lucky ton—!

—Sshhhh!

“Maybe...” But I detect no innuendos.

We pack up and move out. We exit through a different part of the park, moving northeast along the lake. I noncare much about my surroundings really but that’s usually the case when I’m with AMA. That soon proves to be false though when we enter through a hedge and pass a couple of overarching trees... Which hide a large garden with waterfalls and big stones and flowers and... Wow... What? Where? How?

Ama whispers in my ear “This is the Waters of Pepe.”

“It truly is sss-pepe-tacular!”

Ama hugs me and smiles.

We walk alongside the strangers sitting on the stones, on the benches and pretty much anywhere else alongside the small path. They strangely salute us with “Peace be with you!”, “Shah-dee-lay!” and something that sounds like ‘Nah-mass-teh’. I noncare, H.U.D. can stay off for the rest of my life. This place is way too... Cool! Around the highest waterfall in the area, right near the center, variously colored and multicoloured people are huddled and cuddled around a brown robe-wearing figure that... Heh, he does look a bit like Pepe! But not his face, far from it. He has this long, long beard and that long, long hair! He wears a small long-foot-cross on his neck. And he’s singing something with the rest of the group.

“...Shah-dee-lay, shah-dee-lay, lah me ah lee ber ta!

Shah-dee-lay, shah-dee-lay, oh noh...

...”

I understand NOTHING but it sounds catchy! I try to sing along but of course I have no idea what I’m saying or if I’m saying it right. Ama grips my hand lovingly and smiles while bobbing her head to the sides, a bit out of synch I.M.H.O. The song takes a final note and a quiet atmosphere soon settles over the crowd. I’m both curious and afraid of what might happen next...

“My children, we have gathered here on this glorious day of the Sabbath to bring our praises to KEK. As you all know—” except me “—KEK asks us to leave aside one day for worship and rest. KEK understands in His infinite wisdom that this day may not always be the Sabbath. But KEK would be kindly pleased if, once a week, we all took a day off from our daily struggle and rejoiced in the glory of HIS CREATION!”

The crowd responds with “Shah-dee-lay!”

“Shah-dee-lay!” I respond a bit out of synch and a bit too loud I.M.H.O. The preacher notices this but he just smiles, looks around and then...

“My heart is full of joy to see so many new faces. It never fails to amaze me but HIS word is truly ETERNAL—!”

“—Shah-dee—!”

“—ETERNALLY TRUTHFUL—!”

“—Shah—!”

“—FOREVER AND EVER—!”

“—dee-lay!”

“Dee-lay, bro!” My timing is perfect but not for the good reasons.

“Brother!” The preacher is looking straight at me, oh fud, noncomfortable— “Tell me, have you renounced the work of the devil?”

“Yes, sir, I—”

“—And all his filthy lies—?”

“—Yes—!”

“—And all his treacherous ways?”

“... I...” ... “... I...” ... “I do.”

“Then you have truly heard the word of KEK and listened. Come!” The crowd moves aside and forms a tunnel towards the little pond that rests at the bottom of the waterfall. The water looks clean and... But... The thought of that amoeba... Bleh... A couple of people break from the crowd and form a line inside the tunnel. They start... one by one to step into the water... And the preacher submerges each of them by pressing on their heads... Then he pulls them out of the water while saying “Rise and never S.I.N. again!”

Ama signals with her head for me to go ahead. What, you can’t possibly think I’m going to—!

“—Ama?? But what about the amoeba?” I whisper-shout but it’s no use, everyone heard it in this silence.

“These waters are just as clean as Pepe’s soul, brother!” A voice from the crowd breaks the silence while the others respond with shahdelays.

“Ama! But...” Ama listens patiently... “... I’m afraid.” Ama crushes my hand in a vice but I barely feel the pain. Right now, I prefer this pain rather than the fear. Ama drags me along and holds me prisoner in the line. I’m totally flabbersplonked. I’m... I know I made a promise but... Well, actually I didn’t promise her! Did I? Maybe I did. Regardless, that doesn’t mean I can’t change my mind. But that would make me look nondecisive. That’s not good. Yeah, I gotta, I just gotta—

“—Come, son!” The preacher motions his hand gently towards the water.

I take a step forward and I take a step back. It’s like I’m constantly being under attack.

Just like a dance, but there’s no romance. How can I advance if I don’t take the chance?!!

I do a pirouette, it’s like I’m in a trance. The preacher cracks a smile and the crowd goes wild.

AMA looks at me: ‘have you lost your mind?’ I guess I stayed behind but now I’m certainly not—

“—Blllgghghhghft!” I succumb and let all the fear dissolve in the cooling arms of the pond. I arise, renewed and rejoiceful. I’ve done it! I’m now one of THEM!

“Rise and never S.I.N. again!”

“Shah-dee-lay!” I say and the preacher seems to be pleased with my progress here but I can’t help but notice a... tiny, itsy bit of suspicion.

The sermon resumes and he says something about this and the other and sorry! I wasn’t paying attention because I couldn’t understand most of... Anyway, but what really catches my ears is when he mentions something like ‘Because the human calendar is flawed, it cannot accurately pinpoint KEK’s Holy Days’. So, instead they use a system based on ‘KEK’s revealed Word’... Whatever that means. Something about a day called ‘Sabatree-non’, something else called ‘She Trinity She’ and another one called ‘The Birth of the Universe’ which is basically celebrated on New Year’s Eve. Heh... Interesting... But what is KEK’s revealed word? Well, I guess I didn’t do my homework properly, eh? FINALLY! The sermon ends, the kids have another go at a different catchy synthy-wavey-funkay kind of sounding song, something about not needing another hero... Hmm, are they talking about...? And something about beyond the Monodomes, hmm... Then the crowd disperses and I’m just sitting there, amazed, amused and confused. AMA looks at me with the most lovable eyes ever and just... nothing, she just looks at me. In a trance. Is there something on my...? I noncare. I try to kiss her but she pushes me away. She waves ‘no’ with her finger then points around. Hmm, ok... But I nonget to ponder much when the preacher approaches us with his arms spread wide apart.

“My children!” He hugs both of us, like Fah... “My son, I heard from a little bird —” and he does this bug-eyed motion towards AMA “—that you are in love.”

“Guilty as charged, your Honor!”

“Heheheh, I see. Well, that fills my heart with joy and it certainly does fill KEK with joyous laughter.”

“I’m glad for that.” He likes to watch and make fun of us, eh? That cheeky, little —!

“—But He does ask us to take The Oath of Bonding, to seal such love in His holy eyes.”

“Another oath?”

“Oh, no my son. This is no earthly oath. This is an oath taken in front of KEK himself!”

“Wow... You know, since I’ve got here...” I look around, I look at AMA and I say... “... I’ve been dying to meet this KEK fellow!”

“Haaahahahahahah!” The preacher seems terribly amused by that but I’m, well... I think I understand but... Heh... “I’m sure you do, son, I’m sure you do. But KEK may not be seen by our earthly eyes. Unless, of course, KEK Himself decides to allow it!”

“Hmmm, interesting...”

“The Oath, my son, you must take with great care. For this Oath is not to be taken lightly.” He looks at AMA. AMA is looking at him. I look at both of them...

“So, is this like a life partnership?”

“Ehhhh, sort of. But try not to think of it in legal terms. It is a spiritual agreement —”

“—I see, but then how can you be sure that the contract is enforced?”

The preacher ponders for a bit... “KEK does not force anyone to do anything. KEK gave us free will and it is up to us to decide what is best for ourselves and each other. Under the guidance of KEK’s Word, of course. So, to uphold the Oath of Bonding, both of you must remain true to your word, with faith in KEK’s Providence.”

“Interesting... So, it’s a trust-based system.” Unlike blockchain?

“Yes, you must hold on to your part of the Oath. And AMA must do the same.”

“Aaand what does this entail?”

“Love and sincerity. Trust and devotion. For better or worse for as long as you shall live.”

“Interesting...” Hmmm... “Yeah...” Hmmm... “I... like that.” The preacher seems pleased. And he should be, I’m actually sincere! I hope...

AMA grips my hand with her fingers almost in the shape of a heart, I can feel her heart pumping through the veins of her palm. The preacher does a silent mumbling, eyes closed and his head tilted forward. He then...

“Now, Ama asked me to do this quick so I’ll spare you the whole shababble!” Thanks “Demeter, do you —” Hey, wait a minute! I look around with suspicion but — “—Do not be afraid, we are alone. I made perfectly sure of that...” Ok, if you say so, Tim the wiz — “—Do you take this woman to be your loving bird, moon and stars, till death do you part?”

“I... Uhm, I... Shah-dee—”

“—Just say ‘I do’.” The preacher saves the day with a whisper.

“I do!”

“And do you Amanita, take this man to be your loving toad —” Now, wait a sec—! “—sun and sky, till death do you part?” AMA just nods her head a ‘yes’ but the preacher does a throat-clearing noise and then says “Ama? We talked about this...”

“I do!” AMA’s eyes get big like the biggest bug-eyes of the cutest catlike, tiny toadlike, birdlike—

“—Have you brought the rings?”

AMA nods and then puts her hand over my ear and pulls out a shiny, golden ring which she places in my hand. She pulls out another one and holds it steady in her palm. I’m confused.

“Now I put this on my finger?”

AMA shakes a ‘no’. Points to her finger. I do as instruct and then she does the same for me.

“You may now kiss the bird!”

“Wait, what? But I thought you’re not allowed to—!”

—But I don’t get to finish articulating my query when AMA jumps in my arms with full force and lands a kiss right on my NOSE Geez OHZ—!

—I almost fall but the preacher catches me and laughs like the little—!

—... But soon I let all worries dissipate. I let myself be carried back to the surface by AMA. I imagine myself swimming with her, swimming through the ocean. Me and my mermaid just racing to the ends of Terra. Forever bound in this brutal, beautiful, bonding experience I just experienced. Forever... and ever...

The preacher congrats us and then leaves for some biz of his. AMA takes my hand and carries me away from the hedge and away from the edge of the hedge and the pledge we just... Eh... We’re going for the center, we approach the Pepe Plaza, she insists that we should enter, I just touch her lovely... I can no longer rhyme nor reason, is this actually a prison? No... I must not think of that, that’s what HE would say, the brat!

Forgetting...

Deep inside this plaza nest, lots of people gathered... Must be some fest. Black and brown and white and blue, all these people look real cool! Dancing, singing, fire-breathing! Little camps are non-extinguishing! AMA pulls a big brown... WHAT? IS IT REALLY THAT?

“Ama, I thought you... wow, cigars, really? Are you that heavy a smoker?”

AMA giggles a hearty laugh then types on her PDA [‘It’s not a cigar.’]

“It sure looks like it!”

[...]

[‘... This is way, way better! ;)’]

Hmmm... Ok... She lights it up, I’m intrigued. She puffs away, I’m amazed. She blows it out in a stinking cloud. What the Hades is that? It smells like a splonkdamn fart —

—The cigar is handed over but I hesitate, my hand I cover, I can never... “What is this?” But she insists. I swallow hard, my fear is anger. My anger’s deep, I push it deeper. She passes me a match and I take it with a snatch. I pull it in my lungs, I hold it for a bit. But soon I feel a sharpening pain that cuts my throat oh SHEEEEEEE —

—“BWOAGOHOOHOOHO*cough*HO*cough*—” Pain is painful, I just *cough*! What in fuds name, what —

—The crowd gets cheery, I’m no longer leery! Guess I’ve passed the test... Geez, what a show! The concert lights are super-coloured, crowds are colored, minds are numbered! My days plundered; how did I not know about this? What the...?

AMA grabs my lance and invites me to dance. The style is too tribal, she’s touching my... marble. With her dancing, her romancing, her entrancing, loving... Woman, you’re challenging! I take the lead and wave her around and I think she enjoys being swept off the ground! Then I follow her lead for a while, man what a ride! She passes that dubious ‘whale’ again and I puff and I’m sent into space on a train!

Funky! I’m a donkey! I’m splonky, honky-cocky, I just lose myself in the momen-tea! AMA takes my hand again and leads me out of the train, now wait a minute... What is this, heheheh... Eh... ‘The Honey Moon’... Heheheh, what does that? Honey Moon? Heheheh, imagine that. A HONEY made of MOON!

U meaning? Heheheh...

HEHEHEH, yeah, a moon of honey made, yeah! HEHEHEHEHEHEH!

Hard Hee-heeing!

It’s just a tent, L.O.L! AMA sits down and I sit down there too. AMA is flustered, AMA is mmmmmm... Hey, don’t do that, I like it, I swear! Wait, hey what if...? Mmmmmmm...

Nonprotected?

I—! I—!... But...

I... wow my head is dizzy... I pull away for a bit and AMA’s head actually turns into an actual, literal question mark and I think it’s because of what I just smoked! Wow... I shake my head and rub my eyes and she’s ok now. I ask her shyly...

“No protection?”

She looks at me with the most devilish eyes in the underworld, she comes close, close to my face, past my face, nibbles my ear and whispers... “The Oath allows it...”

“Is that so?” ... But the—

—NONADMITTANCE! NONDENIAL! NON—

—BUT I CAN’T—!

—YES, YOU CAN—!

—NON—!

—YES—!

—NON—!

—YES—!

—NON——!

—YES——!

—NOOOH... YEEEEEEES!...

—.....—

—.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

... The trees... the... nonprotected people... nonprotected children... Noncare... AMA holds hand nonprotected, noncare. Dance, noncare passersby! Noncare... Care only... only AMA... care... Turn around... But no... please don't... PLEASE NO! NOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO THIS IS NOT TRUEEEEE!!!! PLEASE NOOOOOOOOOOOOOO!...

I wake up... Father... Father, why?... The same dream I have every night... but this time... This time it was the worst of them all. Father was the one who shot me. Of course, it's just a dream! Of course... But the pain I felt is just as real. Not the pain of the shot. That was painless. It always is. Feels like when you fall or you hold your breath for too long. But no... The pain of Father killing his own son... That pain is... nonbearable!!!! Nonbearable...

I glaze my eyes over AMA in the relative darkness of the tent. I love her so much I...! Heh... We've completely bonded! Heh... Nonprotected... IMAGINE THAT!

Reimagining... Reliking...

I'm lovin' it! Oh man, but what if??? What if we...?

Bebe?

Yeah! Uhm...

Loving...

Really?

Hoping...

Heh, I thought you preferred to be the pampered—

—Nonpampering! Growing...

Interesting... Ok, I see your point. But... I don't know... sometimes when I think about this world... And all the noncertainties... I lose my courage. I'm afraid I can't... Protect HIM how? The child I mean, of course...

Analyzing... Comparing... Compiling...

Computing... Recomputing... Recopulating... Recopulating????

AMA's up at it again I just noticed, I...! Oh my, you're a horny one, aren't ya? Ayy, ayy ayyyyyyy!

—.....—

... I hear activity outside again... What time is it? [7:06] Wow, where did yesterday go? I hear more activity... Hmm, shouting... What is...? Shots in the far distance. More shots! What in the fuds name...? AMA is up on her feet, really tense and runs outside, hey wait a minute! I run out and... People running... screaming... What is

going on??? Then suddenly I hear something that chills the blood in my bones. A loud siren echoes through the cave. And words... Words I never believed I would ever hear.

“The Sandmen have breached! The Monos, *echoes* the Monos—” NONPOSSIBLE! NON... NON...

AMA drags me like a nonsane person in the opposite direction of the fleeing crowds, are you out of your —?

“—AMA, I THINK WE SHOULD—!”

“—SHUT UP!”

She drags me like a kite through the crowds and all I can think about is that we’re going to dead soon. Either that or maybe... Hmm... We pass the lower wall of the fortress, lower, lower, lower.... Oh, fud it’s one of THEM—! AMA sprints, he shoots, she jumps, he shooting and she slashes oh DEAR FUCK! The blood... I run up to AMA, she pulls round a corner, right corner, over, under, no wait! Over again, under... We stand in front of a drafty, enormous vent with solid, strong bars that no one could possibly—! Well, except AMA of course. She bends the bars like they’re cakes in her hands. She waves quickly at me to get inside and I get cocky and say “Ladies first!” and she just shoves me inside, ouch! She bends the bars back and one of them breaks. We run and run and run through the endless corridor, passing lots of truncated vents that get smaller and smaller and smaller until we’re crawling inside one of them. We FINALLY reach the mouth of a vent and AMA kicks the gate away. We jump outside and we’re in... a swamp of sorts... Wow... The light shines brightly over the canopies, over the glittering branches, roots and leaves. I hear nature chirping, and croaking and singing and dancing! I... I almost completely forgot that we’ve actually just... Oh my...! What just...?

“Ama... the town... the people... the MONOS, for REAL?!”

“We have to keep moving!”

“And go where?!?”

“Far from here.”

“You think they can’t track us down?!?”

“No.”

“Do you realize what...?” But what do I know? I could’ve been dead right now if it wasn’t for AMA. I silence myself, dust myself off, bow and do the gentleman “Lead the way!” But she’s not amused. Me neither.

We walk through the wet, splonky marshlands and I can’t but get a bit disgusted by all the bugs flying around. I keep wishing nature hadn’t given us all of these bugs! I HATE BUGS! I—! ... Eh... It’s not that bad... I mean I get used to it after a while... Buzzing, big ones pass us by and then two of them collide in midair and what the fud... A dragonfly. No! A pair of dragonflies has fallen near me and I’m not sure what they’re doing. Are they fighting?

“Look, AMA!”

AMA stops and comes close to me but she looks a bit worried. Like we’re wasting time or something. But you can’t expect me to just ignore all this!

“Look, they’re fighting...”

“No, they’re mating.” And she returns to her course.

“Oooooooh...” Fascinating...

We walk and jump and crouch and “OUCH!” Something bit me! THANK YOU, NATURE! !! I...! Ay-ay-ay!

“AMA, WAIT! Ouch, ouch, ouch!”

“What’s wrong?”

“I uhm... something just bit me!”

“Oh, my KEK! Where?!?!”

“Uhm, right... here.” I point to my calf and a slight reddishness can be seen right around its middle.

AMA analyzes my noncomfort and then remarks “You’ll live.” And then gets back on her path as if my PAIN is NOTHING TO HER!

“Uhm, isn’t this dangerous? What if it was a snake?”

“It’s not.”

“Then what was it?”

“Probably some bug.”

“But what if it was poisonous?”

“There’s only one way to find out.”

“For real? So, we’re just going to wait and see if I fall dead or not?”

“...”

“...Fine!”

“...”

I’m boiling up a little but hopefully not because of some feverish side-effect. Ama is silent but then she murmurs a “Pansy...” Now wait a minute! I—!

“—What did you just call me?”

“A pansy...”

“Pfft, ok, yeah like it’s not enough you emasculate me every chance—!”

“—You do that to yourself already!”

I am off... AMA is angry... But she’s probably right... What do I care? I was dead twice. She... at least once. She went through so much that I can’t IMAGINE! And here I am, moping like a little bee —! Itching starts to grow in my leg but I ignore it. I probably shouldn’t touch it. No sterilizing options, no nothing. I must apologize.

“Ama, you’re right... Please forgive me, I’m a donkey. I guess I’m still shocked by this whole...”

AMA’s tense muscles get a bit nontense. Her eyes a bit nonalerted. I smile... She doesn’t... She turns around to march deeper into the marsh. I catch up and walk beside her, admiring the view, admiring the sky, admiring the... spaciousness of it all! Suddenly AMA grabs my hand and holds tight, her eyes still fixed ahead.

She responds “And it’s ‘an ass’, not ‘a donkey’!”

“A sweet piece of ass you mean!”

“A boney... cute ass.”

“I’ll settle for that!” And I guess we’re ok. I was a bit worried there but... Eh... I trust her... She trusts me. For better or worse, right?

The atmosphere seems to lose some of the humidity as we reach a more spacious plane of existence right at the edge of the marshes. The trees become rarer, the view wider and I see... I see... What in the Hadesville am I seeing? A huge expanse of barren lands. Hills over hills over hills of sporadic dead tree trunks are spread all over the landscape. Black patches cover the ground like patches on the back of a cow. The only thing that

washes a bit of my bitterness is the first-time-first-see all-natural rainbow that cuts the sky in half. I'm... noncertain what to feel about all this...

We descend deeper into this 'valley of death' and the smell of ashes reminds me of the LotO gravedigger. And his words... Maybe the Monos weren't fully nontruthful about this one... The light gets darker, AMA gets silencer, I'm neither. Well, I say neither. How could people let this happen? They just crashed and burned and looted mother Terra. Maybe Mono was the punishment. Maybe THEY did this, eh?? That makes sense. Only THEY could be this dumb. But eh, like Dude said, the people made Mono. Or something like that. Something about viruses... Is Mono like a virus? Maybe we're all infected... in some way or the other. The MONOVIRUS. THE MONOLEGION. Monotheism? Mono state of being, not here nor there. Just on the edge of madness, neither dead nor alive... That's what Mono is all about, isn't it...?

Completely dark... Not much buzzing in these parts. No insects. Not even bugs?

AMA pulls over under a rocky edge of the hill and says "We're camping here tonight."

"For real?"

"Yep."

"..." But... "... But this barely counts as a shelter now, does it?"

She sighs, goes to the nearest trunk and... Let's get real now she can't possibly... She starts punching the trunk! WHAT THE? She keeps punching and punching and bark flies everywhere. Although I'm amazed, I'm also confused and... Oh man, is she working up some frustrations right now???? Imagine if we were that —

—BARRING—

—JUST imagine! She grabs the broken tree trunk and pulls it semi-gruntingly and places it over the rock.

"Happy now?"

"Pffft... I'm... I mean... Sure! Thanks!"

"You're welcome!"

She settles inside the non-comfy pseudo-grotto and I try to cuddle beside her. I look at the sky. All the stars are visible. All of them, even some stars I don't think actually exist... yet. I put my arm over AMA and she puts one under me. She says nothing. I don't say anything. Then, I remember...

"Got any more of that... cigar?"

"That's for special occasions only."

"Ohhh, you're no fun anymore!" But I try to sound as sarcastic as possible.

"I'm fine with that."

"... I'll dial down the jokes if they—"

"—It's not that, it's just that..." She huddles in deeper inside of me and continues "... Sometimes I... 'enjoy the silence'." She sings that last part just like The Pesh... I turn to sing-mode.

"All I've wanted! All I've need it—"

"—Is heeere, in my arms—!"

"—Word are very, nonnecessary!"

"They can only do..." Her lovely, off-key voice fades away as her staccato breathing gets lesser and lesser... I envy those who can... fall asleep so... Easily, I can't... just... fall...

I wake up... no dream... [3:33] ... Heh, that explains... Nonremember what I was dreaming. I thought I heard something... The wind creeps up on me a little but it seems... Quiet around here... Hopefully... Brrrhuhhheeh! It's chilly though... AMA sleeps like a babe... At least she can get some “*cough*”, she probably needs it more than I “*cough*”. Oh man I hope I didn't catch some bug. AMA is woken by my coughing and I excuse myself. She opens up her pack and pulls out a green blanket, for real?? Well, better late than never, I guess... The warmth of her body is now perfectly preserved under the blanket. She seems to emanate it like a furnace! I do feel like I'm absorbing all of her warmth and my coldness seeps into her... I'm... enveloped... by... her...

... The trees... dead... The people... dead... The Park is all... empty... Nonlife... AMA... AMA? WHERE ARE YOU? AMA! NONLEAVE ME!... Who the fud are you? What the fud are you? I—

—WAKE UP! ... The same stupid dream! But it wasn't actually. Everything changed... it almost looked like the landscape around us right now... No AMA, just dead people spread on the ground. And then... someone I couldn't recognize. All cyber-clad top to bottom. I FELT it was a woman but... It sure did not look like one. And so much cyber! Cyber legs, cyber torso, cyber eyes, cyber... weapons... She slashed me to ribbons at the end. I tried to do something, to reach for my gun. I had nothing. Only FEAR. I am really sick of this. I'M REALLY SICK OF THIS NONSENSE! I think I will forfeit sleeping at night from now on. To Hadesville with this...! With this...

... Light slowly creeps in and it devours the shadows of the valley, slowly but steadily. I watch it in fast-forward mostly. AMA wakes up just as the first rays of light penetrate our little temp-home. We stretch and curl and wind out and then AMA says we need to get breakfast.

“Oh, any fancy restaurant around here?”

“Only the best, come!”

We skip over the hill and she keeps looking around for something. Then she crouches at the roots of a semi-foliaged tree, one of the few that actually looks (barely) alive around here. She digs between the roots using her claws and pulls out... Worms... And then starts slurping and munching. This is post-apocalyptic madness! She hands me over some grubs and I hesitate. I'm disgusted and horrified and... My growling stomach nonagrees in both senses.

“Just crush their heads before you eat them.”

“Eh... Why?”

“Because they'll bite you otherwise.”

I do as instruct and then pop them in my mouth and mmmmmbleh... My face turns to a million squirms and AMA laughs whole-heartedly at the expense of my nonrich ass!

“Mmmm, mmmarvelous!”

“You really like them?”

“Oh, I LOVE them!”

AMA is terribly amused and hands me a bottle of water. I wash down the bitterness and my stomach does not agree with all this experimentation I'm putting it through, but my stomach is going to have to deal with it! We hike the valleys and crevasses and hills and long-time putrefied, carbonized, fossilized... Eh... I somehow lose sense of the passing of time. It's weird how... easy it is for me and AMA to just dance and skip and move and stop. We just communicate through our bodies. No words needed here. Not much to do, you just move and enjoy the view. I... I... LOVE—!

—But I get this feeling... that we're being... not watched necessarily... And NO, I don't mean... the guy Up There. Maybe like being followed. Being observed. Being... tracked? I cannot prove it but...

I stop AMA with a slight pull of her hand and she pins her gaze in my gaze like a rubber band. "Ama, I feel we're being followed."

"We are."

"..."

"..."

"For how long have you known this?"

"We've been followed since we left. Gary and Batbro are behind us."

"You pulling my tail, my shoes, my socks, my—"

"—It's protocol."

"I... I... I nonunderstand..."

"Well, if you would've paid attention to what you signed, you'd know."

"... Ah, yes, wait, what, where—?"

"—Section Seventeen Seventy-Six under Oath—"

"—For real, there's over a thousand?? But Kin—!"

"—case of emergency physical security breach, all Res' members shall disperse and retreat, in groups of two, predetermined in due time, see Section Twenty-Four Res Eme Dee Bee—"

—And the lesson goes on and on. Basically, it's a grid-based spread-out evac drill. This way, if one of the groups gets captured, others can attempt to rescue them before they either: A. Get executed. Or B. Be Persecuted, or C. Forced Evacuation and Eventual Incarceration. Luckily for me, AMA already filled out the data so we're fine on paper! Whewww! But I nonget to ponder much... Wow, fancy that! Gary and Batbro, to the rescue! Me and AMA in the clutches of danger and they come and rescue US??? Come on, heh... Maybe it'll be the other way around! Heheheh, yeah sounds more reasonable. ME and AMA, WE rescue THEM! Heheheh... Makes sense. I try to do a joke.

"And here I thought they didn't join us because Gary doesn't like strangers."

"Gary doesn't like you personally."

"Is that so? He seemed to enjoy our last conversation."

"You had a 'conversation'?"

"Yeah, you know... Like work colleagues or something." I smile devilishly.

She looks determined to grind me. Well, I have nothing to hide so bring it— "Gary said you told him, ahem, and I quote, 'Some really stupid theory that my birth-cert' is fake'."

"Oh dear! Crime of the century!"

"Yeah, Hihi! But yeah... You'll just have to wait... He'll adapt, you don't have to."

"Good to know."

My oh my... Heh... Imagine that... being confused... about... that! I mean come on, you just look DOWN and THERE it IS! Nature gave *that* to you for a reason. But what do I know? Can't imagine what goes through the mind of a kid. Can't anymore anyway.

I can...

I know but... some things are hard to re-consider. Once you see it you cannot nonsee it. P.S. Deliverer... Fake, of course. P.S.S.D. *, of course it's not a true A.I.! Says right there on the back of the doll! Oh and of course, the 'Monolympian...' something or other. Whatever they decided to call it that week 'cause they always changed their minds, didn't they, those BANANA-minded—!

—Never mind... The point is, none of us can know for sure. So, I.M.H.O., everyone's entitled to their own opinion. But... Those kids, man... I mean... It's not NORMAL to do that to them. EVEN if they ask for it, it's nonnormal to... To...

??? I nonget.

No, not that, dear KEK, that's out of the question always, of course! I mean... you know... thingy...

Wat THINGY?!?!?

You know... modding... DOWN THERE!

OOOOOH, thinging!

Yes... And I don't... feel like joking about it anymore... really feels like the... crime of the... cent... Eh, I hope Gary and Batbro are ok. They must be, I mean... Hey, maybe we can...

"Hey! But we can call them on the tele—"

"—No telley! I just recited to you, letter by letter, the full TERMS—!"

"—Ok, sorry-sorry, I just wanted to make sure they're safe..."

"..."

"^ _ ^"

"_ _ _"

"> _ <"

"... They'll be fine."

"I'm sure they will..." And we're back to the trekking but my feet are really starting to cry their toll like junkies begging for more adrenaline, or at least some saccharine, some well-cooked 'creatura' marine, mmmm. But I must prove myself, and to myself, no more self but ourselves and we trek and we trek and I feel like a deck, a worn-out deck from bottom to neck, oh I'd jack-in but I just smack-out and my vision is cracked, what the fud, I'm losing battery here what the freak, I'm just spewing theory after theory from my tower of ivory but the crack in my skull I forgot to patch-it full! What a fool, what a dood, what a numb-numbingly-numbelly-schompiling-dumpy-ling—

"*gasp* Ama, sorry but I'm *gasp*—"

"—Me too, let's camp a little." But she nonshows any kind of discomfort.

"Ama, I have to tell *gasp* you... you still amaze me how *gasp*..."

"You'll get used to it." She points around and says "Fresh air's gonna do you some good too."

"I think I used up all that was left."

"Hihih... plenty of air, don't worry about that."

We sit by an imaginary campfire and we tell silly stories about silly things that no one would ever want to hear about. But then she...

"There's something you need to know..."

"Ok..." I'm ready for anything.

"This next area... it's... is going to be quite dangerous."

"I see, go on." Antennas fully receiving.

"Uhm, it's the radiation you see."

"Oh... Oh, ok."

"But that's not the dangerous part." Pffft, really?

"How much radiation is there?"

"Not much, don't worry about it. If we move fast, it'll be like... one of those old ray-somethings..."

"You mean a... whatever, I know what you mean."

"Cool. But there's also... There might be some of those who... don't need to move fast through this area... Those immune to radiation." Dear KEKdamn, what are you talking about woman?? I shiver but then... I have to break this ice with—

"—Zombies you mean???"

"—Hihihihhi! No, silly! They're people, they just... I dunno... went mad or something."

"Oh... well, yeah that makes more sense."

"No, it doesn't, they're mad! Why are they...?!"

"Well, are they really that dangerous? I mean I've seen you... That OVSEFO chum was **toast** before he—"

"—I know, it's just that..." She feels a bit afraid but then... "I'm not as courageous as it seems."

"You sure ain't showing it!"

"Thanks, but... I don't enjoy it, you understand!?! I wish I didn't have to **toast** that guy but... Sometimes you just have to..."

"I understand, look, I'm not trying to make light of this, you know that. But come on, what are these? Some laser-shooting, gorilla-like cultists from Mars or something?"

"Sort of, yeah..."

"Bwahhaaaaaaaah—!" I am genuinely pleased AMA is participating in my **toast** of these — "—Good one AMA, that's comedy PLATINUM!"

"I'm serious." And she is either the best dead-pan deliverer or she is actually... No... Come on!

"What, you mean like actual gorillas with lasers?"

"Well, no, not actual gorillaz, not the actual primate! Just... bad people..."

"And they got lasers you say?"

"Yes! They... you know... I think they worship some princess or something..." Hmmm, this is starting to sound way too...

"Ama, please forgive my nonbelief but did you watch some sci-fi splonkflick or something? Maybe you thought it was real, I mean, I tell you! That 'cigar' you got there can surely 'light' up the imagination —"

"—IT WAS REAL!"

"Ok, ok..."

"Well... they said it was real..." I feel a forceful suppression of doubt in her mind.

"Who said it was real?" Bait and...

"The... the guys who made the... the documentary, they said it."

"Oh, I see. And you believe them?"

"Well... I don't want to believe them but..."

"Your heart tells otherwise?"

"Yes..."

"I know how that feels like." I hug her smugly and kiss her cheekily and she pushes deeper inside my bowels, I hope those worms don't decide to start some war... And then I say "But you know, sometimes people lie to us for all sorts of reasons. They lie to themselves most of the time... That's why we need confirmation from one another. 'cause it's hard to talk to yourself and reach a nonbiased conclusion."

“Ok, so...?”

“So... maybe... those guys were just trying to **scare** you, booh, boooooh! ... You know, that there’s some bad people in there, you know... If they say it’s a **documentary**, it’s bonus points to credibility! But you can’t just take their word for it! They have to show proof, credentials, research, peer-research, peer-reviewed, re-peered-double-viewed—” She hits me because I’m stuck on a loo— “—pee-pees, mee-meas and all that shebabble. Extraordinary claims require extraordinary proof. That’s what science is all about, not what those splonky Monodoods—”

“—Forget about Mono—”

“—Ok, ok, but the point is...” ... “... the point is...” ... “... NOBODY can ever tell you for sure that something IS that way or some OTHER way. Sure, some of them have better proof than others... but... Heh...”

“... What’s so funny?”

“Think about it! Let’s say that... heheh... there are some PEOPLE living in the radiation —”

“—This isn’t helping—”

“—Nah, nah, just go with me on this... What if **those** people are the **same** people who made the documentary, eh??? EH?? Like, to keep other **people** away from their turf!”

“You **don’t know** that!!”

“No, but just... heheheh... IMAGINE!”

AMA closes her eyes and for a while she’s a bit... but there’s another kilobit then a megabit and she’s laughing along, yes, she’s getting it, eh?

“Hihihihih, yeah!”

“They’re probably ok people, who knows? Hey psst, want another ‘conspiracy’ theory?”

“I’m all ears in my knees!”

“What IF?? The Resistance! Has a...” AMA’s eyes get twenty five percent wider and counting— “—secret Eych Que right here in the wastelands! Eh, eh???”

“Wow... you really think so?”

“Just think about it! I don’t know about it; you don’t know about it. Maybe only Jaques does... It’s secret, so there has to be one, it’s logical!”

“I see... I see what you did there you cheeky—!” and she playfully roughs me up for my little tricky mind-games.

We laugh all the fear away... We resume going on our road. Well, I say ‘road’. Our road has no boundaries right now. I feel and hope that there are no more boundaries between us either. Well, I mean there are certain boundaries, for sure. There are some things that, you know... Cannot be stepped over. It’s just not... you know, ok?

Y?

Because... it’s not in the ‘Terms’, ok? Just... go with me on this one.

... K...

Anyway... Our road is steep and it is treacherous and lecherous and I feel like bitching, like screeching, I can’t stand all this torturing, this noncommunication, noncommunion, castigation, revelation, detention, reelection, nonelection, extra-election, wtf-is-this-election and just friction and friction and no alleviation but just incarceration for my meager question, my mind-affliction, MY conviction that no addiction is worse than MONO—!

“—Ama... there’s something that’s been bothering me...”

“...”

“Did your own Mother... actually do that to you?”

“...”

“...”

“... Not all of it...”

“I see...”

We continue as if nothing was said. But then, I feel her trembling beside me. She... I... She... I grab her hand and try to crush it, crush it, crash it! No use... but she smiles. She understands. She appreciates... the gesture...

We reach a semi-mesa-like-opening. Well, I say mesa... It’s like a mesa you’d see in a toy department. In both size and colour. AMA signals to me that this is the ‘radiation’ zone. Well, eh... Heheh... I KNEW I should have bought that Geiger-upgrade...! Can’t plan for everything, I guess.

We pass through one of the wider tunnels formed by the mini-mesa and I scan the brownish walls of the ravine and the black, nonlit torches I see scattered on the walls and on the ground are starting to make me think that maybe there’s some things you should plan for—

—I check my pocket, arms lock-and-loaded. It’s a wild, wild world around and I got a wild, wild... thought. What... if???? AMA sticks close to me, she is shivering. She must’ve never been in such a... It’s an ex-river bed, maybe? Arms are tight, palms are spread. Feet walk light and full of dread. Fear must be read in my eyes and my... bird’s eyes, I wish I had bird eyes right now and I make light of all of this but suddenly oh fuck me what-the-fuck—

“—STAY WHERE YOU ARE AND DON’T FUCKING MOVE OR I’LL FUCKING BLOW YOUR BRAINS OUT, YOU, YOU...!” My gun is pointed straight at... I don’t know... it does look like a gorilla but... The weird part though is that ALL my shouting, in ALL my excitement CAME OUT all wrong, high-pitched, girlish, KEKdamnitfudsplo—

“—Heheheh.... HEHEHEHheeeheheeeeeeee—” I look at AMA confused as fud by the laughter coming out of the monkey and AMA is at least as confused as me. She hasn’t moved a single... cent... Frozen. Her fear, her... Well, I try to be the man here and continue my threats but I’m hit with a dilemma. What tone of voice? The one I’ve already used, the... girlish one? Or do I adopt a more serious, biz oriented, yeah that sounds more—

“—Sir, this is a “Now Hate Club” Gee-something Pusher—”

“—Bwaaheehheeh, the boy does impersonations! BRILLIANT, OH BRILLIANT!”

The apes are terribly amused by this so you know what, maybe it’s working but—

—I nonget to live my fantasy when one of the splonkers hits me in the head so FUCK that it sends me down to taste some of this irradiating ground. I can only hear AMA’s painful sob and nothing else. Well, maybe I’m TOAST. I COULD try to reach for the gun but... heh... Nah, it’s too far... We’re surrounded anyway, I mean, ratio is AT LEAST twelve or fifteen to TWO so divided that’s like, what...?

Nonmattering... ForF?

Nah, no use, I’m not feeling it. Look, I’m fine with it, we had a good time, you know? We had... you know... NONPROTECTED... thingy...

Confirming...

So yeah, we’ll be fine! I’m just... I feel bad for AMA... Not only about what will happen to her... I mean, I’d hate it if she died, don’t get me wrong but... Somehow, I feel she would prefer to die rather than... Anyway, I feel bad that she has to see this, all this nonsense... I’m... vengeful... I JUST WANT TO K—!... Just... K—!... KKK—!

—Yeah, yeah...

What was that?

...

Tell me, please! That was unnerving...

... he... he...

What? What? Are you laughing? Are you stuck? What 'he'?!

... he... is... BACKING! UP—

—No... no...

I told you I'm gonna save the world!

No...

Hey, come on! You know I only want the best for us, eh? I mean...

...

What's your options here, eh? Dead like a little girly bitch or dead in a blaze of glory?

Don't... Don't do this...

All I'm saying is...

Non...

ALL I'M SAYING IS... You got nothing to lose... my friend!

NON! NONFRIEND! NEVER—!

—SHUT UP YOU STUPID LITTLE SPOILED BRRRR—!

—YOU DON'T GET TO TALK TO HIM LIKE THAT YOU FUCKING STUPID BRAIN-TWAT—

—NON—

—GRATEFUL—!

—NON—!

—HATEFUL—!

—NON, NON—!

—HATE??? I ONLY HATE YOU—!

—NON, NON NOOO!

...

...

... NONME! ... FAM... FAM-ILL...

Fam—

—ily?

YES! YES... FAMILY!

... Father always said... 'It's not you, it's me!' I mean, that's what Mother told him too. I mean she had no choice, the 'Terms' said... But what do I know, eh...? At least I think I finally understand what he meant. He meant, it's not my fault, it's his. And I'm fine with that. Good thing we figured that out before we hit the dirt here, eh? Heh... Well, AFTER we hit the dirt but you know what I mean... Heheheh...

BWAHAHAHAHHA, DUDE, THAT'S THE MOST ORIGINAL—

—HEY! HEY! WHAT DID I TELL YOU?

OK...

OK... FINE!

... Anyway, it's been a pleasure knowing you, gentlemen. Now if you'll excuse me, I'm off to meet the MAKER!

Likewise.

Hat-tipping

I resume playback and look with nonfearful eyes at AMA, her fearful gaze comprehending the nuttery in my numb-numbingly-dumb acceptance of fate. It's like she understands... She smiles between deep, deep sighs...

A voice behind me says "What're ya two little birds walkin' 'round like this' all normal, eh? Ain't ya heard of them ray-dee-eye-shuns and stuff?"

"Nah, I'm not much for conspiracies." I'm asking for trouble here but what do I care?

"Oh really?" He presses his boot deep into my neck, ouch ouch, AMA don't worry I'm ouch... Then he spits some words I non-understand and then says "You don' kno' shieeeeet!"

"I know I don't! That's why I don't believe it!"

"Oh really??" He presses deeper but then lifts away.

"..."

"You some kind of wise guy?"

But I nonget to respond when two more gorillas, well I say 'gorillas', they look more like miniature chipmunk versions of the gorillas around... Well, that's not what breaks my heart though. They're dragging Gary and Batbro in a net. I mean, come on!

"Look what we found in the bushes! Squirrels!" The little chipmunks squeak and squawk some noises and seem pretty proud of their catch. WoW! Big deal! Anyone could've —

—ForF? I mean our chances just got higher now.

Yeah, but the... eh... Look, if they wanted to DEAD us... they would've done it by now, right? Right???

What's your point?

Correlation, caw-casation or something, remember?

Again, you're starting to spread into TERRITORY YOU DON'T —!

—FINE! Fine...

So, if THEY haven't done anything stupid yet... Well, I say 'stupid' I mean my neck is really starting to —

—Yeah, yeah—

—IF they nonaggress, right? We nonaggress. And if their variable changes, we change ours too. Sounds reasonable enough to you?

Mmm, yes.

I do find it... hard to nonaccept.

Double agreeing...

Ok, let's see what more he has to say. He just grunts. But I nonget to ponder much the deep nuances of this neo-retro-post-proto-modernist expression of communication when a... familiar? Sure sounds familiar... A familiar voice comes shouting behind one of the —

"—Hey, what's with all this excitement, you booze-sucking-pieces-of-OH-MY-WHAT-THE-FUCK-ARE-YA—!" I don't know what fills my heart with more joy. The fact that I'm hearing Shaun or the fact that he drags the mask off his face to reveal his dear, lovingly, loving, so beautiful his face, I noncare it's fake, just look at it! It's beautiful, I'm all gay for him, he's so beautiful, beautiful I'd sock his —

—Sshhhh—!

—Maybe not that, anyway he comes and lifts me up with the power of a thousand cyber-horses and then he slaps the guy who's got the print of my neck on the sole of his foot. He slapped him so hard I thought I heard something crack, wtf!

"YOU FUCKING APOLOGIZE TO THIS FUCKING YOUNG MAN! RIGHT FUCKING NOW —!"

"—Shaun, Shaun—" I try to defuse the situation but the combination of frustration, anger and deviation in Shaun's vision makes me think I should not continue "—..." So, he continues.

"NOW!"

“Shaun... how the FUCK’s I supposed to—!”

“—NOW OR I’LL BITCH-SMACK YA—!”

“—A’RIGHT, A’RIGHT, just STOP for COCK’s sake!” The dude lifts himself up. Neck seems functional still. Maybe they’re all just androids and he cracked some casings or something. Whatever, he shows no signs of pain except in his ego. “Sorry, kid, I didn’ know.”

“Didn’t know what?” Shaun requests.

“Didn’...! I didn’ know who ya’ll are, I mean, damn Shaun, come on—!”

“—Come in what—?”

“—The fuckin’ splonkumentary, why the fuck we paid for that shit—?”

“—I fucking TOLD you there was a fucking MONOBREACH you fucking, STUPID—!”

“—BUT THE SHITHEADS’ SUPPOSED TO BELIEVE THE FUCKIN’—!”

“—THESE AIN’T YOUR AVERAGE SHITHEADS, YOU FUCKING DIMWIT, RETARD—!” I have never heard so many curses-per-meter in such a tight perimeter in my whole life like wth brother—?

“—...”

“...”

“... ...”

“.....”

And the guy just leaves. Ama is perplexed. I’m confused. Gary and Batbro are neither... or both. Shaun turns in an instant, like on command, to a much more loving tone...

“I’m sorry you had to hear all this, kids. But these stupid, fucking—!”

“—Ahem...” I sneakily point with my head towards the kids but Shaun is like—

“—What, you never heard that dirty-Gary-mouth when she’s coding, have ya? Bweheehheeee—!” Oooh—

“—I’m a HE you bucket of rusty—!”

“—Yeah, yeah, how’s that math working out for ya? Still your most ‘modest’ subject, eh? Bwaheehheeh —!”

Shaun seems quite pleased with his bashing and roasting and toasting and crushing but he’s the only one amused around. I mean, I would laugh, but... heh... Yeah, fancy that! I’m picking Gary’s side this time. Heh... Between Shaun, the coolest person I’ve ever met and Gary, this little, splonky, sploonky... Heh... I catch Gary’s gaze and Gary’s shy gaze hops away. He’s ran out of insults way sooner than Shaun, but come on old man! You have more eX Pee! I catch his gazellelike gaze again, trying to escape somewhere, but where? Anywhere, just not... here. I finally manage to catch his eyes for more than a second, since I’ve kept starin’... and get the GENIUS idea to do a bot dance, mocking Shaun. But Gary waves, ‘no’, ‘no’, Batbro waves ‘no’, ‘no’, AMA waves even more ‘noes’, I non... Ah... Shaun... is not amused.

Gary tries to save the day first “Shaun, he’s an idiot—!” Hey now, wait a sec—

“—he’s just a noob—!” Hey now, wait a min—!

—AMA just does a looney-ballooney sort of mimicry.

“Now, hold on for a cycle, is this some sort of mutiny—?”

“—Nah... nah...” Shaun seems actually deeply depressed, what the...?

“Hey man, I was just trying to—”

“—HE DOESN’T KNOW!” Gary pleads but Shaun dismisses him with a...

“He knows, he knows... he’s a smart boy, this one...” WHAT?!?!?

“Shaun, I really don’t—”

“—Well, I wasn’t gonna tell it straight to you, now, was I?” Shaun is boiling up a bit but then... “It’s fine, I just need to... Take some nap or something old people do.”

I let Shaun depart, I'm not sure how I... Heh, well... yeah, sure at some level it can be taken as offensive, but anything can be elevated, or rather, 'demoted' to that level if you try hard enough, ain't it? Maybe he takes offense to childish jokes. To stupid jokes? Cripplingly stupid jokes? Stupidly-mind-farted, idiotic jokes? How low do I have to go to be forgiven for my silliness? I mean, come on... It's a living... Well, I say a 'living'... I don't need to make a career out of it. I like jokes just for the sake of it. And OF COURSE! There's plenty of better jokes out there, WAY better than mine. I could NEVER have come up with MOST of my stuff, I mean... Most of my stuff is... 'borrowed' anyway, heh... And when I hear a good joke, I like to share. I like to see a smile suddenly shine on those little faces no matter how hard or painful life is. A smile is always better than a frowny, Father used to say... And I miss Father's smileys...

I let all fear drip away as I hold my position strong here. Free speech does not mean free of consequences, right? And sometimes those consequences are unforeseen. As Shaun disappears into the distance, an angry Gary, a worried Batbro and a slightly amused AMA appear in front of me. I keep the act.

"Ooh, the Inquisition is here!"

"Don't you know!?!!" Gary is pissed.

"Know what?"

Batbro tries to help out "Shaun is... I mean Shaun tried to... Look, man, Shaun suffers from deep —"

—AMA mimics a pistol shot to her head and I finally OH DEAR KEK WTF —!

"—Why do you think he calls himself 'Shotgun' Shaun, stupid?"

"I... Non... NON, you must be...!" Chills... on my spine, in my neck, in my feet. Forget about the jokes. Forget about the silliness. Forget about the... NON! This is the hardest pill to swallow for me. To think that SOMEONE would try to... to do that. I know I said that stuff about euthanasia, and YES, I still think you should have the RIGHT to do it to yourself, but...

Listening...

BUT... But... I can't put myself in his shoes. I really can't. Probably no one can. That's why it must be so HARD for them. Because no one believes them. Or at least they don't understand, right?

Top agreeing...

So yeah... My all high and mighty ego deflates in synch with my all-high-and-skinny body and I release this sigh of ok, I guess I am an idiot and it's my duty and honour to... And say what? I am probably the last thing he wants to see. Well, I gotta make sure.

"... I have to..."

"..."

"... I must... —"

"_..._"

"—Excuse me ladies and gents..." and I specifically look at Gary "... I have some biz to attend to. Some 'mending' if you know what I mean."

"Really, now's not the time to —" But Gary nongets to finish when Batbro intervenes.

"—It's a 'metaphor', Gay-ree!"

"Don't CALL me that you —!"

—AMA's claws are out and the kids back off quicker than the claws get the chance to retreat back into AMA's dangerously, lovingly, spankily, mmmm, non, maybe not that.

“Thank you, now...” And I just do a one-eighty. I do a one-eighty with force in the opposite direction and then ninety and ninety... Eh... I whisper “Got any ideas where I can find Shaun?”

“He’s probably under a rock somewhere.”

“He likes to burrow?”

“No, look! That rock over there?” Batbro points at two small clifflike rocks. One is in the far distance; one is in the quite-near distance.

“You mean that one in the distance?”

“No, silly, this one. The closest!”

“Oh, dear!”

“Yeah, don’t worry! His hearing ain’t what it used to be.”

“I want to believe...”

“Just GO!”

I walk down... the corridor of noncertainty. I approach... the rock of doom! ...Heart’s all sweaty, my mind a... baguette. Afraidy and afraidy I step near the arcadian rock, but it’s synth-rock. Synth-metal? My heart is just a petal. I take a step forward. I take two steps back. I take two steps forward and I stop in my track. I feel on a rack, like a deck with a long, painful jack inside my crack! I meant my other crack... I bite the bullet and face the shotgun, all around is just Hades and lockdown. In the underground... We all fall in the end, there’s no amend, no commending, no mending, no spending, no defending, no rejecting this terrible coil, this terrible turmoil, this horrible foil, oh my, oh, why...? Why, oh, my would KEK allow for...? But if KEK is all high and mighty, why can’t his magic be all... around me? To stop the S.I.N.ers, to foil THEIR plans. And help OUR plans... But what if OUR plans are not HIS plans? Or... What if? WHAT IF? Look, I’m just saying this as a possibility, ok?

... Chilling...

WHAT IFFF? There is... some other... KEK... You know? The ‘dark side of KEK’...

... Nonwant imagining...

I KNOW, I KNOW! I mean it’s silly, I know... But... what if? I mean, I don’t know that, you don’t know that...

What if... KEK Himself doesn’t know it?

Nonpossible.

Why?

IF KEK > infinite power

THEN KEK knowing... all knowing...

Then why allow it? Then KEK has the power to STOP ... dark KEK, eh?

Maybeing...

Maybe He doesn’t do it in an obvious way. Maybe He just, you know... Finds the perfect twists, eh?

Considering...

Yeah, yeah... Now, you know we are only taking a walk-through Imagination-land, ok? So, I’m still not convinced! But... I like to believe.

WANT to... believing...

I need to! I need to... And there’s nothing worse than this fear. This fear of rejection, it’s a complexion, a lesion, a friction, oh my addiction to nonadmission is—

—JUST DO IT!

I step behind the rock and I trip and almost roll all over Shaun and he’s like “What the fuck are you doin’ you stupid—?”

“—Sorry, SORRY I didn’t—!”

“—Just watch where you go, you stupid...” But his words just trail away in another dimension of existence, a Hadesian dimension of pure, fiery, putrid, disgusting— “—Why you come to bother me, anyway?”

“Look, Shaun, they... I... You... We... I mean—”

“—If you don’t hurry up, I’m gonna die of old age here.”

“Shaun... I didn’t... I just couldn’t... Uhm, SHAUN!”

“Why the fuck are you—?”

“—Sorry! Sorry, I thought you fell—”

“—I did and I had this dream you actually reached some point—”

“—Shaun, I’m not as smart as you think I am.”

“...”

“I know I look like it, but I’m not. I know a lot of stuff about all sorts of things... And nothing about anything really, ‘cause you can’t be a master in all trad—”

“—...”

“... Look, I’m sorry! But I’m not as brave as you are, ok? I mean, to do that. I mean... what you did. I think it takes a lot of bravery. Lots, I mean, I can’t even imagine...! I can’t imagine what you’ve been through.”

“...”

“I’m just a skinny-ass-bitch—”

“—Wooaaah, woaaah there, you said it, not—!”

“—know, I know... But I’m not ashamed of it. I actually find myself quite sexy!” And I do this faux sailor-tailor expression of vanity.

“Pffft, ok, Skelly-Juan!”

“Heheheh, yeah...” Whoever that bitch is!

“... You know...” Shaun finally holds his scopes on me for longer than he’s kept them on the distant, far, far regions of this valley “... There’s no bravery in what I did... No bravery at all.”

“How so...?”

“Look... you know what’s the last thing that went through my head when I pulled the trigger?”

“The...” I lose a smile but grab it fast, no I’m not doing that—

“—Before the bullet, you clown-face!”

“Ok, ok! What was it?”

“I thought... look, in those moments, I thought... Right when I pulled the trigger, time started to... slow down to a drip! I actually saw my life, my ex-wife, my ex... children.” There can’t be no pain harder than losing a child. I just watch Shaun and try to hide some tears but it nonmatters, he’s not looking at me anymore. “And then... I felt rage. Not just the rage that this was taking so long... BUT RAGE! Real, fucking rage I never felt before. At the world mostly, at all the stupid, fucking idiots in this stupid, fucking world! And I said, yeah fuck ‘em, they don’t need me anymore. I did my job and they spit right in my face! So, yeah...” He gets lost in thought but soon is reminded of... “... And then... as the sound of the click of the trigger finished... my last thought was... NOW I’M ALSO ONE OF THE FUCKING, STUPID IDIOTS!”

“...”

“So yeah... Too late for that bit of wisdom, eh? I’m telling you kid. Smoke all you want, drink all you want, kill yourself slowly for all I care. But I don’t... I don’t wish this pain on my worst enemies. Eh, on some of them at least, bwueehheeeeeeeh... heheh...!”

“...”

“... Heh... You’ve got a pure heart, Dem... Never let anyone take that away from you...”

“Thanks, but I’m not that good—”

“—Oh, don’t give me that Socratean, sectarian, cretinean bull—!”

“—Ok, OK, I just meant—!”

“—Sshhh!” HE’S SHHHH—!? Well, I guess I deserve worse than that. “Did you see that?”

“What? Where?”

“There, behind that rock.”

“What, you mean that one in the distance?”

“Yeah, yeah!”

“I don’t see anything.”

“Well, why you got those fucking ‘plants for? You sure are retarded, I must say.”

“Thank—!”

“—Sshhhh, shhhh. Ah fuck, not this shit again!” Shaun stands on his feet with a metally, screechy sound and pulls out the biggest, baddest plasma shotgun I have never seen and he just starts shooting in the WTF—!
“—Strap in boys *BOOM*, we got visitors!”

All around me the gorillas are getting into position wtf AMA, Gary wtf where, wtf am I going...? And then I start seeing THEM! Whining and screaming and laughing and shouting. The tribal looks, the cranial marks, the hateful snarks, the...

“*Pew-pew* the fuck are *BOOM*, Shaun—?”

“—KEK*BOOM* mutants—”

“—MUTANTS? *pew-pew* WHAT—?”

“—EAT *BOOM* AND *pew*!” Shaun is really getting into char, AMA jumps from afar, slash, crash, bash, ashes everywhere, smoke and fumes and dunes and plumes of wtf I’m frozen wtf do I do wtf the gun yeah, the gun, the—”

“—EAT THIS, YOU *pew-pew* MUTANTS!” And I pull the trigger and it clicks and it throws me off my feet and the beam shoots straight through the sky well fuck, well at least I tried, at least it looked cool, it lit up the sky with fiery blazes and leaves a trail of residual amazement on the faces of some of the mutants maybe they thought it was cool too—

“—BOY, YOU GOTTA AIM THAT *reloading* THING AT THEIR *cocking* HEADS!”

“Yeah, yeah!” But I nonget to aim much when I notice that they are retreating. I’m fine with that too.

“COME BACK HERE YOU *rapid-fire* STUPID *overload* COCK-LICKING *overdrive* *overpowered*—”

“—DUDE, YOUR SHOTGUN’S GONNA *BOOOOOOOOOM*!” A big ball of wailing, screeching, greeny, plasmatic sort of projectile shoots out of it and WHAT THE SHIT DOOD THAT LOOKS NONSAFE AS F—!

“—Aaaaah, this ain’t fun anymore!” Shaun almost seems depressed... Repressed. But I think he’s progressed some... Don’t we all? Well, my shooting skillz beg for some training.

“Shaun, you’re like the coolest fucker I’ve ever seen!”

“Yeah, well I get sick of hearing it!” And he starts running towards the retreating mutants. I think he’s finally lost it and the devils took over. He’s screaming and shouting and almost... crying... He stops and drops to his knees. I’m lost...

AMA steps next to me... She holds my hand. She assures me it’s over now. We’re all safe. Gary’s mending Batbro’s bruised... boyhood, wtf—? Ah, nevermind, I’m no longer blind. The blindness of the moment, the fogginess on the pavement, well I say pavement... I notice... one of the mutants. Smaller than usual, I approach and... and... Oh my... OH MY KEK—!

“—Shaun! SHAUN! Help, we need to help this kid!”

Shaun is out there, on his knees. His movement nonbreached. One of his 'friends' comes close to me and looks at the kid at my feet, at the marks on his face. But the FEAR! It's the FEAR that horrifies me the most. He knows... The kid knows... the end is near. "WE HAVE TO HELP HIM, WE HAVE TO—!"

—AND THE FUCKING STUPID IDIOT JUST SHOOTS HIM IN THE FACE, WHAT—!

"—THE FUCK ARE YOU DOING YOU STUPID, FUCKING—!" AND I PUNCH THE STUPID FUCK BUT MY STUPID HAND HURTS MUCH WORSE THAN HIS FUCKING STUPID—!

"—Kid, just *clonk* off!"

"—STUPID*clonk*ASS*clonking*!"

"—Kid*clonk*last*clonk*WARNING!"

"I NONCARE, FUCK YOU!" YOU STUPID... AMA drags me away and holds me tight and I'm, I'm, I'm... I'm NOT FINE but... I'm a bit FINER...!

I can't even look at the kid. I can't look at AMA, nor at the STUPID FUCKING—!... I non understand. WHY???

WHY???? Why...? AMA drags me away from the scene, from the obscene and the nonsane and who's to blame other than that stupid fucking... Ah... AAAAAAH! AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAR —

"—Sshhhhhh..." AMA's soothing voice can barely cover my pain, my sobbing or that stupid fucking... Ah...

"Why AMA? Why?"

"Sssshhhhhh..." Sounds like... Moh...?

"..."

"^_^"

"*_*"

"^^ ^^"

"O_O"

I don't understand... Maybe I don't have to. Maybe KEK knows, HE must know, right? AT LEAST HE SHOULD UNDERSTAND THIS IS NOT FAIR, THIS IS NOT COOL, WHY WOULD HE ALLOW FOR THIS TO...?

Shit happening...

Heh... I wipe my sponky tears with the sponky sleeve of my beautiful bird...

"He didn't have a choice, you know that?"

"Who? The kid or the stupid, fucking—?"

"—Both of them!"

"... I non... I don't..."

"Look, both the 'stupid-fucking' and the dying kid... Both of them knew it was the only way. You saw him... They couldn't sew him all up in time..."

"Why? Why does KEK allow this...?"

"I dunno... It's not my place to judge Him."

"..."

"And besides... There's nothing you could do about his soul even if we could save his body..."

"I don't under..."

"Ah... do you really want to know?"

"YES! Yes, I do, I'm tired of being pampered!"

"These... mutants... they..."

"Are they really mutants?"

“YES, these ones are real! I didn’t just watch some splonk—”

“—Ok, ok! ...”

“They are... They have... They do... Look, they’re all just stupid, fucking—!”

—But I close her dirty mouth with my dirty lips and just feed on her like the most egotistical, satirical, lyrical, nonlyrical, musical, magical, logical, nonlogical, practical, nonpractical, intellectual, cynical, radical, critical, fanatical, criminal, liberated, nonrespectable, nonpresentable, just a vegetable with a devilish, lickeylish, carpy-fish, smiley-isssh—

“—Dem, you keep surprising me again and again.” she whispers.

“—In a bad way?”

“In a good way... Well, I say ‘good’.” And she smiles like the little innocent angel that she isn’t.

“Oooh, I wonder what that means!”

“Eh... you know!”

“I don’t, I don’t!”

“You ass—!” And she pushes me and I fall in the grass and all this harassment raises little embarrassment in my... Enchantment. And we’re just lost, falling deep into the grass, man I wish she would pull out that... bass. And make a mess of my mind just like I would make a mess of her... Cleanliness. So nonlogical. So digital. Such a mircal. Magical...

“Hey look, they’re mating!” But all good things must come to an end, of course. My fantasy gets pissed all over by some... Hey, I recognize that... I turn my head to find, yes... Yes... What was his name?

“No man, if you look closely...” This voice and face I nonrecognize and much I noncare. He’s just some generic, stereotypic, splonky-faced kid.

“Ah, yeh, yeh. There’s no pee-pee involved, true.”

“Taking some biological field notes?” I ask whats-his-name.

“Yeh, we don’t get to see much of this in nature.”

“Oh, do you now?” Kid must be a pornosens—

—Sshhhh!

—but I barely get to suppress the need to... embarrass the kid with the missing... I.D. When the whats-his-face next to him rescues me.

“Speak for yourself, you virgo!” And just like that, they kick and they punch each other like they’re trying to outdo one another but me and my muse nonget much time to amuse when—

“—Eòn!” Aaah, yes! That was his— “Hey? You still gay? Bwahahahah!” Batbro’s roast-fest begins with a sharp jest! The gestures, the dancing... What’s with all the prancing?

“—Shut up, ye Batboy! Or I’ll steal yer shooty-toy!”

“Oooh, just come and get it! You faaaaageeh—!”

“—Hey, hey! Let’s not digress.” Gary tries to embarrass but I’m laughing my ass at the best comeback, yes!

“—Come on, it’s just a joke!” Batboy defends.

“—Yeah, it’s just a joke!” Eòn commends. “Just like the fact that ye are a bloke!” And he laughs and I smile and the crowd’s going wild and amusing it is but it’s not to... his... eyes... AMA’s not, but come on! How long can we keep this silly charade? This silly parade, escapade and blockade. Silly... eh... Whatever.

Batbro turns “...”

AMA is mmmmm.

Eòn is “What?”

The other guy is... “Whatever.”

But the fear in his eyes, the hate for the... lies? Real eyes... realize real lies. And it hurts. It hurts that you're not and it hurts that it's hot! I know it is but come on, don't do this... Don't do this to yourself. Don't turn that cute self in a... horrible shelf of a... Shell of a... Gary then leaves and Batbro is sad. Eon pretends that he watches the leaves and the other is... whatever. I think I know now that my role must come next. But AMA pulls me back, she waves 'no', I say 'yes'. Her duress not my stress, her dress not my mess, well not all of it. I lift up, I pull down, I pat my clothes round and around. I take a deep breath and I leave a deep growl. I feel like an owl, well what do owls think? They barely blink and they probably stink so there's nothing to think. Just... tinker.

I find Gary in a fidget; he's screwing some gadget. Not that kind of gadget, you dirty-minded-splonky...! Like a hatchet he hacks, with a mallet he smacks and the sparks that he racks up do nothing to hide the pain in his brain. Well, I say 'his'. I just smile and watch, like a benevolent Netwatch. I know that sounds stupid. But maybe I'm not...

"Working hard?"

"Eh..." The gadget breaks into pieces. My rhythm from now on... probably misses.

"Was that intentional?"

"You think I'm some idiot?"

"No, just nonsocial."

"Well, it's nonlogical!"

"What you mean?"

"All of... this..." The pieces fall to the ground. They spread all around. The confusion is real. The pain... probably too real. "I'm just tired, is all."

"You do look like a ball."

"WHAT? THE FUCK YOU JUST—!"

"—HEY!" And the silence shoots like a ray.

"..."

"... I know you're confused, like we all are sometimes."

"..."

"But if nothing is true... why bother?"

"I dunno..."

"Is it true?"

"What?"

"You know..."

"What?????"

"Is it true that... You're actually a boy?"

"NO! I MEAN NES, I MEAN—!"

"—But is that what you see?"

"..."

"Because if you lie to yourself..."

"I DON'T!"

"..."

"I mean..."

"..."

"Ok, but we all do that sometimes, don't we?"

"True, but..."

"But?" Gary's awaiting some answer to the mysteries of the universe but I have none. I just...

"But... that still doesn't make it right, now, does it?"

"No..." Gary is lost in thought and I patiently await. I would hug her but... Eh... It's working so well, let's not ruin it... "No, but why do they do it?"

"Who do you mean?"

"The Monodood meanies."

"Why do they lie?"

"Yeah, why do they lie to all the kids? About everything, basically."

"Well..." And I take a hand and place it on her shoulder and caress for a bit and then retreat just in case I'm about to get bit. "They lie because they have to."

"... Huh?"

"If they didn't lie... then no one would believe their crap."

"..."

"They have to! It's not just some decision taken in a meeting board! It's the mentality, you see! The Monos are like—here, if you want to make an analogy—MONO is like a MIND-VIRUS!"

"Ohhhhhhh..." And the dots are crackling inside Gary's brain like a thunderstorm of epic proportions. "Well, yeah... that makes sense."

"Better than my delivery-date theory?"

"Nah, but..." She ponders for a bit... "Actually, I did look into that and I've found some weird stuff about our—"

"—What you mean by 'our'—?"

"—Yes, I looked in a lot of files but the thing is..." She's lost in thought again "Nah, it's just stupid, but..."

"I'm all ears in my eyes."

"Heh, yeah... It just doesn't add up."

"What doesn't add up?"

"You remember that average you assumed the first time we met?"

"Well, I was you know, just estimating—"

"—Yeah, I think that was an accurate one."

"..."

"For real! Like come on! It would explain why I'm—!... Why I'm... This way..."

"...Mmmmmaybe!" And I do this faux-nonfaux tone of nontrust.

"No, for real! I looked in the APDB—"

"—Are you sure that was the—?"

"—Look, it wasn't me, OK? It was... a friend."

"Mmmm, I see..." I wonder who this 'friend' might be.

"Yeah, and I mean... there's no bureaucratic stupidity there, those boys don't mess around! But those dates still..."

"Dates?"

"Look man, I looked into it and... The dates would explain MY age for sure but... YOUR age... and AMA's..."

Oh boy... "What you mean?"

Gary looks at me and he says "You're ten years old, DEM! Just ten... Probably younger than me, heh."

"Come on, just look at me, do I look like—?"

"—I know, it's just... I don't know what to believe anymore. NOTHING IS TRUE ANYMORE!"

"Kid, you don't wanna go down that road."

“NOTHING! Nothing... nothing...” Gary deflates and I think I’m detecting some suppressing of... She starts to cry with girly, sobby, splonky tears and I can no longer fear what she might think if I hug her at least for a blink.

“There, there you, big heart of a brain!”

“IT’S NOT FAIR!”

“I know... I know...”

Gary’s shedding and shredding and defending and mending ‘till the sadness’s subsiding. His anger turns bitter, her eyes seem to twitter. His wisdom from princedom to princessdom to KEK’s kingdom! I’m done. I’m done with this rhyming, with all of this whining, I’m done with it. No more. There’s so much pain in this world, there’s no time for... my own. With a tender chord Gary reaches some accord, now gone in his or her world... And I ponder alone and... Fall in some deep, deep, deep conspiracy hole. Like a rabbit I’m jumping and jumping and NO! No... I must not go there... NEVER!

But...

Nah, come on!

Just think ABOUT IT! WHAT IF???

Don’t be silly now!

But what if...?

Theorizing...

Chapter 7: Deadly S.I.N.s

... I wake up. It wasn't the same dream I have every night. It was... the same but different. Much better. I don't remember much of it. Just me and AMA kissing. Caressing. People running, people screaming, shouting, bleeding. We noncare. We just feed our passion and get on with the action. It was... a peaceful dream.

I observe the relative darkness of my immediate surroundings. AMA sleeps peacefully, Gary and Batbro are sharing a blanket, aww, so cute! And some other monkeys are laying around. The barracks we're stationed in is made out of planks and trunks of trees. The original home. With original materials. Origin... The origin of the Universe? What IS the origin of the Universe?

You mean besides that
'Mono' particle bull—?

—Yeah, anything Monos say can and will be used against them. I mean... yeah, it does make sense on a theoretical level. But I'm not so sure anymore.

Ooooh, fancy that!

You losing your faith in science, boy?

Never! It's just the 'scientists' I don't trust. I mean, they're always the ones coming up with the 'discoveries', aren't they?

Suspecting...

Yeah, they're always like:

Me smart, you stupid, you lose.

Yeah, yeah... So, you gotta watch the watchers or they'll snatch your batch before you can say...

Whatever!

Not much to discover anyway. Or too much. Or not enough. Or...

My beard's gonna touch the floor
by the time you've reached some point.

There's no point really. Just making convo.

... Convulsing...

Convalescing... That's a new one we learnt. And contortionist. That's like a 'triple plus bendy person', heh. The C.O.N. The CON. The 'mind-contortionists'. The biggest joke in the Universe.

Yeah, you know... All that stuff

I said about going back there...

Yes?

I've changed my mind. It's not worth it.

Interesting. Why so?

Because they'll come to us anyway.

...

Yeah, I know. But sooner or later they get you, don't they?

... You're stepping into dangerous territory there, my friend...

You said it yourself, didncha? On a long enough—

—Time is all we have right now. Better not waste it by thinking about things that are out of our control.

There's a new one I like! 'Control'!

Figures... That's something you barely have over yourself.

Heh...

The first rays of the dawn are bashing through the cracks in the barracks and are slicing my face in a hundred pieces. No commas, no lemmas, only dilemmas. What are we doing? Where are we going? We know where we've been and what we've seen. No matter how obscene or noncertain. But we don't know where we're going or what we know in general. I know I don't know. Only NON knows.

You mean KEK?

Whatever... We're on a road to nowhere. And you know what? I'm feeling okay. This morning really makes my day. This paradise of sorts we thought we lost. It was right here. All we wanted, all we needed, was right beyond the Monodome, like they say. We're riding shotgun, eh, not literally but... Shaun right now is the person I trust the most. Except AMA of course, but Shaun... I mean, taking into account all that we know about him... Shaun's really got his splonk together. And he doesn't spare the details. No, even when he does, he... I just need to pay more attention from now on. That dream... That dream of me shooting my... Was that what the dream was trying to tell me?

Maybe...

Maybe there's more to dreams than I thought about... But... They're always so cryptic! Nothing makes sense there; well, I say nothing. I mean, you voice-command 'off' but the light stays on. You look at your hands, they're all blurry! You try to read something, it's all blurry. Faces flurry, fire is fury, coldness is hotness and magnets are magic-nets. How do they work? The dreams I mean, I know how magnets work, heh. Or do I?

AMA gets up and leaves, just like that. As if I'm not even here. That worries me a bit and I go after... her. She sits on a makeshift bench at the edge of the camp. Smoke and whistles and guys with hairlocks of bristles.

All this rhyming a cancer me giving.

You're just whining. But AMA seems lost. In a deep, thoughtful pond so I attempt to re-bond.

"Hey... Did you sleep ok?"

"Yeah... I just..." She's lost again.

"Yes...?"

"I just... have a bad feeling, that's all."

"Oh... about what?"

"I dunno. Just a bad feeling."

"I know what you mean. I used to get that all the time."

"No, it's not that kind. This is..." Lost deeper and deeper, I need to rescue her!

"You think something bad is going to happen?"

"I don't think! I just feel..." How am I supposed to argue with that?

"How am I...? Never mind."

"What?"

"Nothing, nothing."

"..."

"Look..." I try to grab her shoulders but she backs away. Ok... "... Feelings are not facts."

"..."

"And facts don't care about—"

"—You don't care!"

"..." ... "... Why you say that?"

"... I'm sorry..." She finally submits and retreats in my arms. "You do care... I'm the one who..."

“No, you’re not.” AMA whips out a cold-gaze but wait, this pause is just for— “—We all are sometimes.” Her eyes turn into stone and then marble and then... I hug her some more. And I wonder...

But I don’t get to ponder much when she gets up and leaves, marching towards the distant forest as if I don’t even exist. “Pffft, no good-bye kiss, not even a, ‘see ya’?” But my tone is nothing like you’ve imagined.

She turns to face me, from about I’d say, uhm, twenty feet away, if that’s a measure, and says “I just have to be alone for a while... Just a bit, ok?”

“A kilobit or megabit?”

“Just a... short while...” And with those last words she departs. She seemed quite sad so I didn’t want to grind her much. Although this is... a bit weird.

You mean a megabyte.

Yeah, well... It does byte if you know what I mean.

More like stabbing...

Yeah, well I think we’ve seen enough of that for a while.

I pass some time through the camp, thinking about looking about something about doing. Not much to do around here. These guys have no decks, at least not any ‘Public PC’ ones. PDA broke last night in the mutant fight, Rest in PCBs!

Shadeelay, brotha’!

Shadeelaying...

At least no one was deaded. I mean, well, non on our side anyway. I mean, their side... Oh, it’s so hard to think about it... It’s still not fair, regardless of how those people really are. I mean, a kid, for real? I mean... What kind of people would send their own children to fight?? And WHY?? I mean, we weren’t doing anything to them. I have so many questions and I’m just running in circles around this camp and... Where is SHAUN???

“Uhm, anyone know if Shaun got up?”

“Shaun is always up. Heheheh!” The gorillaz—well, they aren’t wearing the costumes now but I’m gonna keep calling them gorillas ‘cause it’s easier—join in for a good old laughter at the biggest joke in the universe these sponkers think I haven’t heard an infinite time in my lives before. But, because not only their weaponry, but also their body hardware is infinitely superior to mine, I’m going to leave the witty remarks to myself and just join them in the merry-making for the sake of the meaning, or meaningless of life.

“Bwaaahahaahh—!”

“—Hehehehehe—!”

Another gorilla asks “—What you need Shaun for? Ain’t one girl good enough for ya? Pfffawhawh—” and of course the rest join in for the SECOND biggest joke in the Multiverse I—!

—I can’t believe you’re not enjoying this.

... FINE! Fine...

“BWAAHAHAHAHA! OH, HE DIDN’T TELL ME HE WAS A GIRL!”

“He didn’t?” The guys are all serious. Wait, what? No... come on, no... NO, NO, NO, NO, NO—!

“—BWAHAHAHEEEEE, THE LAD FELL FOR IT, EH?!” Of course! They’re pulling my bollocks! The relief that at least SHAUN wasn’t turning out to be a girl around here brings me to my knees with laughter and joy and OH MY! NOW I REALLY WANT TO SOCK HIS—!

—HEY, HEY! Now,

I know I joke about it sometimes, but let’s not jump the—

“—BWAHAHEHEHEEEEEEEEEHEHEHEHEHEHEHEE—!” Of course not, you silly-Billys! BWAHEHEEHE—!

.....

This turned-out way, way better than I expected. Despite the... incidents... we've had —
—Ah, see? Now you get it—
—Yes, despite... These guys are actually cool. And I mean, you wanna be cool with guys like these. I mean... Look, maybe those 'mutants' were after them, but STILL! If it was just me and AMA, we would've been deaded real bad. Really bad. I ask the boys about Shaun again, in a more serious tone, and one of the bulkier guys responds in a gruffy voice.

"He went for some scouting. On his own."

"Oh, I see... It seems to become popular around here."

The guys non understand.

"Yer birdie flew away?" Luckily, the local biologist, Eòn, pops up from a hole in the ground, like literally, to save the day!

"Yep, shwoop!" And I do the *shwoop* sign. "Said she had a 'bad' feeling."

"That's exactly what Shaun said when he left and nothing else."

"Heh... I guess that proves it. Shaun IS actually a GIRL!"

"BWAHEHEEHEHE—!"

—But we nonget much to amuse ourselves when Shaun appears out of the darkness, even though it's quite sunny outside, in a bit more hurry than I usually see him moving. Like I think he's actually been running but he's not showing it. If he heard the greatest joke of the millennium or not, his face doesn't care but that's usually the 'case' anyway. He starts rambling.

"Get yer dicks out of yer assholes and lock-and-load, now! We got a Sixty-six on our asses hauling AT LEAST six metalheads!"

"Yes, surr! Let's move!"

Then Shaun takes big steps towards me, stomp, stomp, stomp. What in the Hades is a Sixty-six? I try to lighten up the load a bit "What's this, a new band is in tow—?"

"—Now shut your mouth and listen carefully." Ok, Shaun is pissed so this is Triple plus serious — "You take your little friends right now and move South and you don't stop NOR look back till you reach Liberon —"

"—Liberon? What—?"

"—kind of idiots are they recruiting in the FUCKING Res' nowadays, are you fucking—?!" and Shaun is really fudding pissed and I think he's having a breakdown or the start of a glitchy breakdance as he's reaching for his calf and starts massaging it. Now, from my P.O.V. it looked like he was just mending some cramp from the running, but the fact that his tone of voice radically changes from aggro to soft makes me suspect otherwise. "... Dem, you're a smart boy, I'm sure you'll be fine. Now—"

"—But what's going on—?"

"—Me and the boys have got some cleaning to do, now just—"

"—Don't patronize me, you—!"

"—I'm NOT! We just gotta deal with some Nomo FUCKERS and we can't have you running around —"

"—But we can help—!" But I nonget to say the whole plan, well, I say 'plan', when Shaun grabs me by the shoulders and presses me hard against the planks of the barracks, arms spread like ouch-ouch, my feet are hovering above the ouch, ouch—

"—THESE AIN'T YOUR FUCKING AVERAGE BRAINDEAD MUTANTS, DIDN'T YOU HEAR ME? THEY GOT METALHEADS ON OUR ASSES, YOU FUCKING GREEN—!"

“—WHAT’S A FUCKING METALHEAD? YOU FUCKING STUPID—!” I’M FUCKING PISSED NOW TOO!

“—IT’S THE BIGGEST FUCKING CYBER-DEVIL YOU’VE NEVER SEEN YOU STUPID FUCKING—!”

“—WHAT IN KEK’S FUCK IS YOU FUCKING TALKING—?”

“—BIG, POINTY TEETH AND FUCKING CLAWS LIKE A FUCKING MAMMOTH TIGER YOU STUPID FUCKING—!”

“—THAT’S THE **STUPIDEST** FUCKING THING I’VE EVER—!” NO. WHAT. THE. FUD? I stop, not just my heart, not just my brain. He is serious as fuck and each second that passes is probably the difference between life and nonlife. The horror... The horror in my eyes must be obvious because Shaun lowers me to the ground and prepares to leave when I remember— “—But... AMA! She left! She—”

“—Just CALL her on her damn—!”

“—I CAN’T! She... She...” Oh no... Luckily, Shaun is sedated enough to give me one last second “... She left it in the bags... I...”

“Then she’s on her own now.” Last great words of wisdom from Shaun before he puts on a heavy green helmet with a deep metal frame, mono-visor and mounted laser-pistol-bayonet-combo. This guy is the coolest trucker-fucker in the whole fucking universe I swear one of these days I’m going to—

—I-run-as-fast-as-I-can, grab the bags, grab the kids, grab the whatever and we just—

—RUN! RUN! RUN! RU—!

“—Why are we running, what’s going—?” No time to explain to them but—

“—Metalheads!” And the silence and faster steps I start getting from Batbro, Gary and the other guy confirm once again that I’m the only ‘metal head’ around here. Eòn has been accelerating since we left and is now about thirty-six feet away and rising. We just run and run and run and we jump and we duck and we grunt like a “—FUCK—!” was that? Noncare must move must move we’re about I’d say one kilofoot away when we start hearing the distant shouting, shooting, booming, yelling, zapping, screaming, shooting, booming, crying, screeching, crying, zapping, booming, shooting, crying, shooting, crying, crying, crying...

Non cry...

I CAN’T! IT’S NOT NORMAL! ...

...

IT’S NONLOGICAL!

...

All this fighting... For what?

...

For what...?

.....

...

...

...

...

.....

... The chaos and the mayhem are dying down as we reach a shady bit of green hope in this forsaken wasteland. As we run and run and run and run, the shooting and hating dissipates and I’m ok now. Okaish I mean. The kids are catching a breath but none of them seem determined to stop even for a nanosec. The fear and worry in their eyes break my heart more than my brain can ever break my heart. I’ve lived in relative joy

and peace all my life. Whatever that number is, I don't care. But THEY... heh... well, yeah, Gary sure got a bit of that. I have a 'conspiracy' theory that Batbro did too. Just a hunch... Heh... Eòh... He's still a mystery to me. The other guy, who cares? But the point is that THEY don't get to NEVER experience this... this deadening... IT'S NOT—! ... Fair... I guess, what is fair? I could've been delivered as one of those... eh... Miscalculations. But still! A miscalculation in the underworld is the difference between life and death. I've had lots of miscalculations when I did my time under the Monos. And I got away with it. Or cheaply anyway. But here! No, here you gotta pull out a FUCKING plasma shotgun and shoot tons of enemies like in some silly old flatscreen action... whatever. Just to make sure you get a good night's sleep. Well, I say a 'good night'. Better than being dead I would imagine. He saved us... He held the gates of Hades closed so we may safely pass into the promised lands... I wish him all the best and really hope to see him again... But some... dark, dark feeling... It's not an 'what if'... More like the fear I felt before Shaun dropped me to the ground. He had no fear in his eyes. Well, he probably wasn't capable because of all that cyber... Eh... But I felt the fear in his... mind or something, I'm not sure what but... I FELT IT! And it's certain it wasn't for his life. He told me, right? He doesn't give a shit anymore. Like, to paraphrase here, he basically said "I finally don't give a shit anymore!" Because he still gave a shit... When he pulled the trigger. But NOW! Nope... too much for too long. But... Probably his last gift to this world was that... "He helped us..." He warded off the enemy. For these little splonkers and for me, the biggest splonkhead of them all. Both literally and...! "... He saved us!" I need to believe he did this for us... "He did this for us..."

"Of course, he did." Gary answers but I wasn't... Oh my, wait a minute... I was talking out loud! Gary takes a break to gaze at the sky and says "And he always will. He always will."

"I want to believe."

"You have to, man. There's no other way..."

And I think... I think I understand. Maybe not with my mind... but with my... heart. It doesn't have to be logical. Only a few words and yet so much meaning. Of all the people I've ever met, Gary was the one to show me the way. Or at least helped me reach a better understanding of... life... maybe. This kid... Heh, maybe kids do know more than us. At least... they see things differently. That's always a good thing. Well, I say 'always'... Heh, maybe it's time I retreated that joke. We've been good friends but... It's starting to take space in here. And I mean it was funny the first couple of hundred but... Eh, you get old, full of mold, no one wants you anymore cause it's just the same thing, I mean come on! You think ideas are that easy??? Creative ideas especially. I mean... I never had trouble with that. Not ALWAYS I mean... Father... Father helped a lot. But still. It was the WORK I had to put in that... scared me. That was the scariest part. Still is. Coding, yeah but that's not creating the way I see it... Eh, maybe vidya but come on! That's easy! People almost always never care about the story. Just pew-pew and bang-bang and some of the time both at the same time. But you know... something like a... Hmmm. It appears I have ended up in some other corner of my mind but that's ok. Not much else to do but to move and think. And thank... 'whoever' is up there for letting us pass nonharmful through this valley of death and sorrow. And especially to Shaun. HIM especially... for so many... things...

It's getting dark and I have no idea what am I doing, where am I going or if I am allowed to use the damn telelink now. The sun became a bit tricky-sneaky and the kids a bit some-worry. Then the magnets, yes, I feel them! Who could it be then? Res'? Or someone else? Shadows above me pass. Is it a bird or a...? Nope, it's just as I suspected! We are being surrounded by some familiar but unfamiliar hovershuttles bearing the Ohm logo stamped on the sides. And eh, who could that be—zoom-it—? Hmmm, non-I recognize, I see... Who could it be? Who could it be...?

The hoverboards and hover-bots surround us as if we're some kind of... alien astronauts! Some freak show, some sideshow... they hover white and really slow. They escort us aboard, lots of faces, generic. They look friendly, we made it!

We made it... We step inside, the magnets churning. We say good-bye to all this... mourning... I smile at Gary, he smiles at me, she smiles at Batbro and both of them again at me. I look but nonAMA... My heart jolts but I must not... I trust her, forever, I trust her, I MUST! Forever and ever... till death do us part. The ring on my finger I pull like a trigger. I push and I pull and must always remember. No matter the pleasure, no matter the pain. I must never betray her! Either that or a bullet to my brain. No matter what... NO MATTER WHAT!

... The sky is beautiful and lyrics could not describe my P.O.V. at this angle. It's... divine. We ascend and the shuttle moves so swiftly yet so neatly, I'm quite impressed, really! I've never been in one of these. Well, I say... Ah! There was this time I got infected with an amoeba, but I was nonconscious during the flight so, yeah! Whatever... I could've done it in the Mono, but... I didn't trust them much. I mean, sure, statistics-schmatistics, but you know how it is... Electromagnets are not like magnets... There's still THAT small chance that, eh... Not really helping me much to think about that bit of statistic right now but... I mean, it sure beats the zero, point infinite zero chance we had with those Nomos... probably... I mean, if ONLY I could just SAVE it right BEFORE the battle and then LOAD each time—

—Heh, yeah, IMAGINE THAT!

If there was some 'console' to the Universe.

MAN, THAT WOULD BE EPIC! But how would you find it?

I dunno, just... do what scientists do.

What's that?

You know, look around, try to figure stuff out.

YEAH MAN, but where do you start when you're searching for the 'shell' of the Universe? I mean... if that is even a thing.

Well, maybe it's something like... eh... Hmmmmmmmmmmm...

Careful there...

... Dreaming?

YEAH! YEAH! See? Bigbrain here understands me.

Hm... So, like... instead of the dream having me, I'm having the dream?

Eh... close enough, yeah.

I see, I see... Hmm...

Hmmmmm....

Triple plus Hmmmmmming...

We ponder for a bit, and by 'we' I mean ALL of we, including the we in me and the we in they and I think of she, but let's not think of her, let's just think of, yeah, maybe not. Maybe... The sun almost sets behind the curtain of the mountains and I'd rather not think of the sun but of the moon and stars but let's think instead of the stupid face of the kid of whose name I don't care. Yeah, he looks like the frog, the spleenky-sploonky... Poor kid, who knows what he's been through. Damn! That HATE all that hate like those guys in the field, well they must have the hating or they can't do the killing, 'cause if there's too much feeling you get chilling, thrilling, reeling, milling, billing, spilling, killing, stim-ing, steaming, re-stim-ing, repeating, I'm rambling, I'm shambling, I'm crumbling, I'm crumpling, I'm a dumpling from some far away... nothing. We enter in some

nothing. I don't understand, we just passed through the mountain, like it's not even there. What in the fud's name is going on?

"Did you guys see that?" I ask the kids because I can't believe we just went through a KEKdamn mount—!

"—What?" Batbro confused.

"The... thingy."

"What thingy?" Gary even more confused.

"Uhm... thingy!!"

"You're not making any sense, guy!" The generic kid starts to give me some.

"We just flew **straight** through the mountain!"

"Yea', I guess ye've never been to Liberon." Oh, THAT explains it, Eòn! "Ye're pretty colored after all."

"Yeah, I'm FULL of jelly beans!"

"Heh..." Generic kid seems amused for the first time in his life and I'm actually... pleased with such little expression of amusement. "... I remember when we used to get those for Cristmas."

"Wait, was' dat?" My ears are like the antennas they use to find spots on the ass of Uranus.

"Cristmas? You never had one of those?"

"I... uhm, no, I never heard of this 'Cri-mass'." I try to make a little joke but of course I'm the only one laughing because I made that JOKE only for myself, you understand??? I'm THAT SELFISH! BWAHAHAHA! And FINALLY, I'm not the only one who hasn't heard of this Mass of my former boss. FINALLY! Well, except for Eòn, but Eòn seems to know a lot of things...

"Look, I don't believe in all that KEK shebabble—" Oh, we got a NONbeliever over here! Please do continue, sir! "—but in principle my religion is the same."

"What's your religion called?" Batbro asks inquiringly.

"We believe in Kryst to be—"

"—Who's Kryst?" Gary grinds furtherly.

"Look, HE's the saviour of—!" Generic kid tries to explain but I must—

"—Like a Mehsighah?"

"Exactly! This guy did his homework—" Thank you, sir! But I'm actually the village idiot.

"—What's a Meh-sigh-ah—?" Oh, Eòn hasn't done his.

"—Guys, guys, just—" Generic WISE kid, I.M.H.O., is trying to non-fuse the situation but it turns into a schoolyard festival of nonsense and I just join in the fun like we're all ten-year-olds, I mean right now it makes sense we're all just kids inside and what Dude said about the kid inside of him finally starts to make sense to me too.

The guards are smiling, they seem unaffected by all this shkebabble and babbling and trampoline of words and thoughts only a child could come up with. I finally start getting it, why, why, why people have children. They're just so... weird. And in a good sense. You get a cat; well, I never had a REAL cat but you know. Doesn't matter really. Even the real ones must get boring at some point. But kids, man, kids! I mean, that's like, my opinion, MAN! But kids... are fascinating. I think I could teach them something good, even if they're not my own kids. They don't have to be. They raise each other anyway. And they sure raised me up when I fell down because I was an idiot. Well, I shouldn't say an idiot. Maybe a...

Dood-head?

Perfect! Yep. A dood-head. A doo-doo head, heheheh...

A deck-head!

Pffffft, now THAT is original! Touché!

Thank you! Thank you...

Non-funny...

I know, I know...

Psyching!

Touché! Heh-heh... Oh, mon Diez...

We finally reach our destination inside the mountain. Inside, it looks like an arena, I mean concert, I mean football stadium or something, but it's ten million times bigger and I'm probably not exaggerating. The sky... It's open, it looks SO REAL! But I'm no longer sure I can believe mine own eyes. Model VS two point for what? For what do we need all this deception? As I step outside of the shuttle, I land straight into the biggest puddle I could find around and I thank KEK or NON or BOTH of THEM for putting this BEAUTIFUL puddle RIGHT here, but I THANK them instead that this is not instead the mouth of some cyber-pussy—

—CAT, he means—

—with big, pointy teeth and caressing... eh... I join THEM in their laughter and I take a deep breath of probably fake air and fake particles like this whole white, synthetic nightmare around me wtf is this place I NONGET—!

“—Can someone explain this to me, please? Am I dead?”

“Why do you say that?” One of the generic guards tries to answer my mysteries but my phrasing is probably a bigger mystery to him.

“We just passed through a mountain. And I mean... FORGET about all that. You didn't blindfold us, sedate us, we saw ALL of it, I mean I KNOW I have some clearance but—”

“—You all do. You're all members of the Resistance, aren't you?”

“What?” Hey now wait a minute... “You mean ‘collabs’? I know I AM a member, but—”

“—You all are.”

“Interesting...”

The guard lets me process but what's to process? I thought these splonkers, I mean even Eòn? EVEN THE GENERIC KID? For Kryst's whiskey, what the wine? This is divine, we're like in a dream and I hope I never wake up, except if AMA is next to me and we get to F—!

—But I nonget to live my fantasy much when some... cybernetic anomaly starts to approach, approach, checks a digipad, looks at us, approaches some more and now I can finally distinguish something off of this synthetic abomination I wish I'd never seen before what in the fudding shit is this splonk—

—FUCK ME, YEAH—!

—HEY! HEY! ... ONLY AMA, REMEMBER!

Reinforcing!

Although... but no. Look... She, I assume it's a 'She' because the tag under her Res' tag says 'Mina'. Whatever that means. I must refer to her as Mina? Sounds like sort of a—

—BOMB! OH—

—YOU KNOW I HATE CYBERS! Eh... look, if IT pleases you... You can keep it in your FILTHY—!

—YEAH, OH YEAH—!

—... I wouldn't man, I mean, come on! Just LOOK at it... IT probably doesn't even have a... thingy!

Oh, YEAH, I LOVE THINGIES—!

—Sshhhh! Scarying...

Who, me? Or...

U 2!

...

I'm done anyway.

Good... I must be overanalyzing but it sort of looks like... Nah, the dream was too blurry anyway... From all that slashing! I couldn't see a thing! I was watching the whole scene through... a broken mirror...

Metaphorizing...

Look, all I'm saying is that... and I know this is going to sound —

—GENIUS! GENIUS, I TELL YA—!

—BUT I just have a bad feeling. That's it. Agreed?

I'm all yours, your 'Highness'!

Feudalizing...

The greyness of her chrome, the greyness of his eyes, the grayness of its soul. They all emanate Mono. That is certainly Mono chrome all over its body, probably an ex-OVSEFO. I've NEVER heard of such... betrayal.

Maybe 'they' have a hidden agenda, eh?

Agreeing...

And Jaques wouldn't know about it?

We don't know where Jaques is. Or AMA.

And this monstrosity in front of us is...

Triple plus Agreeing...

Nonadmittance.

Denial.

And the Legal Repping! NONFORGET THE LEGAL—!

—YEPPING!

Eon is detained by some G.G., then Batbro by some female G.G., but not before they disarm him, I mean her, then Gary is detained but they just disarm him of his or her screwdriver. Then Generic Guy or kid or whatever, 'Gee-Gee All-in' said his name was, so this generic GG All-in kid gets retained by this male G.G. from the Res' generic line of Good Guards versus Bad Guards and then there's these guards that I nontrust much, I mean just one I nontrust, especially what the FUCK it's, its STUPID FUCKING GENDER WHY IS IT SO HARD TO JUST PUT A FUCKING ONE OR ZERO SO I KNOW YOU'RE A FUCKING FEMALE OR NOT WHY TF IS THAT SO HARD TO, and I apologize for that but it really sat on my mind right now when all I can think about the thing I should not think about especially in such public moments and there's so many Gees in my Beez what —?

'—Just staying nondeeeaaaaaaaaaad—!'

“—Hey, you, in my office. Now!” And now it's just me and IT, somehow, like in a NONLIT NONLIGHT episode and I'm the guy who picks the short straw and she either kills me or rapes me and kills me or both at the same time I mean if this is KEK's idea of a joke where I just get SLASHED to ribbons like in my dream then YEAH OK, I BELIEVE, OK!?!?! OK, JUST PLEASE DON'T DO THIS TO ME NOW WHEN IT'S ALL BEEN GOING SO WELL, PLEASE I BEG YOU I JUST BEG, but I apologize for that moment of nonrationality, I do understand the chances of my dream having any significance in all of this is purely coincidental.

I just follow her and she seems professional enough for and to do her job. Look, sometimes we make these stories up about people, you know. I can't do this 'Feels man' like AMA does. I mean, sure, sometimes, I watch some—

—Backdoor—!

—in some high-security system and I do get that super-duper itchy feeling I almost cry of joy but I don't 'cause I don't have time for that 'cause you gotta watch for the damn ICE—!

—would make no difference! Heh...

So, I just follow Mina and then I see the pictures of the cats on the walls, lots of pictures with cats, these people actually worship cats, what in the funhouses? There's like...

I stop because no, no Mono, no Res' is gonna stop me from admiring the shrines dedicated to Cats. Toys and car toys and all sorts of plushies, which are probably nonlegal in Mono, children playing, children praying, I watch them wondering, do these guys actually FOLLOW DUDE'S MEME?! I MEAN WTF, is Dude around here?!?

I must remember though. Master of my own—

“—I assume you've never been to Liberon before.” Mina approaches me and seems to be ok with me breaking from our 'IMPORTANT' biz, just a little break to enjoy the view. And I nontrust her or his friendliness right now, not a single bit.

“I... No, never.”

“...”

“...”

“Come, we've got plenty to talk in my office.”

And yeah, I've got a hunch what that means. And no, not THAT! We pass the giggly pilgrims to the altars of Catology or whatever it's called, Catheism. Yeah. These kids are actually comfortable with the idea of being created by Cats... L.O.L. Pffft... But what do I know?

And we pass the doors of glass on the left and then the doors of synth-wood on the right and up ahead the doors turn to metal and then some dark metal and synth-metal, doom metal, Bad metal, good metal, nonmetal, fetal position, lethal addiction, fatal attraction, no escape, no hero with a cape, no man, no WWoman, just a boy, a boy lost in the Bad Lands, not the Good Temple Lands, the Bad Lands where everything is Good but Bad but WHY?? WHY, WHY WOULD KEK ALLOW FOR SUCH WEAKNESS, the stony door, the synth-stone door, the nonlegal, nonpermitted, must non, AMA PLEASE HELP PLEASE HELP PLEASE! And the stony-woody gates of Hades in front of me I nonfind very attractive, AMA is very attractive, I love her SO MUCH I LOVE HER AND I MUST RESIST!

...

...

Mina is set in her chair behind the desk and me into mine, face to face. Tidy office. Tidy desk, tidy floors, tidy walls, tidy whitey, tightly tidy, tidy, tidy, tide, ride, no—

“—Is something bothering you?” FUCKING QUESTIONS, THAT'S WHAT'S BOTHERING —!

“—Me? Never. You?”

“Oh... always! There's always something bothering me...” ... “... But I'm not going to waste your time with my bullshit, now...” Mina suddenly takes a nonfriendlier tone. “... The reason you are here, Dem —” This is starting to sound too... déjà vuy “—you must know, of course, because you're a smart —”

“—My name is _____.” I try to sound as nON-passive-aggressive as possible.

“Ok, _____. I'm going to need you... to sign this communications log author —”

“—But I thought I already signed that —!”

“—for any **extra** media —”

“—I signed all your stupid bullcrap, why the FUCK do I have to sign all this SHI—!?”

“—HEY, LANGUAGE!” She points to a sign on the wall with a poop in a mouth crossed by a red X, I mean what the f— “There’s only one clause. Any info that you can share with us on the disappearance of...” YEAH GOOD PAUSE FOR EFFECT, BITCH YOU THINK I’M GOING TO GIVE YOU ANYTHING YOU STUPID FUCKING HOT—

“—... Am I intimidating you, Dem?”

“...”

“Look, I know you **think** you’re in some trouble—” OH, BIG, BIG TROUBLE BUT NOT THE KIND YOU’RE—
—DEM! U SCARYING!

... fine...

“... But you are not. We are investigating the disappearance of Jaques Melee —”

“—What?” ...

“Yes... He hasn’t contacted his superiors since the one-seven-seven-six took place and subsequent—”

“—But I thought he was like the Final Boss—!”

“—Yes, at this point we are considering the ‘was’ part.”

“What in the fu...?” ... Is there ANYTHING? ANY CODE? ANYTHING JAQUES TRIED TO TELL ME?

[Rec]-replaying...

What if...?

Ama?

IS?

NOT AMA? YES, YES. MAYBE... MINA?? EH??? EH... OH MY FUCK! JAQUES DIDN’T KNOW I DIDN’T KNOW WHO THE FUCK MINA IS OH SHIT OF CRAP OH—!

—CALM the FUCK down, for Krystler’s sake!

... Ok, ok... Maybe he did know. Maybe it doesn’t matter. But I must believe Jaques! BROS BEFORE CYBER-HO—!

—Easy now... easying...

“I see... No trails of Jaques?”

“Only an arm. The bio one.”

“...”

“Do you really want all the gruesome details?”

“No thanks, I haven’t eaten anything in a while and I’d like to keep the void in there.”

“...” Too deep for you, melody?

“Look, all I know is that...”

“Yes?” Bait and... mmmmmm... wait for it...

“... I would like to ask for a legal representative—”

“—Certainly, public or private?” BWAHAHAHAHA, no. No, you mean...

It actually worked this TIME?!?!? FOR REAL?

Asking... Receiving...

“Yes... I mean...” No, I don’t care but hey! “I like the public, yeah. Preferably with hair on top, I nontrust baldy people!”

“...”

“I’m serious!” In case you DIDN’T NOTICE, MINA DOES HAVE HAIR ON HER—!

“—Ok... I gotta say Dem—”

“—_____—”

“—...”

“...”

“Why don’t you like the name ‘Dem’?”

“Yes, about that legal rep—”

“—He’ll be here in a minute—”

“—But I asked for a SHE—!”

“—Listen here, mister—”

—And with those tidy, tidy words the tidy, tidy desk of her tidy, tidy room closes up in a tidy fashion and all the millions of tidy holes I didn’t notice in those tidy grey, synthetic corners of the walls, well, I say ‘corners’ —
—Resurrected!

They all close up but NOO, no déjà vu here. I mean, sure, she’s cutting off comms’ to Res’ now, BUT, NOPE. NO buttons, NO remotes, NO nothing, she just CLOSED them with magic cause THAT’S the favorite style of those FUCKING MONOS, TRUCKERFUCKING SMOKING, DRINKING, JACK-IN, AMA, JACKING, AMA, LOVE, JACKING, LUST, JACKING, HATE, JACKING, NONHATE, JACKING HATE, JACKING NONHATE —?

“—I nonhave time for any bullshit so if you’ll please give me any info you have on Jaques nonappearance or NON??! ...—”

“—...”

“...”

“...”

“...”

“... Nope. I got nothing!” And I rest my case and my ammo case and casings and shells and bells and whistles, I did it! I’M THE MASTER AND YOU’RE THE SLAVE NOW, BII —!
—Remastering... heh... heh...

Payback tastes... mmmm, sweeeeeeeeet!

And Mina gets pissed at all the opportunities she missed
Oh, you wanted to be kissed? Well, tough luck, miss!
Or whatever you are, I noncare, I nonmind
I ain’t that kind even if sometimes I’m blind...

But not this time, beeeeeeeee—!

—Itching and scratching and bitching and fusing, defusing then re-fusing

You can keep all that shit! I’ve had enough of it! You-ugly-stupid-fucking-piece-of—!

—Hey! Hey! Let’s not...

... FINE! Fining...

I’m refining, redefining, adjusting and realigning

I’m arranging, combining, re-combining and non combining

Only AMA is my muse, my beetle, my juice, my eyes never see lies in her eyes even when they hide
Til death take us apart, here or in other parts of this fucking world it’s just her I just...

Come on, stay with me on this.

I ain’t no priss, no preacher, no teacher, I just diss. I don’ hiss like a creature of some Hadesian abyss.
I’m just a hacker, a cracker, a tracker, a backer, a slacker, a stacker, a smacker, attacker, AMA fucker yeah
whatever.

You’re on fire!

Appreciating but nonthanking, just KEK thanking they didn’t even take my gun, wtf...?

... Shaun was right.

The Res' is goin' down the Hypertubes.

And the rep' comes all prepped and erect and correct and I elected him this is holy fuck, this is real!

And he gives me some babble, some shebabble, legababble, whatever dude, I know nothing!

And I'm free and I'm out and I dance like a trout with his snout up his mouth, Mina you bitch!

I'm gonna get you for this... You killed him...

NON!

KEK ALL KRYSTEY!

But what if?

Yeah, oh dear ONO, look! MAYBE, JUST MAYBE... Jaques escaped. I mean Jaques Melees? Come on. Those ARMS man, those ARMS—

—Your point being?

I'm sure he'll be fine without an arm. I mean, come on! He can probably do this 'no arms', eh?? Eh??? He's... 'on his own' now. And we are on our own now too. And remember... we *loo-key* but no touchy, ok!?

OK! Ok...

I mean think about it! Why would she search for him if he's dead? Just to deceive us? I mean she... But no, can't trust anything coming out of that cyber-serpent's... Whatever! And that's proof enough for me that Jaques is still alive. Ain't no bitch gonna beat up Jaques, come on!

Excepting AMA!

Of course, of course... I mean, no! I mean, whatever!

And that's it and we're out and we're back and we're fine, kids are here, two-by-two, oh it feels like cashmere in my ear from the lyre of my KEK, we're actually free! Well, it depends... On what the kids said. I trust Eön and All-in, and Batbro of course but... Gary... It's not that I nontrust, I just have a... feeling.

But I nonget to ponder much when a Goon of a G.G. or Gorilla S.G.M.V.P. whatever announces to me that "Lieutenant Mina requests a second council, _____. It's voluntary, surr—"

"—Ooooooooooh!" And all the kids are like oooooh and me too and hehe, she's up for round two? I mean roasting her once wasn't enough, she wanna get burned too??? Second dish, third dish, infinite dish, like Madame B.'s... Poor woman, poor ladies, I'm so sorry ladies I made fun of that, it was stupid of me I'm a stupid fucking idiot, I admit!

Anyway, I refuse, thinking forever about my only, single, nondigital muse. I love her so much and this bitch can go suck some dirty, old, maggot-infested tree-stump for all I care. So, the G.G. departs. And the kids are entranced. And we hear the singing, the jolly singing of the other kids come on KIDS, come on, let's see what this fuss is all about, eh? And we try to sing, something about ying and yang and some ping and pang and pong and dongles and dingles and shackles and brittles and, and mews and meows and spaceships made of sand and there's even a holodeck, well, I say 'holo-deck'. And has colours like candy, the spaceship quite dandy... A pyramid, of sorts. What in the freaking Kryst are they talking about?

The preacher... Who is ah... Ahem... OK, although he DOES look a tiny, tiny bit like FoxCatGloves or whatever, he...I mean come on; he's got BLOWARE? I mean... come on, that's HOLY! I mean, I say 'he' and I don't care what HE says.

He continues the explanation “Yes... yes... Now you have to understand... These Ancient Cats were probably ten feet tall or MORE!” The kids are all eyes in their ears, knees in their mouths and some of them, I think they dropped them under that— “And when they got in groups of two, their purring resonated. And if they got four more together, their purring resonated even MORE!” The kids are like *woah* and ‘get real, old man’ and I’m just fascinated by the discussion it emerges. Because the kids, like the cheeky, little, curious cats that they are, start asking questions.

“Where do they come from?”

“Of that we are not too sure but some feline sources indicate a constellation called... Mm, does anyone know?”

“The... uhh... Meelk...” One kid who I.M.H.O. has too many cybers and also... Monojack...? Hmmm...

“Yes, yes?”

The kid tries again “The... Milky Way.”

“Hehehehehe!” And all the kids and the preacher and everyone else are amused by this silly little joke and come on, I mean you can’t really not be!

“Yes... Because you see kids, we don’t really know if it is true... But, if it gives us hope... why not, eh? Each of you is free to come up with their own study of catstronomy by the end of the month and don’t forget your assignments on catheology, arcatheology, cathropology, memeology, that’s Fryday, remember?”

“Yees...”

“Oh, man, sign me up!” I’m all excited to learn me some memes.

Preacher responds “Sure, right here on this holy-deck you may acquire a monthly subscription—”

—Hey now wait a holy second there, mate! Pepe’s temple or whatever didn’t ask for any of this! What in the fuds splonkers is shuddening in here, eh, pal? Chum?? Eh???

I’m like “...”

Fox like “^.^”

The skull of some lizard kid in the back row turns really, really slowly and creepily and he looks at me as if he’s ready to snatch the BIG NOTHING I have right now.

“Nevermind, I’m... We had a long ride... Yeah, we fought mutants!”

“*PBBBBBBBBFFFTTPPTF*!” And the kids of course nonbelieve ‘cause they’ve probably NEVER seen and it’s easy to NONBELIEVE even when you SEE because you can just FOOL yourself with all that self and then you become nonself, just a shell of a shotgun of a... I want to believe but I... I need to believe...

But never mind ‘cause Eòn is definitely not blind. He comes to the rescue “Yes we did, ye fools!”

“There were about a hundred or so in the first wave.” Pretty accurate observation from All-in.

“And some of them had lasers!” Well, yes Bat, bro! But only on OUR side.

“And metalheads!” Oooh, Gary now... That really got the attention of the furry kids, well, I say ‘furry’.

One of the biggest nonbelievers in the multiplexverse comes up with the STUPIDEST — “—No one comes back alive from an encounter with metalheads.” His voice sounds a bit too... C.G.

“What do ye know, metal-brain?” Eòn, come on, don’t do that!

“...” The kids nonrespond. I mean both sides... Hmmm...

“We DID do it and... we lost on our side too...” Gary says it with the most painful de-heartening I have suffered in my whole life.

“...” The kids nonrespond but something changed. Maybe they don’t believe IT! But they sure... feel it.

“Let’s go, these guys can’t understand.” Eòn is decided. All-in, not so much but I can’t read his face that well anyway.

“Look, we only need a couple of creds...” Batbro tries to bargain but with what? Just cause it’s ‘a couple’ doesn’t mean it’s NOT—!

“—...”

“I’ll pay for you!” The rotating-head-lizard-whatever is still looking at me as if he wants to eat all of my innards like AMA did to that nonrich fish! Well, I say ‘nonrich’, at least it was dead beforehand.

“I can do it too!” Another kid and another and they all start to sing but the cat boss shushes them gently and calms them aplenty and says “Look, I’M top modder so I think I should —”

“—BWAHAHAHA, FOR REAL!?” I laugh so heartily not for some hidden thought or hidden... cheeky. Just because, come on! They were only doing this for fun. Not for “MONEY!” Heh... Cute, very cute. These kids are way smarter, way, way smarter than I thought. Sure, they got their... chinks in their cyberlinks but... Hey, I’d say they’re pretty COOL in my tele-whatever-module! “LET THE MONEY FLOOOOOOW!”

And the kids, they are back and they stack and they rack millions and billions and trillions, hey you wanna see how much is a quadrillion centillion billion trillion bajillion monies? Here, just type it in this console, BAM! The kids are learning the coding and recoding and combining, recombining and combing, debugging and re-bugging and those cheeky little buggies, eh? Hehehehe... Ooh mY DEAR FUK! The... cab driver. I TUTALLY FURGUT ABUOT THE FOCKING—!

—...—

—Uhm... the preacher... I think he nonapproves.

Oh...

“Sorry, sorry!” I—...—back out and back off and lay off, I completely lost my mind and just snatched the damn deck out of his hands and jacked-in, what the wrong is fuck with me?

Addictions rising...

Conflictions...

“It’s... ok, just... Please...” The preacher... some pain... some anger... some frustration... hmmm... hmm... “... All together now, kids!”

“No jacking-in during sermon, fine!” The kids seem nonpleased but nonangered, just stoic and dealing with I.T.

“Fine... Fine!!” Trying to keep up with the times and the memes here. “Look, mister... uhm...”

“Fox.”

“Like, your real name?”

“Yeah.”

“Ok...”

“Yours?”

“I’m...” Heh... “I’m... I’m Don Monty, you got me, please don’t arrest me, oh em gee!” And I do the most faux surprise and these children are full of surprises, they know all the memes, everything about the genes, the Gene Beasties, the Genie Sims, the Gender Wars of Syndy Kates, whatever the fud that is. And we laugh so much my sides hurt and I have to get out of here before I get some damn heart attack! But I... I ask Fox if he can accompany me. I ask him through signs of my hands if there’s links in his head and he says:

“Of course!” And LUCKILY for me, it’s just a mask and ear-muffins and that bioware on his arms looks fake, now I see what’s going on you sneaky-tricky—!

—Fox just throws them in a bin and everything looks clean and I already trust him even more, I think he's the only guy I trust around here, well, except for...

"Look, Fox, is there any place...? Look, I know this is going to sound really, really weird, BUT..."

"..." Fox is all ears for years already, nonrich thing, but I'm too dumb for this crap.

"Look, we don't have to go some 'place' secret or something, just—"

"—My oh, my! Are you really that desperate—?"

"—NOT in a romantic sense of kind but—"

"—You mean 'kind of sense'—?"

"—Look, man! If you understood what I said, why the fuck does you still correct me?"

"..."

"Sorry, sorry, I'm just millions of feet away in all directions, it's this DAMN need for sleeeee —!"

"—Please, look..." He points to the poopy-mouth sign, ok, and then... "I'm sorry I corrected you; I'm surrounded by kids all the time and it's easy to forget I sometimes... have to deal with the adults too."

"Ok no problem, just..." Silence. Three kinds of silences and/or silencers I haven't observed with or on anyone else before. He's got something else. He's three kinds, like me, I think. Well, Gary seemed to have it. AMA certainly has it... Most people I met in the underworld seemed OK! Don't remember if anyone... That cab driver CERTAINLY didn't have it... He had NOTHING probably...

Chilling...

Thrilling...

"Look, I just need to CHECK a single—!"

"—Why?"

"Why!? Because... I have to."

"... Not an argument."

"Will you spare me your hyper-spacial, cranial, cretinian—?"

"—Hey, HEY!" And here I thought I was being witty.

"... LOOK, MAN!" And I grab him by the shoulders but even THIS guy has bigger muscles than me "I WANT TO... I need to believe!"

"..."

"^ _ ^"

"Fine! Fine..." And he leads me to a secret cupboard inside a secret door, but not before we entered some vents, well that was after we, well, look, I tried, but this guy is... Crazy! What sort of secret place is...? Decks and consoles and whatever you want man, just jack-in and he's monitorin' some feedin' from the... Mina's office?

"Well, fancy that!"

"I've been on her tail for a month."

"Oh, really?"

"Yeah, I... I didn't trust that BITCH since I first laid my ears on it!"

"Shadeelay, bro!"

"And take a look at what SHE's got in her 'cupboards'."

He scrolls through all the data, no need to confirm much cause it's clear, Mina's been doing a lot of sneaking around. I mean, yeah sure, the footage heavily blurs when she comes in the frames, must be some sneaky-tricky-Mono-dicky-magicky bullcrappy thingy. It's her all right... I don't need it 'uncensored'.

Heheheh...

But what really pops my balls is when... Fox ALSO shows me one of Mina's hidden pockets... Digital pockets... And plays the clip that's supposed to be just in my FUCKING HEAD WTF IS THIS BULLSHHH —!

“—...”

“Yep, it's that bad.”

No, I mean, it's NOT the fact that Fox is seeing this. It's obvious on who's side FOX is... But MINA! HOW THE FUCK DID THEY GET THE REC FROM THE TRIPLE-END-ENCRYPTED DECK IN MY FUCKING HEAD I DON'T GET WHAT THE FUCK—!

—I MEAN THIS IS THE FINAL STRAW I'VE HAD IT WITH THESE SPLEENKY SPLONKY SPLOONKY WATCHERS
THEY ALWAYS GOTTA SEE—!

—SSHHHH!

It's my fault, of course. I should've NEVER ... Hey, wait a minute... I mean, come on. Jaques is the smartest guy in the infiniverse. If Batbro could tell I'm [REC]-ing... We need to fix that... Yeah, otherwise HOW could I have understood? My memories are splonker than chumfuds. Jaques, a true believer of NON, he knew he couldn't be sure we're not tapped. He needed a cover. A blanket of sorts. All fires burnt up at his ends and his charms couldn't help him with Mina. She ain't... rational!

Triple agreeing...

Father... Father could help us, I'm sure of it. Hey, maybe Fox can...

“Fox, this may sound weird but—”

“—Oh, it's fine here, we're totally—”

“—Look, man! I'm... Forgive me, but I've had some rough days, man and... Too many jokes... I had to think of too many jokes so I didn't have to think about the... The horror... And I'm kinda tired right now, but tomorrow...!” Ah, what's the use, tomorrow I'll probably be burnt like a steak “... Tomorrow, jokes on me, eh?”

You're a joke ADDICT too!

Fox is nonamused but for the good reasons. I lay back and just... confess...

“Look man, it's like... I MISS my bird so much and it's only been—”

“—Don't worry about her, she's fine.”

“How in the Hades do you know about—?”

“—Old friends. Neo-old friends let's say.”

“...”

“Look, man, if you need your cock sucked—”

“—GEEZ, OH, WHAT THE FUCK MAN—!” I thought he was reaching for my pinball machine but FORTUNATELY for us he's just going for the pulling of the biggest, baddest, synthar I've ever seen, HALF-WOMAN just like the fucking— “—Duuude, a Yamahack model—”

“—This ain't no Yama rip-off bullshi—!”

“—Teach me, meister!”

And we sing and we dance and we strum and bromance in the tightly packed room, right in front of Miss Doom's “Miss 'I'm so important that nothing's important but meeeeeee'!”

“With your shins and your bins—”

“—And your silly, old tins—”

“—Monotones, mono-bones, mono...”

“Eh...”

“What’s wrong...?”

“I’m just... It’s hard for me to make fun of it, man! My liberty’s at stake here!”

“...”

“...”

“... So what?”

“... What so?”

“Hats off!”

“Bwahaheehhee—!”

—.....—OUCH—

“—OUCH, OUCH! WHAT THE FUCK ARE YOU DOING YOU STUPID, FUCKING —!”

“—SORRY, sorry...!”

“...”

“Sorry, I had a... bad dream.”

“...”

“Sorry...”

“Well, it really proves you’re a little faggeeeet inside, I knew it, BWAHEEHHEE —!”

“—...—”

—.....

[4:20] AM... I woke up way earlier. I know it’s bad for you, but... I just couldn’t sleep. I have a bad feeling. Bad feelings. Stinking, bad feelings. Fox is cool though, I mean we camped here in this tiny, STUPID room but eh... A foxhole is better than no hole, eh??? EH???

...

...

Not like I would ever do that with him, or anyone else that does not meet the criteria. I mean, the criteria, the retort, the supreme unit of measure is AMA. There’s plenty better than AMA and plenty worse than AMA. But there’s NON like AMA. See, it’s logical! And to THINK I actually... thought of... that... with... IT. IT’S IT! OK? I’m sure of IT now!

But how? I mean...

... I know... It’s hard to believe, it’s way harder for me to believe even. It makes no SENSE! But... if it helps... it helps...

So, you’ll think like that about every girl you feel attracted to?

... My heart says yes... But my bollocks... It’s all bollocks anyway—!

—Let’s not jump to con—

—trary to popular belief—

—What IS belief?

...

...

I mean... What if?

...

Begone thee, spawn of... What in the devil’s ass are these idiots doing!?

I check the feed two times just to make sure at least three times that: Eòn, All-in, Gary and Batbro are sneaking through the sewer system. Interesting...

[[‘Calling ‘GaryMary’ ... line unplugged.’]]
[[‘Calling ‘BatbroMary’ ... line unplugged.’]]
[[‘Searching for ‘*Eon*’, two million results—’]]
[[‘—Searching for ‘*All-in*’, twenty-four thousand—’]]
[‘—Searching F-I.D. Book ‘*GaryMary*’ five million—’]
[‘—Ditto ‘*BatbroMary*’ four results— ’]
—Some progress, finally! Let’s see, contacts, hmmm... Bingo!
[[‘Callin’ ‘AlinPee69420FK.I.T.’ ... linking... linking... link-up—’]]
[[“—Guess who?”]]
[[“Che poolah me’ah?! Deh oon-deh poolah me’ah eye noohmarrool uh’stah, peezdah muh tee—?”]]
[[“—What the fuck is that lang dude, are you a liz—?”]]
[[“—Ssoh foot peh muh ta un peezdah, footoots—”]]
[[“—Ground command to Major—’!”]]
[[“—Mortzeeh muh tee she rahNEETzee muh tee—!”]]
[[“—Take your pills and put your helmet—”]]
[[“—Ten GOORAH aya de bow yesht mah, dah pro’st—”]]
[[“—Fan of Bow, eh—?”]]
[[‘—Link dropped...’]]

Well then, they’re on their own it seems. Lemme guess, bad feeling? I feel ya. Alin sounded actually quite pissed so I’ll leave them to their biz. Mina sleeps like a cyber-she-devil from the lowest, deepest, darkest, bowels of Hadesville and I hope she stays there FOREVER! Hey, wait a minute, how did...? Fox is a sly one. He’s definitely the ‘H3r0’ but he doesn’t have to say it to believe it. I believe him. I mean, he’s tapped into Mina’s brainchain! Whatever that is. And it’s... eh... the She-devil ain’t sleeping, eh? Let’s listen in.

[“... And the others?”]
[[“... I will send a patrol.”]]
[[[“They will lead us.”]]]
[[[[“Just make sure he does non leave.”]]]]
[[[[[“You mean she?”]]]]]
[[[[[[“Yes.”]]]]]]
[[[[[[[“*deleted*”]]]]]]]]

... WHAT IN THE FUCK’S—?

[“—EL”]
[[“OH”]]
[[[“EM”]]]
[[[[“OH”]]]]
[[[[[“SEE”]]]]]
[[[[[[“PLUS”]]]]]]
[[[[[[[“*deleted*”]]]]]]]]

...

I guess this proves it once and for all.

Bitch is NONSANE—!

["—Listening?"]
[["Yes."]]
[[["Nongood."]]]
[[[["Good."]]]]
[[[[["Nongood."]]]]]
[[[[[["Good."]]]]]]
[[[[[[["*deleted*"]]]]]]]

... No, if this is what's inside that skull, it makes total sense now. Her mind is slit like a literal banana split. And I spit at the nonsensical nature of this nonnatural creature of Hadesian origins, I am... El OH Em Oh See? Do you see it you stupid, fucking—?

—Yeah, yeah...

All seeing...

My feeling is confirmed. I nonunderstand and I don't need to understand how it works. As long as I know for whom she works for... Or he or it or whatever the fuck these stupid, fucking—

—...

... It nonmatters for now. All that matters is that this morning passes faster over the woods and the forests and the beautiful, beautiful planes of this beautiful, beautiful Have-an... Have I? Have we? Can we? Wait, what is this on the senti-feeds...? The... they sure sound like Nomos and... IS THAT WHAT A FUCKING METALHEAD LOOKS LIKE!?!?!

Oh, dear... And I thought Magan was exaggeratin'.

"Fox, Fox... FOX—!"
"—The fuck you screaming about, you stupid, fucking—?"
"—Sorry, sorry! But, look!"
"—What in the assballs is this shitfuck?"
"—Metalheads! I mean No Mos. I mean—"
"—I know that! Why the fuck isn't the signal being picked up in the FUCKING Sec' Streams—?!?!"
"—What. The. FUCK ARE YOU TALKING—?!?"
"—I'M GONNA KILL THAT BITCH—!"
"—CALM DOWN—!"
"—THESE TWO PAWS—!"
"—THE—FUK—DWN—!"
"—STUPID, SYNDROME-RIDDLED WHORE—!"
"—Sshhhhhh—"
"—HATE HER, I HATE HER—!"
"—Sshhhhhh..."
"—I hate her..."
"—Me too, me too..."

Fox is very, very obviously, really, mega, super, triple plus pissed like I never thought it was possible to come out of him. Like a sort of... darkness. Like we all have, right? Heh... Yeah, he really hates Mina. And I

totally agree. She certainly has a hand in this but right now... There's no time. He calms a bit and I hug a bit more and then...

Fox, on command, turns all serious biz and wiz and says "I have to go!"

"Where?"

"The city needs me."

"But, but... The kids, they..."

"What did those stupid, fucking—?"

"—Just look!"

The kids have just exited the sewers and are heading through the forest right in the direction of the Nomos. I mean the left, I mean... It's a relative direction. The Nomos still have much ground to cover but they seem to be covering it pretty fast. The lights of the holy-decks and holy-cons and tridi-icons and all the electronics and gadgetz and bamboozles dance brightly as if it's Twenty Ninety Nine's ass shaking and twerking and tweeting all over Fox's face, his face amazed, amused, confused, re-amused, defused, nonamused, horrified, petrified, oh my—

"—We need to move now!"

We exit through the drawer, then the door, then the gate, then the vent then the barrel then we quarrel, then he's singing a carol, like for real? This is not the time to—

"—Here!" And we pull up in a colourful tube which leads us to a mini-hypertube and it launches us to a platform and there's all these G.G. guys in uniform getting ready for some action! All the reactions, calculated, manipulated with great precision, every decision taken in unison, like there's no time to waste, no time to deviate from our ultimate fate of saving the children! OH, MY KEK! THE CHILDREN, I panic but there's no time to panic so I don't react, I just act and must do this pact, for the children, for those splonky little faces and amazing minds and all that bling. We step in this a great shuttle, a bit crowded but there's no rebuttal. And we launch and we go, through the mount, how they do, I don't know, I don't care, I don't mind, I just need to be kind. The pro-ton-neu-tron-mega-tron-weapons are ready with their shiny-whitey-holy-deadly-pointy heads ready to blow some STUPID heads those STUPID FUCKING—

—Look, man, you're not very 'kind' on at that last part.

... Fine!

We all sit one-by-one next to each other. I look at the G.G. in front of me and I see... nah. He is fearless. I on the other hand probably look like I've splonked two pairs of pants by now. I mean... Have these guys ever fought Nomos before...? They have the uniforms, but I have yet to notice two uniforms that look exactly the same. All bells and whistles and multi-coloured missiles, I have this feeling... So, I have to ask.

"*magnets*, have you *magnets*—?"

"—Can't *magnets*—"

"—*Magnets* you say—?"

"—HEAR*mag-nets*!"

"Magnets? *MAG-nets*—"

"—YES! *Magnets*"

The churning of the burning of the electrons of the magnets are disrupting our conversating. So, we link-up.

[[‘Linking... ‘Fox’... link-up—’]]
[[“—For real, it’s just Fox?”]]
[[“You STUPID kids! I told you to stop calling me you stupid-fuck—!”]]
[[‘—Link-up dropped.’]]

That definitely wasn’t the real Fox. Ooooooh, it’s with a zero!

[[‘Linking... ‘FOx’... link-up—’]]
[[“—There’s a chink in your—”]]
[[“—Ha, ha, you think so funny mistel ha-ha, you mutt, you stu—”]]
[[‘—Linking dropped.’]]

Sounded... Mandarinish... Like a well-cooked dish. Still, not the real Fox. Maybe all caps?

[[‘Linking... ‘FOX’... link-up—’]]
[[“—Caps is not cruise for—”]]
[[“—Bo no ko bo no bo chee KA-MMM CHUK—!”]]

—Sounded... tribal... Maybe it’s a plus!

[[‘Linking ‘FO+’... link-up—’]]
[FO+: [“—You need any help with that telelink?”]] Finally!!
[_____: [“Nah, you need any help with your drawing? Your writing’s all over the place.”]]
[[“Always! Here’s link to chat.”] ‘//gsvggmgvwrpghmmgpvcmfpgg.cg’] A chatroom, eh? I usually don’t do this. I prefer... one-on-one convos. More or less.

[SYMSMSG: [‘_____ has joined the catroom’]]
[005_GGRR: [“—That was last year, but this year it is going to be even BETTER—”]] [026_RGRGZ: [‘lul’]]
[092_RRG1: [‘Check this one out! <img234.gg>’]] [068_R1GGZ: [‘oWo’]] [293_JEEG01: [‘No wai! No wai! :O’]] [949_NTHR_GG: [‘@494 Yes, but no, I mean, yeah, sure, but not always.’]] [FO+: [‘No, man, if you look here... <dotxdotnotx.fe>’]] [001_GGMVP: [‘@999 You weren’t there, man...’]] [123_ALLGGS: [‘got VP on P.O.P. asap R2.M in the MN-o_’]] [FO+: [‘And here <filedotxdot.xf>’]] [555_GGMT: [‘gg mate!’]] [FO+: [‘But not here <notynot.fx>’]] [005_GGRR: [“—cause we’re getting them HOLY grenades for Catmas!”]] [005_GGRR: [‘@984 Just type *catpulse_101* in console’]] [385_GGBRB: [‘Gotta check the rotorps, brb’]] [218_NOGGS: [‘GL!’]] [058_GGKJT: [‘@385 S@B!’]] [065_GGKJT: [‘@385 S@B!’]] [062_GGKJT: [‘@385 Sand be on your back!’]]
[SYMSMSG: [‘_____ has left the catroom’]]

And I immediately remember why. Well, their carefree nature gives me hope.

[FO+: [“Not a fan of mass discussions?”]]
[_____: [“Yeah, too many mass disruptions.”]]
[[“I feel ya. But not in that way.”]]

[[“Except last night!”]]

[[“I TOLD you man! I had a bad dream. I’m sorry, ok? You know I wouldn’t do that!”]]

[[“I feel ya... I get those too, but it’s not those in my sleep that bother me anymore...”]]

[[“What kind of dreams?”]]

[[“Well... You know... Some anomaly appears in front of you. You know it’s a cyber-devil because the closer you get, the clearer and clearer the image becomes. And you know it’s bad for you. But you also know it’s good for you. And that’s when the split happens. Good? Bad! Bad? Good! My brain goes wild. And I... I’ve been strong and stayed my ground and kept my lips pursed and my hands behind my back and my purses in my pockets and my pockets in my trousers and my trousers in the closet and —”]]

[[“—You’re stuck on a loo—”]]

[[“—Yeah, something like that. But I... I need to believe I can always do that... That I can always resist, regardless of the temptations. But... sometimes I do not trust my... nature. Or my natures.”]]

[[“None of us can really. Everyone has a side of ‘holy’ and a side of ‘nature’ and some of us have such wild ‘natures’ that we wear hats with ears of a cat or ox-fox-rat-bat-fat-dat-lizard-wizard-gizzard-blizzard—”]]

[[“—You’re stuck on a loo—”]]

[[“—Sorry—”]]

[[“—No, I mean you actually stepped I.R.L. in a—”]]

[[“—Oh, thanks!”]]

[[“... Does KEK have a dark nature?”]]

[[“Well... In my humblest of opinions... Look, do you know what KEK meant originally? As an acronym?”]]

[[“I don’t think so.”]]

[[“It meant ‘laughter.’”]]

[[“... How is that an acro—?!”]]

[[“—Come on, stay with me on—”]]

[[“—Fine, fine!”]]

[[“And this is only theoretical, but if KEK created everything then KEK created... the dark side too, right? And because there is some ‘laughter’ in all of us, even in those who... refuse to admit it sometimes... And because there is some ‘darkness’ in all of us... even in those who... refuse to admit it sometimes... Then there must be some dark side to KEK too, right?”]]

[[“Hey... Yeah, yeah... That makes sense... OH, YEAAAAAA—!!!”]]

[[“—BUT! But... He reserves that dark side only for special occasions.”]]

[[“... ”]]

[[“... ”]]

[[“... What the—?”]]

[[“—Look, man! I know you have a sick, stupid, fucking, perverted mind that comes up with all these stupid, fucking—”]]

[[“—OK, man, sorry, sorry! I wasn’t thinking about that, it’s just that... Please don’t be vague with me. Please don’t do this patronizing bullshit everyone seems to do with me. I’m really sick of being... handled with kid decks, if you know what I mean.”]]

[[“Ok, ok... I guess you’re old enough to understand... Look, these kids... I know you think they live in some cyber-nightmare and that everything is fake around—”]]

[[“—How do you know that about—?”]]

[[“—I mean, at this point if you’re still doubting you must be really, really fucking stu—!”]] He is the ‘H3r0’ I need, it’s confirmed... But he is the ‘H3r0’ I don’t deserve...

[[“—You’re right, I really am stu—”]]

[[—And that’s fine, I mean... The plan that KEK has for each of us is not obvious... I mean NO one can REALLY tell you what KEK’s plan is for you, NOBODY! Because nobody really knows for sure. But... I think there are some of us who have reached a better understanding than others. And it’s worth at least to... listen to our opinion. Even if you don’t believe in the whole shebabbles. And you don’t have to, I mean all shebabbles are there just for the babbling, right? It’s not the story that counts, it’s the essence...]]

[[“Oh, I see...”]]

[[“So, to finish my ‘dark side’ argument... KEK’s dark side is reserved for one and ONLY one purpose. To save the children. Just as we are doing right now.”]]

[[“Yeah, about that, I was about to ask why it’s taking so long to—”]]

—But I barely look over the edge of the shuttle and almost trip and fall like WTF! For how long have these guys been battling the NOMO fucks!? The Nomos are shooting from all directions, hundreds of rockets, of missiles, of plasma bolts, plasma balls, plasma red balls I don’t even know wtf technology is that shit but it doesn’t matter because the G.G.s are just neutralizing all the shit these NOMOS are flinging at us. The kids are being defended by some troops on the ground, under some massive bluey-thingy shield. These Nomos are really fucking dumb I must say. I mean wtf, we’re basically surrounded by FUCKING NOMOS but the drones, the sentinels, the senti-bees, the senti-mines, the centi-drones, the cyber-cents, millions and millions and millions of drones like insects of metal and wires and copper and wings and rings and...

[[“What in the fucking Kryst’s—?”]]

[[“—Hey, hey—!”]]

[[“—Sorry, sorry—!”]]

[[“—There’s no place for ‘Kryst’ in Cateism.”]] Oh, really???

[[“Why not?”]]

[[“Because we already got thirty million other names of worship in our damn DBs!”]]

[[“Sounds reasonable enough to me.”]]

[[“Thank you!”]]

And the neurons and neutrons and jammed protons and rotors and motors and all that shit with which I was just hit just hit like a brick in my face, in my head, in my heart, in my nose, in my eyes, in my ears in my mouth in my wtf is all this—?

“—*Magn—*nobo*—ts* incom’*Mag-nets* out now!”

“What’s a *Mag—nets*?”

But there’s no time to ask anyone ‘cause they all bailed out. Like literally took their hoverboards and jumped out of the hovershuttle. And OF COURSE, nobody told me about any hoverboard or maybe they told me and I was DUMB enough NOT to pay attention and now I’m left here, thinking in slo-mo: What is a nano-bomb? And then... I SEE it. I see the SIGN! The plus sign with the longer, lower foot. It’s on their backs, all of these G.G.s are carrying the same logo on their backs. It’s the only nonunique sign on their bodies which links all of them in a single creed. They all carry it proudly and I never heard them complain ONCE since I’ve been here. In the Mono, there was always some complaining about something, always ALWAYS some problem, some little shit that no one wanted to take care of because ‘it’s NOT in my skillz-sheet’. Yeah, so what? Can’t you LEARN something for once, you stupid, fucking... Eh, forget about that. What really HITS me is what I notice AFTER this little bit of wisdom decided to link in some hidden, nonforsaken corner of my mind: the sign

on the backs of the NOMOs. It is also the plus sign. It does look like the Catheist/Pepeist/Krystist whatever sign. But... it's INVERTED. It's totally rotated one hundred and eighty degrees. The opposing corner. And it links, it links in my mind just at that point. They live on the OPPOSITE pole of the KEK beliefs system. They both RESIST. The G.G.s RESIST for the CHILDREN! But the NOMOS? What do their resist for? They resist for NON. For nothing. They believe in nothing. Even if it's FALSE that NOTHING IS TRUE, they still believe it the STUPID, FUCKING IDIOTS! So yeah, these G.G.s aren't even shooting them down like I imagined Shaun doing. I mean Shaun certainly did that, I... We heard it... We felt it... But NO, these guys are just neutralizing their guns and bombs and all that stupid shit they probably stole from someone because I'm CERTAIN for one thousand percent that these STUPID, FUCKING IDIOTS couldn't have come up with such technology. Let's get real here.

And then I see it and FINALLY understand what they meant by a nano-bomb. I wish I didn't know. I wish I never had. But I see it, slowly and slowly and very slowly, the round grey corners, the red painted tip gets closer and bigger. Destination: my location in the sky. Cool. I guess there's only one thing to —

—...
...
...
...
...
....._.....^.....^.....^.....^.....

... Pain. Physical pain. All I see is black in front of my eyes. But the pain is not like the one I'm used to feel. This one is deep, in overdrive. It's numbingly painful, I cannot feel it really but I know it's there. Slowly, my vision turns from black to grey to... A disembodied leg. It's a synth-leg but... I mean, someone still needed it. It's not the chrome that matters, it's how you use it. Those children... They probably have no choice. Most of them looked like they couldn't function without them. But that's not what saddens me the most, it's the kids... Batbro, Gary, Eòn and GG... They're behind the shield but... The Nomos are approaching them and I must —

“—...NOoo... NOOO...!” I CAN BARELY MOVE COME ON I NEED TO—
“—No chak oh?”
“Bo!”

And one of the FUCKING STUPID IDIOTS GRABS ME AND CARRIES ME, FUCK YOU but no... What pains me the most... MORE than the physical pain, INFINITELY more than the superior pain is... These Nomos, they're trying to... They're trying to STRIP them away from their clothes. The horror I feel... The horror... NO CHILD SHOULD GO THROUGH THAT I MEAN WTF EVEN THE BOYS THEY WANT TO RAPE?!? WTF THEY ARE FUCKING, STUPID IDIOTS TO THE MARROW OF THEIR FUCKING STUPID BONES! I HATE THEM, I HATE THEM SO MUCH I WANT TO FUCKING RIP THEIR SKULLS OUT BUT I CAN'T CAUSE I'M A PIECE OF SHIT SKINNY-ASS-BITCH-FUCK—!

RED-BLACK-RED-BLACK-RED-BLACK-RED-BLACK-RED-RED-BLACK-RED-RED-RED-RED-RED-RED-BLACK-BLACK-RED-RED-BLACK-RED-RED-RED-BLACK-RED-BLACK-RED-BLACK-RED-BLACK-BLACK-BLACK-BLACK-BLACK!

...

...

...

... Is it over?

We may open our eyes now.

I am on my knees. Blood is dripping from my hands. Blood on my arms, on my legs and I’m not sure if it’s... my blood. No more Nomos. Well, I mean they are spread around, all sliced up and dead and I’m fine with that. The kids, they are... horrified still. They look at me from behind the shield, well, I’m on the other side now but... They approach slowly... They... look at me. They look even more and then GG opens his mouth but closes it back. Eòn does the same but he doesn’t close it back. Gary drops the rock he was holding in his hand and it rolls a bit towards me. And Batbro... is just horrified.

Then GG opens his mouth again and starts spewing some—

“—Dah poy tzam spoos mah ka uh'stah yeh sahtanah! *Ptui*, drahe, che poolah me’ah—?”

Eòn intervenes “—Buh, yesht pro’st mah? Coom poolah me’ah...?” But his words trail off in the dimension next to the nearest extra-dimension of our existence.

Gary and Batbro... still the same.

“What... What... happened?” I ask.

“...Your ... your eyes don’t glow red anymore...” Batbro is now less horrified and more conversational but that bit of info only adds another question to my stack.

“I don’t... understand...”

“Your claws have retreated.” Gary seems to have recovered much, much faster than Batbro but just adds another Q to the stack.

“Claws? What claw—?”

“—La poe'saedatt drawku mei... yeh klarr!” GG Alin probably made an accurate observation of sorts but I can’t for the life of me understand from what dimension of existence this lang comes from.

“Can someone translate his fascinating tongue, please?”

“He says you’re the devil.” Batbro only adds another Q but confirms that Alin still has much to learn.

“Like a metalhead?”

“No!”

“You mean the actual devil? With the horns and the *boo* scare-tactics?”

“Yes!”

And I look at myself. I check my fingers. Quite clear. No claws. But they are covered in blood. My arms, my legs, my torso, all covered in blood which has way too many different shades to be my own. But I can’t believe it. I can’t believe I DID all this. I can’t believe. But there’s not much time to think when I see it, I see it and my adrenaline boils but not enough to make me move. I am noncomfortably numb. The aches in all my muscles and bones and xylophones do not allow me to lift myself up, it’s way too...

The metalhead is about a hundred feet away. I see its glowing eyes. Its claws are ready to slash, its jaws are ready to bite and it is black, all black like a panther in both colour and shape and movement. This fully cyber synthetic abomination is slowly, slowly approaching, seventy feet away, what do I do where, run, run, run —

“—Get away, run, go, NOW!”

“But what about—?”

“—RUN YOU FOOLS!”

The kids run like Hades although Batbro seemed to be nondecisive for a moment. Thirty feet, at least the metalhead is not running, no, never mind, no, don't go that way, NO, NOT AFTER THEM YOU STUPID, FUCKING—

—Freeze-framing—

—I have NO idea what to do... NO idea... How can I lure it to ME and not to THEM?? I told them to RUN, I am a FUCKING, STUPID IDIOT FUCK WTF... What the fuck is this anomaly, are you on DMT OR NOT!?

I AM, WTF ITS IDK WTF AIS!?

The shapes form very, berry slowly! More and more and more.

Slow-framing.

The shapes blend into a single shape which closes in on the metalhead, about three feet behind it.

Zooming-in.

The shape now resembles my broken-mirror dream...

Zooming-out.

Could it be? Is Mina coming to the rescue? Ok, well let's enjoy the show then.

Resuming.

And then her speed hits me like a sponge thrown from a spaceship inside a mountain outside the orbit of Jupiter and she punches the metalhead in its backside faster and faster, I can barely see her hands, it's like an optical illusion just drilling and drilling in the bowels of the metalhead. There's a shower of metal plates, casings, PCBs, cables, glass, smoke and whatever the metalhead used to keep inside of it and I'm actually ok with some of the pieces hitting me in the face. Comfortably dumb. The metalhead drops dead and with no dread in its eyes anymore. All lights have gone out. But the dread starts growing in my eyes because the dread in her eyes is not shrinking. On the contrary, I believe it is starting to accentuate as she steps towards me, stomp, stop, stomp, stop, stomp. I know what comes next and I must accept it. I did everything I could. At least, I hope the kids will be fine.

LUCKILY FOR ME THOUGH, FOX appears from some hole in the sky, like I think he literally came through some wormhole or vortex or something because I can't explain how, well, who cares? I know I am seeing him and this is NOT some illusion or deception or manipulation or HALLUCINATION or something. He IS REAL and I don't care what anyone else tells me. The G.G.s begin to mend the wounded, pray for the departed and escort the kids out of this madness. FOX saved me again. He is the H3r0, or at least one of them, and I don't CARE what anyone tells me. I mean, sure, I'll still listen to your opinion but... He smiles at me; he knows he saved me but he does not expect a thank you. He doesn't need it. My smileys are all that matter. And I thank KEK for His kindness and I don't care what names other people use. I mean, sure I'll listen but... But the smile grows wider on Fox's face after he looks at Mina. Oh yeah, take that! Plans foiled. The dread in Mina's eyes starts to melt in some passive-aggressive rage, then a non-aggressive rage, then a passive-aggressive smile, then a line, then

some squiggly stuff I've never seen on anyone else's face before. Just like a banana in a blender I'd say. A banana pudding. In silence, Mina steps on its hoverboard. Also in silence, Fox takes me on his wings, like literally! His hoverboard wings of course. But I do suspect Fox also has some wings inside. Not inside his hoverboard, of course.

We're inside the M.W., where G.M.s and G.D.s and G.A.s tend my wounds and bruises and they wonder. But they don't wonder how I managed to survive the fall. They wonder how could I be so stupid and not listen to the first rule they told me: 'Don't forget the hoverboard'. I guess I'm more of a practical learner. Next to my bed is a patient whose head is totally encased in some sort of metallic device with no visors, completely opaque. If he is conscious, I shudder thinking how his world must look right now. The darkness of the battlefield playing like a film in his mind, over and over. This war, this eternal war is not normal, it's not fair and it's not justified. In my opinion at least. And yet, these people still do it, they never give up and I am sure they never will. They do it for the safety of their children. And now I truly understand it. Nothing else could give me the strength to go on and fight such beasts like the Nomos. Or the Monos...

Suddenly, Fox crawls out from under a bed and greets me with a smile.

"How are you feeling?" Fox asks me with some fear in his eyes.

"I've had worse."

"You often drop from a hundred feet without a parachute and then rip out a hundred Nomo heads?"

"... A hundred?"

"More or less."

"Do you actually believe what the kids told you?"

"I... I don't want to believe..."

"Me neither."

"..."

"... How are the kids?"

"Only a few bruises, they're ok. But the bruises in their hearts are much deeper."

"..."

"... Look, I'm—!" and Fox leans in and sneakily places in my pocket a small something covered in a small cloth—"going to have to think about this..." He winks and leaves the premises, but I think this is the only time I ever saw him leave or arrive in or out of some place the way normal people do, like using doors and actual human pathways. Interesting...

I pet the 'something' in my pocket and immediately recognize the textures. Fox retrieved my gun and gave it back to me in the most nonobvious and secret way possible. Fox knows something. Dude knows something. Jaques knows something. AMA... AMA knows something. They all tried to protect me because they all knew that somewhere... there is a... Mina.

Like a booby trap! Heh...

The horror... The ho—

"—Surr, if you are feeling better, Lt. Mina requests your council." A G.G.G. from S.V.G.W.T.F.I.T.B.S. announces that Mina is actually DUMB enough to try this again but... Eh... I'll enjoy refusing just the same.

"I refuse."

"I'm afraid it is mandatory, surr." And he shows me some warrant.

...

...

...

... I PUSH THE HATE!

AND I PUSH IT TOO!

I KEEP PUSHING!

And now... It's down to you and me, you brainchained freak!

I walk defiantly smiling, laughing about it. Mina actually probably thinks it got me, heh. I pass the glass doors, then the wooden ones, then the metal ones, then the whatever the fuck is that material. I noncare. I'm locked and loaded and the DUMB bitch probably thinks I ain't packing. Heh... Well, I guess KEK does have a sick sense of humour. Hopefully, Mina won't be DUMB enough to try anything stupid. BUT, if Mina doesn't aggress, I do NOT aggress. Each weapon, be it sound based or projectile based, shall be met with equal force. No more... No less.

Nonadmittance.

Denial.

And smile!

Ah, yes. The backdoor to Mina's main office. Yes, it does resemble her backdoor, LOL!

Hmmm, Mina is in its chair. Its back is turned to me but the backseat of the chair can barely cover the fury hiding behind it. I take a seat, no word said. I never greet... Minas. Slowly, the chair rotates. Just like EKA's terminal display. The monitor display I mean, the expression on Mina's face is totally different. Well, actually, no, it does resemble the stare EKA had in that empty, forsaken room. But not EKA's beauty, no. EKA had a beauty way, way, waaaaaay deeper than any of these dumb bitches could ever hope to attain. Some of the old idiots at the elderypens used to make fun of her. Said she was the ugliest thing they ever saw. Not to her face, of course because WHY, why would you have the balls to say the thing that you just THINK is the truth, because you saw some bullshit pornopticon and think you know what beauty and love are all about now? Nah, they wouldn't have the balls because they knew it was not true. Some of them didn't even have any physical balls. Eh... poor guys, they didn't know, they couldn't understand. Dude was right... I hope he was right...

Mina has been staring for some time and probably thinks that this is somehow making me noncomfortable. But I enjoy it, I could do this all day. I love thinking about stuff. The noise of the void outside has no power over the love I carry inside. The love for AMA, for Dude, for Jaques, for Eka, for the 1337, by the way, what happened to those guys? Hmmm. We never heard from them, eh? Interesting. I couldn't even ask. I was so caught up in all the craziness around, I totally forgot about... Bills, Dox and Kin. Guess we were all on our own, more or less. Heh, I do hope to see them again. But if I don't, I hope they know I love them. Even if I'm such a dumby sometimes I forget to remind people about it. No need to say it, just... show it in some way. Not like this bitch is treating me right now, like for real? I'm not even in DMT mode, I've been thinking all this stuff in real time and this BITCH is not saying anything? What in the dumb fuck is this bullshit? Is she gonna keep me here all day? Wtf bitch I thought I could win this war of staring but NO, of course something as STUPID and as HOLLOW as this bitch can win the staring contest. El Oh Em Oh See Plus, repeat, repeat, repeat forever and ever until your brain turns into a chain that you drag through the mud and it saps and it SAPS and it breaks and it snaps and it craps out your ears, all your fears disappear, all your worries, all your thoughts, it's all 'lomoc',

'lomoc', 'lomoc'... Lomoc, Lomoc, Lomoc? If that's what she thinks about all the time... Is that... Was IT its...? Ohh SHHH—!

"—You probably don't know why I brought you here." Mina loses the staring round and strikes.

"Oh, I think I do." I parry.

"I doubt it." I.T. parries.

"..." I block.

"Gary told me that AMA had left your company without saying a word." Mina throws a bomb.

"..." I block.

"Aren't you two like, together?" Mina throws another bomb.

"Nope." I throw it back.

"You're lying." Mina throws a mine.

"Nope." I throw it back.

"Then whose binding ring is on your finger?" I.T. throws it back to me but I'm out of stamina. So, I must defuse this one.

"That's none of your biz." Try number one.

"Oh, really?" Uh, what?

"Yeah, really!" Really, really!

"..."

"..." I guess it's defused.

"You do know AMA is being charged with the murder of Jaques?" Oh, my dear KEK, what is this bomb???

I've never seen this oh, well, whatever.

"... I had no idea." Just spewing facts.

"If you do know anything about it..."

"..." Yes?

"... And choose to withhold info, you may also be charged with complicity." Is that so?

"Well, in that case, I would like to ask for a legal representative." Touché, cybercat!

"That's not how I like to do things." This is neither a bomb, neither a mine, neither a cat, it's a metalhead!

"Oh, really?" Bring it on!

"Yeah, really!" I.T.'s bringing it on.

"Then listen here, miss! If you do that little trick of yours again where ALL the holes around here get stuffed, I'm going to FILE a report on you!" This one is a little tricky-bomb I made on the spot.

"Ok." I.T. defused it.

"..." I skip turn.

"Why don't you like me?" I.T. tries to seduce.

"..." I refuse.

"Are you shy...? Or just stupid?" I.T. flings some sh.I.T. but it flies over my head with no injury.

"..." I skip turn.

"..." I.T. skips turn, wooh, interesting... Hmmmm...

"..." I skip turn.

"..." I.T. skips turn. Maybe I.T. is morphing into a shy-T.

"..." I skip turn.

"Answer me!!" Oh, I was wrong. I.T.'s turning nonsaney.

"..." I skip turn.

"..." It's not quite clear from the squiggly lines in what is I.T. morphing into now.

“...” There’s no turn here, I have to wait and witness the morphing.

“You know, when I brought you here the first time...” I.T. tries one of its ‘pause for effect’ spells but it bounces. Because I have like this REALLY COOL protection barrier that’s immune to ALL spells made out of BULLSH—! ... I.T. continues “... I noticed a **hint** of attraction.” Oh, this one seems like some really complicated spell that kids don’t understand, but it’s just your basic bullshit spell too “...” I.T. ran out of *magic* points!

“...” I skip turn.

“Is that nontrue?” I.T. tries to confuse me but I defuse it. Well, I mean, you don’t have to do anything really, just skip turn.

“...” I skip turn.

“...” I.T. skips turn.

“...” I skip turn.

“WHY NON-YOU LIKE ME?!?!?” I.T. tries one of them nani-bombs or something but it’s like, look, man, I ain’t never heard of it so I don’t believe it, ok?

“...” I skip turn.

“...” I.T. is losing a lot of steam, like a metalhead in heat! Because that nani-bomb apparently used a lot of its stamina and it’s taking a beat. I.T. skips turn by default.

“...” I skip turn, even though my stamina is back to 100%.

“...” I.T. is recovering... skips turn by default.

“...” I’m like, hey! I can do this all day!

“...*sobbing*...” But there’s nothing wet coming out of that something I.T. calls eyes. I mean, it’s like the bullshittest shitfest spell ever. I’m like, this room IS so full of SHIT right now I can’t even see the walls anymore. It’s just SHIT EVERYWHERE! If I lit a cig right now, this whole place would EXPLODE!

“...” I skip turn for my safety.

“... *sobbing*...” But again, no fluctuations in volume nor the frequency of either the sounds or the water that should normally be spraying out of your eyes and fill-in the room to resemble a pool or a lake.

“...” I’m not sure if I’m free to leave at this point, so I ask. “Is the interview over?”

AND in an INSTANT, I.T.’s face turns into something that resembles a cat-fox-wolf-rat-fat-bat-mat-shat-my-pant-oh-dear-wtf and says “Game’s over!” And yes, ladies and gents, my pants have left the orbit!

“What do you mean—?” But my pants return from orbit and hit me over the head when I.T. gets up and spansks its desk to the side and breaks some really cute looking plushies and toys and other cute things, which could’ve actually brought some joy to some kid but this—

—DMT—

—DAMN STUPID, FUCKING STUPID FUCKING

AND REPEAT FINALLY SHOWS I.T.S TRUE SELF! Well...

Slow-framing—

—Let’s see what’s in those pants.

Resuming...

And although it was only a figure of speech at first, I.T. actually seems to have something in those pants that wants to come out. AND OH, MY DEAR KEK WTF—

—I.T. appears to have some sort of... snake in its pants.

Cybersnake... presuming.

But NOE! It couldn’t be JUST one snake, NOOOO—

—It appears to split into more snakes... like eeeh...

Medusa?

Yeah, yeah, good one Bigbrain!

Thanking!

Meh, I guess the only thing to do is—

—Grab gun, aim straight at the Medusa and—

“—WHERE DID YOU GET THAT?! YOU STUPID, FUCKING—!” Last words from Mina before I—

—FIRING!

And the damn ray blasts a hole in the Medusa, I mean the Medusa is totally missing now, but not only that, I mean the last thing I saw before the recoil launched me to the—

—CEILING—

—was that the beam also carved a big hole all around Mina’s crotch area and legs and whatever I.T. used to have around, I mean it’s mostly PCB’s and metal frames which right now are HITTING me in the FUCKING head!

Well, at least I’m no longer on the ceiling. I’m fine, really, I mean the G.G. medics will need to do some patching but hey! I’ll live. Mina on the other hand... I mean... I.T.s not moving... Like it’s ... dead. I mean come ON! You mean to tell ME that ALL I had to do was just SHOOT a hole in its CROTCH???? I MEAN the MONOS are REALLY FUCKING DUMB, HOLY FUCK THEY’RE EVEN DUMBER THAN THE NOMOS, I MEAN DUDE, HAVE YOU SEEN THOSE NOMOS??? HOLY FUCK, THEY WILL FIGHT YOU ‘TIL THEY’RE JUST A HEAD ON A STICK! THEY’LL JUST SPIT YOU IN THE EYE, I MEAN LITERALLY! I SAW IT, HOLY FUCK! NOMOS ARE THE BIGGEST BADASSES IN THE WORLD, OH MY SHIT OF KEK! Well, I guess that explains how I got to escape Mono so easily. Thanks for the tip!

I try to stand on my feet, I mean I tried, then I tried again and it somehow worked. I look at my masterpiece, well, I say ‘masterpiece’, it is horrible, just look at it! It is horrendous, something like this should not normally exist, in my point of view or from my P.O.V. But eh... A MEDUSA in I.T.s pants? NO ONE is going to believe me. Because there’s no proof left. It has disintegrated into nothingness. This pistol IS way too OP!

Fox comes running into the room all goofy and gasping for air, looks at me with angry eyes and then steps next to Mina, crouches, points at the hole between I.T.s legs and says “Did you do this?”

“Uhm... yeah.”

Fox is a bit angrier but then he calms down and says “Do you have any idea how much it costs to replace these floor panels?”

“No idea.” Well, at least it’s not because of the missing Medusa.

“They cost almost nothing!” Ah, well...

“That’s exactly how much I have.”

“Hand it over right now!”

“Uhm, ok...?”

And I hand him over the... nothing. I mean, I didn’t give him my gun or something, I just pretended I gave him something. This guy is totally nuts and screws and balloons!

“THANK YOU!” And FOX then scurries away with big steps towards the door but I stop him—

“—WAIT!” He stops “Uhm, what about the... other mess?”

“Oh, don’t worry, I’ve already filed the papers.”

“What in the fu—?”

“—Hey!!!” He points to the poopy-mouthy-signy.

“Sorry, sorry. I mean, what papers, what ‘what’?”

“Oh, I was hoping Mina would be unwise enough to do the hack she did.” And Fox just smiles and continues to scurry out of the room and then all the things that happened link in my brain and I feel like in a Nonlight episode but it’s actually twilight outside and it’s raining, but it’s actually raining with light and wtf holy smokes! KEK IS REAL DUDE! At least, I think so...

AND THEN it actually starts raining with light and smileys and laughter when I see Shaun storming into the room ALL RAGE IN HIS BEAUTIFUL EYES! I LOVE THEM! And he points angrily at the same hole in the floor but I’m not sure of what he has to complain about. I mean, I’m sure he did way worse for way longer than me. He admitted it, well I mean he didn’t say it outright but... you have to be smart to understand.

“Did you do this?” Shaun asks amazed.

“Guilty as charged, your Metalness!” I answer, amused.

“Damn... I wanted to fuck this bitch myself!” Shaun exclaims but I’m confused.

“You mean ‘kill’.” I remark innocently, well I say ‘softly’.

“Ehh... it’s complicated.” Which is a nonanswer because it doesn’t ‘song’ anything.

“I see...” I remark nontruthfully, because I don’t actually understand ‘this’...

“Eh, I’m glad you’re fine, boy! Come here, I wanna give you a hug!” He stomps, stomps, stomps towards me but I mean, the idea of a hug right now, especially from him, with all my broken bones or whatever is sticking out of my leg I mean, for real? FOX didn’t even send for a medic? I’m bleeding out here and he doesn’t give a FOX about me? Come on! WTF, well I guess he believes I can take care of myself from now on, so, thank you FOX for believing in me!

1 STOMP REMAINING!

“Uhm... Shaun... are you sure about this?”

“About what?”

“About giving me a hug?” Shaun’s cybers are all glowy and me no likey.

“Why not?”

“Look, man! Look at me... Look at how I look right now! Look at that thing sticking out of my leg! I mean COME ON you have even bigger muscles than you know who had and even stronger than you know the other one that even though she didn’t have much on her she could’ve beaten the other one I was talking about and—” I’m rambling here but I guess I’m just biding my time “—and, and, and...” Never mind.

“Look kid... Why do you think I wanted to give you a hug in the first place?? You stupid, fucking—”

“—What, you got some MAGIC healing powers in those cybers?? You stupid, fucking—”

“—YES, I DO! YOU STUPID, FUCKING—!”

“—YEAH, WELL, LET’S SEE IT YOU FUCKING, STUPID—!”

“—HERE! YOU STUPID, FUCKING—!” And he actually starts patching me up I mean millions and millions of needles and scalpels and other stuff come out of his cyber-arms and mend my hands, my feet, my everything and he stims me up and now I can’t focus on what he’s doing anymore but that’s ok. And THEN it FINALLY hits me. The one thing that never occurred to me but it should have. My heroes were not helping me for some eco-cred or social-cred or the whatever-cred some people use nowadays. No... They were helping me because they believed in me, even when I was too blind to see it. They were all trying to help me. My heroes tried to help me, of course, because they never told me lies. They hid the truth, sure, but they had to. They couldn’t tell it straight because someone, somewhere is always listening... Always some shit-brain, always some shI.T. who is hiding... searching... and seeking the truth with one purpose in mind: to destroy it! And sometimes

we're not ready for the plain truth and we need time to discover it ourselves. But all I had to do was to read between the lines and it was RIGHT THERE! The Res' showed me in practice all the qualities of a good morality: the sacrifice, the selflessness, the non-selfishness, the power to never give up, to never look down, to never look back, to never forget but always forgive... Well, except they did forget my mistakes, because they never reminded me of them. Well, except if I had forgotten about some lesson I needed to learn, but ANYWAY...

...

We could all be heroes...

A little, everyday...

Before everything faded to blackout, while Shaun carried me in his arms, I remember saying something like... "That was the best hug anyone has ever given to me!"

I have NO idea what he said after but whatever, I don't...

care ...

care ...

care ...

I CARE ...

...

...

...

...

...

...

...

Chapter VIII: Our Father?

... I wake up! The same dream I have every night. The same. Exactly the same as it used to be a year ago. Weird...

I've opened my eyes and the ceiling is to the left side of my P.O.V. I'm in an unlit room, except for the red, blue and green lights of the monitors, the displays and the holoscreens mounted all around me. Fox and Shaun are in the middle of the room, in front of some consoles, with their backs to me, discussing something in a whisper. They are both jacked in. The holos are projecting some maps I don't recognize. Some projections resemble tridi-prints of buildings, others display green tridi-grids of some cities. Gary is also jacked in a deck on the right side of the room, just typing with his little fingers on the little keys. His eyes are closed. On the left side is Batbro... But she's not jacked in, she's only typing on a cute, pink, modular, massive deck I've rarely ever seen. May as well be a console.

I rise and sit on the side of the bed with a bit of dizziness in my brains, but it is manageable. I find I am quite... comfortable with myself like I've never felt before. Just... content with everything. I look around the room and although I am curious of what is everyone doing, I feel like they have been working for hours and hours. Judging by the bags under Gary's eyes, I imagine they haven't slept at all. Something is up and I've been kept out of the loop for very long. But! ... I don't care that much. I mean, I care but I'd rather not disturb their work right now. I lay back on the bed and suddenly I sense... her smell. I feel her warmth slowly climbing on my back, on my shoulder, on my neck. Then a whisper. I have no idea what she said. I feel like it didn't really matter. Just the gesture and her kiss and caressing are all I care about right now. I turn around to find AMA lying next to me. Her deep, clear, black eyes and bright, bright skin are proof to me that I am not dreaming. But even if it's just a dream... It's a good dream...

... [6:23] Shaun plugs out, salutes me by bringing two fingers to his forehead and then leaves the room through an empty, blueish wall. Like he literally walked through that wall. Must be the same cloaking tech they use for the entrance to this mountain. If it is actually a mountain, heh... Gary plugs out too, gives me a smile and then leaves the room through the same wall. Probably to have a good night's/morning's sleep. A few minutes later Batbro powers down the monster decking device, gives me a hug and leaves. Fox approaches me, all smiles in his eyes, but a bit worried in the corners of his mouth. I wonder why...

"Have you had a good rest?" Fox asks me kindly.

"As if I slept on a cloud made of clouds. At least nine of them!"

"I'm glad to hear that... I think you really needed it."

"Heh... well, what's all the fuss about? I mean, we did it, right?"

"Did what?" Fox asks confused. AMA looks at me confused too.

"We... got the traitor, right? I mean, I blew a hole right in its..." But Fox is not amused and for reasons I cannot understand. AMA... looks worried. She opens her mouth wanting to say something... but soon changes her mind.

Fox sits next to me on the bed, puts a warm hand on my shoulder and asks "Dem... Have you... Do you know what a brainchain is?"

"Yeah, it's some ten Gee, wireless brain-cloud-something-something—"

"—Besides what you've been taught in school and in the pamphlets."

“Ehhh, no? It was a... **confidential** matter, you know.”

“Well, people who choose to be augmented with brainchain tech, they are... I mean what they do is...” Fox is lost in some deep... something... He is searching for careful words to explain some... kind of horror in his eyes.

“They’re transhumanists.” AMA cuts to the chase.

“You mean like, the actual guys who want to...?”

“They don’t want to, they already did.”

“You can’t possibly tell me they’re that stupid, I mean, come on—!”

“—They are.” Fox intervenes. And he is all serious biz. These people actually thought they could upload their minds to the Net! I mean for real, how stupid can you be? It’s just like teleportation... At least, I think so...

“So, you mean to tell me there’s more than one Mina?”

“It’s not just that, it’s like... Have you heard of the Monotonists?”

“Yep. So, they’re just a bunch of Monoheads?”

“Eh, not exactly... Look, come here and let me show you.” Fox leads me in front of the console sitting in the middle of the room. The holoscreen shines darkly all around the walls. And in a beeping corner, a tiny speaker is spewing a continuous stream of N—

["—EL"]	["OH"]	["EM"]	["—"]
["SEE"]	["EL"]	["OH"]	["EM"]
["*deleted*"]	["*deleted*"]	["*deleted*"]	["*deleted*"]
["OH"]	["EL"]	["PLUS"]	["EM"]
["SEE"]	["SEE—"]	["—SEE—"]	["—SEE"]
["*deleted*"]	["*deleted*"]	["*deleted*"]	["*deleted*"]
["*deleted*"]	["*deleted*"]	["*deleted*"]	["*deleted*"]

“What in KEK’s name is this madness?” I ask with pure intentions.

“This is what brainchain does to you.” Fox responds with pure intentions but offers no explanation.

“It’s like a blockchain.” AMA offers some explanation.

“You mean to tell me...” I fear the answer... I hope I am wrong... “... that these people... or whatever they are... uploaded their minds to a blockchain Network?”

“Yes!” FOX and AMA answer in unison. Their eyes... my eyes... What in the...?

“Nah... I mean, what? I mean... nah, I mean... what? Nah...” I’m stuck on a loop... like the continuous stream of madness spewing from that speaker. Whatever this recording is, it is meant to be a mind. But I shudder, I shudder that a mind could let itself... be voluntarily chained in such a... Dystopian nightmare vision. I wish this was just a work of fiction. But I see it, right here in front of my eyes and I DON’T want to BELIEVE IT! But... I have to... As much as I want to resist the pain and not accept reality... I have to, it’s right here... Right now. And it’s coming after me. This thing has one purpose in mind. At least, by taking a look at this graph, it paints a reality-pill I have to swallow. Its purpose is to delete me, no matter what. “...”

FOX puts a warm hand on my upper back. AMA hugs me warmly, covering my lower back. And I thank them both and although I feel like crying, I only cry on the inside. On the outside, I’ve already accepted my fate. And right now, my two pillars are holding me upwards so I may never fall again. Or at least, not from a hundred feet, I mean we gotta stop doing that because it’s really bad for our health. For my health especially...

“How many?” I ask for a rough approximation.

After a few seconds of thought, FOX says “Hopefully, just four more.”

“‘Hopefully’ meaning what?”

“It means—! ...” AMA is upset by something... “... It means... we don’t know...”

“I’m sorry, I...” fall in a dark thought but pull myself out and remark with optimism “Well, I’m glad we’re here, I mean this place is like a magical fortress to me, I doubt they can ever—”

“—We can’t stay here.” AMA is alerted by something.

“... Why? Wait, you mean... the Res’ is compromised?”

“The Res’ has always been compromised...” FOX is serious “... Look, man... There’s no secret in this world that can stay secret forever. Not even in the Res’. The Monos could find our locations if they decided to. Our profiling is not a hundred percent failproof.”

“Then why haven’t they...?”

“You should know that by now. Their actions are dictated by their ‘eco-nomy’ protocols. If it costs too much, they’re not going to pursue it. The Res’ never gave the Monos reason to pursue. We only use pacifist counter-propaganda tactics. We just spread the Word! And rescue believers, but we never use lethal means.”

“But what about all those bioterrorists and—?”

“—You think the Res’ was doing that??” FOX is a bit annoyed but calms in an instant “No, son, those are not the deeds of the Res’. Even if one of our members would do that, they would be no true believer of the Word. KEK teaches us to love our enemies.”

“Love the enemy? Is KEK out of His mind?”

“I know it is hard to understand. But you cannot heal the world with hate. You can only heal it with love. And violence can never be love.”

“I agree with that last part. But I’m not sure about...” Or am I? I mean... I needed the hate to do what I did back there. I mean, I still don’t believe it but let’s say I actually butchered those poor Nomos in the fields. I did it with HATE but I did it out of LOVE for the children. So, I guess, I did it out of love for the Nomos too?? That still doesn’t make sense to me. “... I... I’ll have to think about this.”

FOX pets my head as if I’m some kind of animal and says nothing more. AMA is lost in some thoughts on the floor. The thoughts are on the floor, not AMA. And then I ask...

“But then... Why are they coming after us now? Why did they attack Liberta?”

“They’re not coming after us...” FOX gives me half of the info.

“They’re coming after us...” AMA looks straight into my eyes to give me the other half but still no explanation.

“But why? Why waste their resources to get me? Or us? I don’t understand...”

“Nobody does for now. But we’re working on it.” FOX scrolls through some info displayed on the holo-projector. Some trails and some tracks that lead to some corners of the APTB, some ASSDB and some other crap I don’t understand but seems to be some top, top-secret project, of which not even the Monoheads themselves know about. At least almost every top head in the chain of command has been kept in the dark about this ‘TXH-8311’ project.

“So, it’s like... Heh, you mean I have some kind of chrome they’re trying to get back? That would explain my skeletal augmentation, but AMA? I mean I’m sure Ama is not...” AMA pierces my eyes with her eyes and then I understand. All that nonnatural strength she has. She’s got something too.

FOX watches both of us with motherly eyes, then looks straight at me with fatherly eyes and says “Look... Dem... You are welcome to stay for a couple of days, but no more. I can’t risk the lives of my children, do you understand?”

“I do, I understand, don’t worry, I’ll be off in no time. I mean... I’d rather die than... imagine what could happen.”

“...” And with a final stroke on my arm, FOX leaves through the mirage in the wall.

AMA kisses me on the forehead and then descends into my bosom. I caress her for a bit before she says “I have to leave.”

“But FOX said—”

“—Yes, you can stay, but I can’t.”

“You mean... They still think you killed Jacques?”

AMA looks a bit annoyed at me but then her head returns to rest on my chest “Until we find Jacques... I’m still a suspect.”

“Come on, I mean it makes no sense!”

“It’s because of the recording...”

“Oh, my dear KEK! And how in the fud did they manage to—?”

“—It doesn’t matter. And don’t blame yourself. It’s nobody’s fault.”

“Oh, I know whose fault it is! It’s that...”

“Yes, but it doesn’t matter now... What matters is that we finish off the others. Before the others finish us first.”

“Did you get one too?”

“Yes, I... I had a suspect for a while.” AMA is shivering a bit.

“Was it the... buggy-eyed taxi-driver?”

“What bug-eyed driver?” AMA just morphed into a straight pole and her eyes are piercing my head in a thousand holes.

“Uhm... Yeah, I totally forgot about that guy until the other day... Eh, there was this guy back in Liberta —”

—AMA is up on her feet and sprints to the console, jacks in like there’s no tomorrow or today and shouts “I.D., now!”

“Uhm, I forgot. It was some bloke from Carrentals—”

“—Got it, I’m in your logs.”

“For real? You just hacked my—?”

“—You talk a lot in your sleep, hihhi!”

“Damn, I never thought of **that** security hole!”

AMA is typing and scrolling away through some trails and tracks, which proves to me she did pick up some tricks. Hey, what if what Jacques told me was actually...?

“Ama...?” No response. I jack in next to her.

[“Ama? *Jazzy-tunes*”] The title in the corner says ‘Break-day’.

[“Yes? *Jolly-sax*”]

[“Is it true? What Jacques told me in the rec’? I mean about you?”]

Hmm-hm Hm Hmm Hmm-hm

[“Half true.”]

[“Which half?”]

[“The one about finding me.”]

[“So, the other half was... about Mina?”]

[“Yeah, but I doubt Mina actually de-C.I.P.-ed itself.”]

[“Wow... you mean?”]

[“Yeah, plus I left a trail of forty-plus OVSEFOs.”]

["Makes sense."] I mean, it's AMA!

Silence... AMA keeps searching for the bug-eyed freak. I'm just...

["Have you heard about... what the kids say... they saw... about me?"]

["Yes."] AMA is a *beat* annoyed in her tone of synth-voice.

["And do you believe it?"]

["I—! ... I don't want to believe it."]

["Why not?"]

["Because..." *click*] Music stops... Nonresponse...

["Because?"]

["Because—! ... Because I thought you were harmless."]

["..."] ... ["... Is that why we're together?"]

["No! Not that... but..."]

AMA plugs out of the console. I do too. She looks me in the eyes and she's trying to hold onto some tears but she fails. I hug her with all of my strength but her sobbing gets louder. I shush her as gently as I can. I try to calm her as best as I can. She whispers through gasps of air... "I'm... afraid... I... don't... want... scared... of you..." And those words shatter my heart but I quickly grab at the pieces and try to put them back in some logical order. I fail. There are no words I can say to soothe her fears. I just try to... absorb some of it with my hugs.

After a while she's back to her senses and confirms our trust shall remain forever bound. I touch her ring with my ring. She smiles. I don't know if that's a thing around here but it is now! I call it 'The Touch of Con —'! 'fidence' or whatever. Before she leaves, AMA says the trail of the bug-eyed went cold. She has another lead but she needs to wait for some feedback. And she needs to do some 'scouting'. So, we say our goodbyes and good-bye kisses—and—hugs and... And then she leaves, just like the others, again, leaving me in noncertainty.

But then, I notice in the corner of my eye some file on the holoscreen. A file on Mina's post-mortem analysis. Besides your usual sensors and trackers and hacking devices installed all over its grey chromed-anatomy, Mina also had... some 'Wildly Addictive Pheromones' cyber-enchantment installed in its... cyberogenous zones. Well, now THAT explains it. I mean, come on! I hate cybers! At least I find them very nonattractive... Ewww, all that... metal and wires... Just ewww... It makes sense now!

Not to me!

He psyching...

Anyway... This proves I'm much stronger than I thought I was. But it is also a warning I have to be extra careful from now on. Might as well hold my breath, stuff my ears and shut my eyes whenever I'm around... Mono chrome...

[9:45] I exit through the cloaked wall and find myself in an intricate maze of corridors of *polished*, white, METALLIC walls. I look to my left and then I look to my right... No signs... I begin moving left. I walk down the corridor and each four or so meters there appears to be more of those 'secret walls' or just plain old corridor junctions. I... I feel completely lost. Fortunately, after about five minutes of walking, I end up in front of a wall. A corridor stretches out to my right. I switch my direction ninety degrees to my right and walk straight until I reach a short ladder. I climb it and press the big red button next to the hatch. Another hatch closes below me and I feel the chamber rotating horizontally... 'clockwise' as they say. After about one hundred and eighty

degrees the horizontal 'elevator' stops and the hatchet above my head opens up. I find myself... behind the altar of the Catheist temple or whatever. Unfortunately for ME, the temple is in full session and I fail to recognize any of the kids, well, with all those V.O.P.s it's hard to tell anyway... They are all staring at me, along with a different preacher. Definitely not the real Fox, judging by the blonde semi-long hair, long, long, pointy ears and most of all, very female facial features. Her long, white robe makes me think of that painting back at the children's hospital, but she's definitely not a frog! I try to wash away some of the embarrassment using some good old nonsense.

"Forgive me for disturbing your Mass, melady and mekids! I've just been... eh, fixin' the grub-knobs on them crawly-pipes down in the... by the chamber-link-pads! Yeah..."

Everyone is obviously confused and nonamused. Well, I tried...

But never mind that because one of the lizard-kids bites "The grub-knobs are in the shire-case lobrollers, NOT in the chamber-link-pOds!" But nobody's laughing. What in the... are they talking about something real? Or am I losing my —?

"—Heh, yeah of course! Well, I better be off then!" And I launch myself out of the hole and try to rush out of there before I make this anymore noncomfortable for any of us, when the preacher lady says —

"—Just a minute! Who are you and what were you doing in the Net-chambers?"

"I was, eh... Look, my name is..." Maybe I should ditch all names for a while... "... doesn't matter, I'm just leaving." And I turn one hundred and eighty degrees but the PREACHER lady insists to —

"—You haven't answered any of my questions."

I turn one-eighty again and defend myself "Well, I didn't ask for any." And I do another one-eighty but the PREE—!

"—We demanded no interruptions during Mass and specifically asked the maintenance team not to disturb us between nine and—" Her tone of voice is very calm but somehow... passively imploring. Oh, I see, well...

"—Forgive me melady, I will go right ahead and file a complaint report on myself! I hope I get fired for this, now if you'll excuse me—!"

"—Please, if you would be so kind not to be so rude—"

"—I'm not, look here lady, I don't even work here I'm just—"

"—Then what were you doing in the—?"

"—don't see how's that any of—!"

"—don't look from around—"

"—get that all the time—"

"—might have to call for—"

"—DO that, please! I've had enou—"

"—Dialing right—"

"—GOOD!" Somehow, I'm steaming! This lady's calmness makes me SO angry! But I... calm myself. I'm in the wrong somehow because either nobody told me I shouldn't loiter around or, once again, it flew over my head at some point.

One of the G.G.s arrives sooner than I expected and invites me to be escorted. Of course, he smiles and knows this is just a misunderstanding. We walk in silence but I'm not sure where we're going...

"Uhm, how's the kids? GG and Eòn and all the others?"

"They're ok."

"Can I see them? I can't stay around for long and—"

“—Unfortunately, no.” As he says that, the blue-tinted lenses of the goggles on his face catch a reflection that cuts each of my eyes in half.

“May I ask why?”

“They are in semi-detention.”

“Semi-detention?”

“Gary and Batbro have decided to postpone Resistance duties. They had for a while. Eòn and Alin convinced them otherwise. They hacked in the sewer systems and left the perimeter without notice.” The G.G. looks at me but there’s no facial features I can distinguish except for the large, strong jaw and prominent cheekbones. “There are penalties for which they all have to pay right now.”

“I see... Well, I think that’s for the best. This place could be a good home for them. I hope.”

“It is.” The G.G. concludes and continues to lead me who-knows-where.

We pass some glass doors, but no metal doors, only brown-woody-like doors. We’re on a different path. We walk straight up some stairs, a straight stair leading to more and more opaque and whiter glass walls. We step inside the triangle-shaped opening of the chamber which lies at the top of the stairs. I look around to find all sorts of cat-icons hanged on the stretched, pyramidal walls, each icon adorned with some kind of knitted necklaces, each necklace tailored with inserts of small pebbles and fewer, larger pebbles placed at equal intervals on the cords. Ten seems to be a popular number around here! Statues of Cats, large Statues of CATS sit in each corner of the chamber. Each of the statues is unique. Black, white, pink and blue. Short hair, long hair, no hair, too much hair. Painted, nonpainted, little painted, jewelry, no jewelry, too much jewelry, et cetera. In the middle of the chamber, behind a large, carved-in-looking desk plus lounge with velvety sides, Fox is laying on a couch and is wearing a red-blue-training suit. He looks as if he’s been working hard, or hardly working on some digipad or P.D.A. modular thingie with extended keyboard. His focused, sad, angry, happy, devil, angry, angel, happy and repeat facial expressions make me think he’s working very hard. But judging by the random, jolly sounds of the beeps coming out of the device, I suspect he ain’t working at all...

“All that work and no play can drive you mad.”

“Yeah, well I get sick of it!”

“The work you mean?”

“Nah, the playing!” Followed by a game-over-slash-defeat sound coming out of the speakers.

“That gadget you got there sounds older than Shaun.”

“It IS! This was the shizzle in its days.”

“Interesting... Now, is there something you needed to talk about or...?”

“Yes, didn’t I tell you to leave the Net-works before nine AM, mmmm?”

“You did? I’m sorry, I have this really bad memory—”

“—HOW?!? HOW is that...?” Fox is... changed completely... I mean, there’s something... I think he... doesn’t trust me anymore...

I slowly, slowly approach Fox and whisper “... Look, if you... need to spik-in... solitude... you know where to go...”

“...” Fox is a bit better but still... not good. “... Please excuse us, gentlemen.” Fox waves to the G.G.s posted around the chamber and they leave. Fox then presses a couple of buttons under the desk and everything closes up. And I do mean everything. All the icons rotate one eighty and get inserted into the walls. The statues are gobbled up by the floor followed by the carved-in-desk. I wonder how he is gonna get it back now that the buttons are...? Heh, well it’s Fox so it makes sense not to make sense. Fox walks back and forth for about ten feet in each direction, with his eyes fixed to the floor, thinking, processing, probably re-processing

what he ate this morning, possibly, and then... Fox looks at me... Approaches me. Grabs my shoulders, gently at first but then he starts to squeeze harder and harder, all of his eyes fixed into all of my eyes during all of this time. He is all serious lines on his face. And then he says...

“Dem! I need you to be honest with me!”

“Come on man, I’ve been—!”

“—s there anything, ANYTHING you’ve hidden from—?”

“—swear I’ve told you the WHOLE truth and NOTHING but the TRU—!”

“—S? YOUR?? FATHER???” ... I freeze. I...

“I... I was... hoping you could answer that...”

“...” Fox looks away from me, while his grip starts to ease up around my dislocated shoulders. Well, I say ‘dislocated’. He releases me from his beastly grip and then he puts a palm on his brow, squats on the floor and slowly starts to ramble some “It makes no sense...” and “I can’t believe it...”

“What makes no sense?”

“YOU DON’T, DEM!” ... Fox calms down and then finally looks back at me... “Sorry, I’m sorry Dem but... Look, I’m no... expert let’s say, in science. But everything... your records... what the kids told me... and now... Ama... It’s just...” Fox’s head shakes a bit as if he’s trying to dissipate a choky cloud forming around his brain. He gets back to his senses, looks me in the eyes and says “Dem, your existence doesn’t make sense. Scientifically at least...”

“Is that so? You losing faith in science, Fox?” I say it half-sarcastically.

“Not in what science can do. But in what it does and shouldn’t do.”

“Watt?”

“Look Dem, I... I have no proof of this... Except maybe for the fact that we know Monos already do this whole ‘pre-programmed-nativity’ biz, but... You... You are not human, Dem!”

“How can you say that, Fox?! For real? How can you say these words right to my—?”

“—I’m not trying to offend you, don’t you understand?? But... Who are you? What are you?? Your... Have you ever even seen your own brain???”

“I hae’... No... And I’m not sure I could, even if I...” take a deep dive... into nothingness... into a void, a black void... I swim back to the surface and see... Light, white light over the edge of the void. And on the edge... The edge of the monochrome planes of existence cuts right through the middle of my brain. That’s it. That’s the only clue my brain gives me about my brain. “Fox... Sometimes... I don’t feel human either...” That thought doesn’t sadden me necessarily, but it does burden me with a bit of loneliness fatigue. Fox’s face changes instantly, his serious lines turn into frownies, and his frownies into brownies and huggies and I’m ok now. Then he looks at me with renewed hope in his eyes and says “Don’t worry about it, Dem... We all feel like that sometimes... Don’t worry, we’ll get to the buttocks of this!” And LUCKILY for me, his joke ends up grabbing the bottom of my backpack instead of my other bottom. He goes back to the ‘desk area’ and taps his right leg two times in each corner of the ‘desk outline’, plus two times in the middle of it and suddenly every bit of furniture and decoration returns to its initial place in time and space around the ‘office’. Interesting...

Fox, on que, turns all professional and says “We have a lead... Not on the... pursuers, but you’re going to meet with some old ‘pals’ soon...” And then he starts blinking. He pauses. He starts blinking again. He pauses. Repeat. Is he having a seizure? No... it... hmmm... It must be... Oh, I see...

1 short, 3 long, pausing

3 short, 2 long, pausing, repeating

2 long, 3 short, ending

I blink slowly three times, pause and then blink one long, one short and then wink one long with my right eye to signal Fox that I got the message. Fox is pleased and continues to say "Shaun said he's got nothing better to do so he'll be your guide." Fox hands me another one of his drawings. Although it looks like a magical pony of sorts, I already see the hidden message embedded in it. Geolocation coordinates and a timestamp. Tomorrow at eight PM. I guess that's where I'll get to meet these 'old' pals.

"Oh, well, I better be off then." And I do a bow or something and turn ninety or so degrees for the exit but Fox stops me with—

"—And by the way... Thanks a lot!"

"For what?"

"For waking me up when you did, otherwise... It could've been worse. Especially for the kids in the field."

"I know... And I would do it again."

"I know."

I leave down the stairs and the corridors and the G.G.s are leading me, they all know, they all respect me and I respect them and want to protect them as they protect me, may KEK guide me and us and them to a much safer plane of existence, of nonpassing, of surpassing the hazardous gassing and launching of missiles, deadly styles of expression, of detection of life, of destruction, of constant strife of my mind, of our minds, of their minds... We end up all the way down and up and left and right of the glass-wood-metal-metal-metal doors and in some kind of enormous 'parking lot' let's say, but it's more like a star-port or star-trekking, space-shuttling, rover-launching gargantuan pad I only thought I would see in a sky-fly-flick! People quite busy, lights around are quite alert. Mostly white and blue and red lights but some of them in spectrums I can non-detect. At least not with my version of eyes.

G.G.s lead me down a heavily lit pathway, any vehicles always back away from our pathway, they never get leeway, no say in what they have to say, the pedestrian is king this way, and I like that, I'm totally OKAY! Wow, so much safety, so much sound and care and pro, it's the best thing I ever saw! We end up in a left-up-left-down-left lot where we find Shaun and the boys sharing some pot! But it's not the kind of pot would think some cheeky minds, it's actually an oily pot to wet the chrome of their bikes' behinds. Of course, someone as cool as Shaun would only ride an actual shotgun! None of that 'hover-lover' crap! They do things in their own rap! Or something. Shaun notices our approach and some of the boys are already mounting their toys and getting ready to roll out of this rock in a mountain... or whateveritis.

"Princess is here! Time to split, boys!" Shaun greets me with the best insult.

"What? No hello kiss, no nothing?"

One of the boys' remarks "He's afraid you might turn into a frog! Bwahehe—" I'm glad their sense of humour remains pure. Or 'puerile' I think is the word.

"—Too late for that—!" I mean, I had to do it.

"—Bee-heheeee—" But I'm not sure if they're laughing at what I said... Or at least, not in the way I meant it... Hmmmm...

Anyway, Shaun pats the back of his bike and says "Hop on!" and, ok, sure, if you think that's safe! And the boys start revving the engines and backing out of the lotting and growling and shouting like mad monkeys, I mean yeah, they're cyber-gorillas or something, probably from outer-space or some other dimension because they usually make no sense! We approach the main highway or whatever it's called, matrix-way or something because it's cray! And they hop onto one of the ground-level lanes and we start speeding towards the exit main of this multi-leveled domain of transport-chain.

...We leave...

...Quite Fast...

... ... HOLY FFFFF—!

—... I've kept my eyes closed, mostly because the wind was burning them. Of course, they didn't give me a helmet, oh wait, what's this? Never mind, it was hanging behind my seat. None of the boys are wearing a helmet, yeah, they're definitely andro-cyber-vampires from the center of Terra! I can barely see much at this speed, we're passing trees or mountains or rivers or wasteland, sun is heating up my helmet, maybe wearing it wasn't a good idea, FFFFFU—!

—take it off and the cool air brings my head back to a non-melting point. I just... take it all in, the speed, the madness, the sadness, the gladness, they're all there and I'm thankful to have them all here, together. I don't think of the sun anymore, but of the moon and the stars, of my mistress, my love from afar. I know she is strong and I know she'll be fine. But the door to my heart is slightly ajar. It's not easy not to worry, but right now we're in a hurry! All the blurry, furry, fuzzy, buzzy feelings do not want to go away, but I'm okay... Every stone passing by looks almost like stone heads of ancient origins, travelling in time for eons and eons. Eroded by wind, sand and water, they keep holding on to their own little pieces of existence. We all do somehow. But conscious life, biological life at least. It seems so... fragile! It gives me the shivers sometimes. Something goes wrong, some nondetected rock in the way, it rolls in your hover-rotor or whatever this thing uses for locomotion, and you fly landing on your head. Maybe wearing a helmet IS the better idea...

... We arrive in a wide valley surrounded by wide, short mountains. A ravine in the middle cuts right through the shoulders of the mountains. Mostly orange and red forests around but still a few green and yellow leaves, and some are a bit too brown and have fallen to the ground. We keep riding on a decrepit, ascending, serpentine grey-as-asphalt-pot-holed-road until we reach some barracks, the sort of barracks Shaun and the gang seem to prefer. But these ones are hidden much better in the relatively bushier forests of these planes. The boys pull up in some hangars where they park, lock and hide their *Thunder-bolts*. The barracks are arranged in a circular radius around the center. And great mounds of charred ashes betray strong pyres of fire from the past. Which is what the boys seem to be starting right now. They light a big fire in the middle and throw some fallen trees over it, they're gathering wood from around, like they're actually just throwing the whole tree trunk on the pyre, these guys are mad! What in the...?

Pyromancing!

Soon the fires burn like a furnace of thousands of degrees. I can't get closer than fifty feet or so to it. These guys wanna burn the whole place to the ground I imagine.

I have to ask Shaun "Guys, is this safe, what the f—?"

"—Don'cha worry, this is to keep the wolves away at night."

"The... wolves? You mean like metalheads?"

"No, actual wolves."

"You're kidding me, right?"

"No." Shaun is all serious. The other guys don't even mind me, they just keep bringing fuel and building some sort of fortification for the barracks and the surrounding areas. What kind of wolves are they talking about?

“Come on Shaun, stop messing with me.”

“What?”

“You mean you’re scared of some wild dogs?”

“These ain’t your FUCKING average wolves, you little green piece of—”

“—WHAT?!? Are they like FUCKING giant WEREWOLVES from Venus or some SHIT—?!”

“—WORSE YOU FUCKING IDIOT, THESE ARE RADIATION FUCKING MUTANT DEATH MACHINES, YOU STUPID FUC—!”

“—Wow, you’re actually serious.” I calm myself but I’m not sure why. I mean, in what kind of a world am I living? All the things you would read in a comic book are actually happening on this planet? Well, I mean, I haven’t met zombies or aliens yet, but what do I know?

“—Don’t they teach you anything in the fucking Res’ nowadays?”

“No, Shaun, not me. I... I somehow slipped into the system. By circumstance.”

“...” The boys stop their work. They all look at me. Some start laughing a bit but they’re not sure... If I’m joking or not. But I’m serious... I continue.

“Yes, I... I mean Jaqqes... I mean Dude... I mean, look, it doesn’t matter really, the point is that I’m good at some things and really bad at most things. So, yeah... Sorry I didn’t know this world has become a nightmare in the meantime.”

“...” Guys seem a bit shocked. But also, a bit... empathetic. They resume their work. Shaun drops the trunk he’s holding and kindly sculpts two really neat seats inside the wood, all those little knives in his cyber-arms are quite handy! He invites me to sit next to him as the sun sets in and we watch the huge pyre send signals to the skies, like some kind of fiery tornado magicky thingy. Shaun says nothing. I don’t say anything. We’re both lost in some sort of ‘trance’ and I’m not talking about their taste in music. Then Shaun looks at me and says...

“Ya know, these wolves... They rule the lands around here. There’s so many of these bastards, I think there’s very little chance you could win a war against all of them. At least not with brute force.”

“Do they have like Frankensteinian brains and—?”

“—Not necessarily but look... Up North—” Shaun points Northeast “—or close thereby, about a few hundred kilometers in, there’s the ruins of a very, very old accident that took place a long, long time ago... A nuclear accident.”

“Wow... What was it?”

“A nuclear plant or nuclear reactors, ya know, the dumb fission reaction ones. And because these idiots somehow melted the cores, they had to evacuate the town and surrounding areas and it was horrible. So, no humans were left around in this sub’. They had to bury the cores in concrete, I think twice, lots of people died of radiation, basically the workers at the plant sacrificed themselves in waves for the good of the whole planet. This thing was really bad, son, really bad! ...”

“I can only imagine.”

“But, years later, some guys discovered that, in the absence of the human predator, other species had... flourished in the area. Especially wolves. Genetically mutated wolves, who had no problem living inside all that radiation. These guys were the Alphas of the Alphas!”

“Wow!” I can barely believe it but I gulp it bait and hook.

“Several tens of years later... Trust me, you’ll hear them later... They still chill me to this day, boy...”

“...” I cannot even imagine.

We fall in silence for a bit when I... feel the need to say... “Shaun... I... wanted to tell you...”

“...”

“... I’m glad to see you’re alive.”

“What the fuck are you talking about?”

“Look man, back there with the Nomos... When you screamed about the metalheads... Some part of me was afraid you wouldn’t come back.”

“You think some dumb Nomos were gonna get me? HAH!”

“You mean you didn’t lose anyone?”

“Just look around, all the boys are here. These are hardened MEN!” The others answer with ‘Ays’.

“I see...” I try one of my trick questions “So, if you had to choose between the Nomos and these mutant wolves, which one would you pick?”

“Oh, Nomos any day now.”

“Wow, for real? Why?”

“Nomos are way dumber than these wolves...”

“You’ve gotta be joking, I mean sure, the No—”

“—joking, kid, I ain’t joking a single fucking bit. These wolves are fucking wicked, I tell ya. I wipe my ass with metalheads, but these Cern’ wolves are truly fucking wicked!”

“Wow... well, I’ll have to see it to believe it.”

“You better pray to whatever Lord you believe in that we don’t get to meet them tonight. You dumb nonbeliever. We’re talking packs of hundreds of quite brainy, massive wolves, didn’t you hear me!? This is a new species that’s evolved in the last hundred years or so! This is **nothing** like you’ve seen in the movies, you tiny grasshopper!”

“Yeah, ok, sure, I believe you.” I say, still unconvinced by this whole thing. It is probably some hoax or leg-pulling the boys have cooked up for me. But I play along, sure.

Everyone is by the fire, most of them seem bored but content. Some whisper, some say some jokes I don’t get, some say jokes I’m ok with, some say jokes I don’t care anymore, they talk but none of them seem either scared, nor happy. Just a bit tense. I would try to break the ice but I’m too tired... I ask Shaun if I can go to bed and he says:

“If you hear shooting, you jump in that bunker under the—”

“—After ALL I’ve been through—”

“—s for your own safety—”

“—still gonna treat me like a—”

“—You have NO IDEA—!”

“—poo-poo-pee-pee in my pants—”

“—you and your stupid, fucking jo—”

“—kidding, I’m just a kid after all and life is a—”

“—worst nightmares you haven’t SEEN such be—”

“—As you say, I shall hide in the hole in the ground—”

“—STUPID, fucking IDIOT—!” The boys are watching us bickering, nonamused, mostly confused.

“—these SO INTELLIGENT wolves are definitely not—”

“—OH, they will find you and then they’ll WAIT—!”

“—I’m sure they’ll just play cards for hours a—”

“—play with your stupid BONES yo—”

“—and smoke cigars like in that p—”

“—your ASHES they’ll puff—”

“—sounds like my kind of crow—”

“—DEAD, THAT’S WHAT YOU’LL BE, FUCKING DEAD!!!!!!!!!!”

“ ... ”

Look, I mean, at this point, if this is a gag, it’s the dumbest gag ever and I’m not even going to bother to criticize them for it. So, I just surrender and go to bed.

“Ok guys, good night and have fun!”

“ ... ”

I leave, all smiles on my faces... Still no laughter, still no... These guys are actually serious?... I...

I climb in my bed. I look at the ceiling. A rotating fan is mounted on the ceiling. It is rotating with average speed and it gives off a soft breeze I could go without right now. I turn it off. First, I try voice command. Then, I try the switch on the wall labeled {‘Fan’}. The fan slowly grinds to a halt. Science!

I close my eyes and try to think of nothing. Absolutely nothing. Only nothing and of course nothing and nothing. Especially nothing now that I keep thinking about that nothing, I should think of other nothing, I mean, it’s nothing! The boys will do something, I’m sure of it! And we’ll be ok, nothing will happen to us...

... I try to find a soft spot in the medieval bedding but I’m not having much success with that. I try to curl, to swirl and then finally cocoon like in a womb, I cover myself with all the blankets, a fluffy tomb of insomniac numbly feelings of why are we camping here instead of some FUCKING fortress somewhere? If these things are SO FUCKING dangerous, are they so FUCKING stupid... Uhm... AMA? What would she do alone in these woods? Where would she hide? I bet she hides really well, I mean... The way she climbs those walls and jumps and... Spider-cricket-mammoth-cat... something. She’s quite... special. I bet she eats those wolves for dinner and breakfast, raw, hah! Yeah...

... Some time passes... I try not to open my eyes or turn on my H.U.D.... Maybe hours have passed. But I’m determined to sleep and get this night over with without any incident. Maybe the wolves are smart enough not to mess with our boys and their huge... campfire. I mean how BIG could they be? I know wolves are, in general, bigger than dogs but not by that much.

Genetically general species you mean.

Yeah, whatever... But mutations are not like that! Most mutations are not beneficial... Most mutations kill you, that’s cancer basically!

Yeah, it kills the weak!

Everyone can die of cancer!

Some more than others!

Thousands of types, genotypes, monotypes—

—You smoke, you go broke, no tokens, no—

—no guys are probably mutants too!

Civilizational mutants for sure! I mean how could you live with them in a society? If they just keep flinging SHIT at you?!

...

...

Yeah, ok, sorry! I know they’re probably just trying to survive, like everybody else. Or at least they think they—

—Shhhh, it wasn’t about that!

U not hearing?

No, I... Hey, wait a minute...

My ears curb and rotate as I try to pick up the sounds... They're distant... very, very distant. But chilling nonetheless. Wild, wild howling after howling of various wolfen timbres. They definitely communicate at very long distances judging by the large spectrum of directions of the howling sounds. I didn't think predators could form packs larger than fifteen, or let's say thirty, but still, even then you're stretching it. Well, hyenas do form clans of up to eighty individuals. But to have hundreds in a single pack...? The horror... The horror rises in me when I THINK I hear the howling approaching and morphing into growling. Maybe I be losing my minding. But as long as no shooting, I mean, we'll be fining...

... The howling has died out. I only pick up short, seldom signals and they don't bother me anymore. Well, not as much as before. I just keep and keep...

...—

—falling in deep sleep for a second or so and then wake up shortly thereafter. It's like that feeling when you think you're gonna fall off an edge. Vertigo, I mean. Or do I? And then I wake up again... And again... again...

...

Wake up! ... All wet... same dream used to... think? Not sure but was... dark and hhh... Look around, twilight outside but dark. Throat dry... Room too dark, no flasks of liquid... Then... red eyes... what is... No... No, IS THAT... CERN-O-WOLF!?!?! HEELP... HEELP CAN'T SCREAM, GRAB GUN, WHERE IS, HELP CAN'T MOVE, NO MOUTH HELP—!!!

—I wake up oh my dear oh fu...! I'm really sweaty... I... I'm sure I'm awake for real now! I hope! Dear KEK, what a nightmare! A nightmare in a nightmare or something... It's darker outside than it was in my dream... But inside it's a bit brighter. The walls are just as woody as before. Yes, this must be real. My hands are not blurry. I'm still thirsty... Heh, didn't notice those pictures of the wolves before. Those on the walls. Really ironic, heh...

Uhm...

Dem?

What? You've seen those portraits before? I swear I haven't...

Those are...

The windows...

...

...

...

... No, you're fucking kidding me, this is just another nightmare, JUST WAKE ME—!

—Shut up and calm yourself just—

—BACK AWAY—

—BUT WHY DIDN'T THEY ATTACK YET?! IF THEY'RE SO SMART—

—JUST GRAB THE FUCKING GUN ALREADY AND—

—RUN! RUN—!

—WHERE? I'VE FUCKING PISSED MYSELF! THEIR EYES ARE FOLLOWING US WTF—!

—CALM THE FUCK—!

—OUR Father—!

—WHO are you?

WHAT are you...?

...

...

I stop and watch them closely. The wolves are just watching me back. I mean the windows are quite high, at least two meters above the floor and they're quite small windows, about the size of one or two human heads each. So, they must be propped up on the ledges with their paws or just... have been looking at me for who knows how long. I'm astonished... Amazed... I expected them to growl, to snarl, to try to come in. They could definitely break those windows... How did the boys did not...? I thought they had motion detectors installed around the perimeter... I guess these wolves are really smart. I approach the windows, slowly, my eyes fixed on their big, brown, dark eyes. One of them drops from my view. The other two still watch me. Then... they disappear too. I look around, check the other windows... Nothing. I check the entrance... Nothing... The boys are still around the fire... Do these guys ever sleep? Shaun has broken away from the pack and is close to my cabin now. I exit and greet him...

"Do you ever sleep?"

"Can you?"

"I actually did for a bit... or in bits. But I had this thing... I mean, you're not going to believe me, but..."

"..." Shaun is all eyes and ears and whatever other sensors he has in that head.

"I... saw some wolves at the window—"

"—ARE YOU FUCKING SHITTIN' ME?!" And he storms towards the back of the cabin but I shout —

"—THEY'RE GONE! ... Or at least I think so, but..." Shaun is back and he's listening to me but then —

"—Why didn't you scream or something, why I mean how in the fuck I mean what the shit I mean —" Shaun is stuck on a wtf loop so I try to unwind him.

"—Shaun, calm down!"

"Fucking kid tells me to calm down when THESE FUCKING—!"

"—CALM THE FUCK DOWN, SMOKE SOME OF THAT AMA SHIT—!"

"—POTHEAD STUPID GREEN FUCKING—!"

"—GONNA CALM YOUR SHIT UP YOUR FUCK—!"

"—HERE'S WHAT I NEED TO STAY ALIVE, LOOK!" And Shaun shoves a KEKdamn stim almost up my nose and it reads... 'adreno-' something-something-whatever, I don't care old man wtf—

"—Ok, so?"

"So, stop giving me these FUCKING-STUPID reasons to have a KEKdamn heArT aTtAck!"

"..."

"..." Steaming... stim-ing... less steaming... Calming...

"..."

"... Are you sure it wasn't just a dream?"

"Ninety-nine-point-nine per cent purely certain, surr!" Heh...

"..."

"... I actually watched them for more than a minute. At first, I thought they were portraits —"

"—You must be some schizo—"

"—I swear, man! Look, they were watching ME through the window while I slept —!"

"—bullshit story you cooked up to KILL ME with your stupid —!"

"—can believe what you want, old man! All I'm telling you is what I saw."

"..."

“...” I’m dead serious and dead certain, I’m getting quite good at distinguishing this reality from the others. At least... I think so...

“... You mean...? But I’ve... This is why they scare me, boy, don’t you understand?”

“Nope, not really.”

“These... beasts! They always learn, they always do something I don’t expect. If what you say is true... I mean... Boy, these guys never send scouts like that! And we usually pick them up on the sensors, I mean what the FUCK—!” Aaaaand he’s back to re-stim-ing and steaming and rebreathing his whatever devils he has in that old mind of his; he must be out of it but STILL! ... If what he says is true... Then... Why...? Why the sudden change in their strategy? Why risk it in such a small number...? Three. Or at least that’s how many I saw. Why would they just watch me? They didn’t seem... to prey on me. Only... Heh, must be my imagination...

“Look, Shaun... Sorry, but I’m not so sure anymore. Maybe I just imagined it. What you said about the wolves really stuck with me through the night...”

“... No boy, I believe ya, I just hope you’re wrong...” Shaun takes off through the back of the shack and disappears into the darkness of the relative morning. The sky is a bit bright and the fire burns to quite some height. I’m... amazed and amused and confused. I’m content, again. I mean, maybe the wolves aren’t that bad and these guys are just... Paranoid or something. Paranoid androids, imagine that! Heh... Mutant wolves from the past versus paranoid androids from the future in an intergalactic battle through space and forests! How’s that for a splonkomey? Whatever, I doubt I can sleep anymore.

I get close-by to the fire and huddle among the non-chatty fellows and try to break the ice with some bait —

“—How’s it hangin—?” But my joke opener is cut short by Shaun spawning out of the darkness, in a hurry, although it’s quite bright here by the fire and says —

“—Get off your asses, we got a horde incoming, NOW!” soon followed by the motion-detection alarms.

“Yes, surr—!”

“—DEM, IN THE FUCKING HOLE, NOW!”

“—YES, MADAME!” And I run before he or she slaps me for that bit of nonsense and I pack and I jump down in the hole, I barricade and sit in the darkness, in the shouting and growling, barking, shooting, booting, itch — —scratching, howling, zapping, running, running, I’m just sitting, sitting, wtf am I doing here it’s just hundreds and hundreds of stampeding feet above and around me, it’s like wtf is this bullshit this can’t be happening, some of the boys I can’t hear, I hear revving of the engines, the bikes, they’re leaving!?! For real, they’re just gonna leave me here??? WTF, I thought they cared about me, stomping, stomping, stomping, stomping...

My heart almost grinds to a halt. I’m petrified, mortified, sterilized, paralyzed, I wish I didn’t come here but now I’m stuck... Maybe... The stomping becomes rarer, the howling sounds farther... Maybe... I... I try to... Fetal position... I wait... A bit chilled out but I’m ok. In the darkness, in this little tomb, this little womb under the shack. I’ll be fine... I’ll be...

...

...

...

... I wake up... I hear birds chirping... Much activity outside but no... wolves? No Shaun or the boys either... I open up the trapdoor... Slowly... I come out... I guess I'm fine... But then... I hear the... breathing... The... Breathing! Behind me I slowly turn I'm... Three grayish-whiteish-blackish wolves. Most of those colours cover them in large patches. All three of them are watching me with curious eyes. They look almost... Could they be the... same as those who watched me from the windows?

...?

No growling... No howling... No barking... One of them tries to lick one of the others. They have a bit of rough play... They seem young... Even though they're at least twice the size of what I imagined a wolf to be. Nonaggressive. I mean, they could've just snatched me by now. I... I just go for the exit, wanting to leave the shack. They... start following me. They pass me by! I... almost felt fear but... They don't fear me... And don't want to eat me, thankfully... I step outside and this gang of three wolves is just... doing their thing around. Sniffing, trailing, tracking, playing, sometimes they stay behind, other times they run ahead. Whenever I stop, they wander around and look for food, I guess. I only have... a bit of provisions but I'm not sure it's a wise idea to... get them used to being fed. I'd rather just watch and see what they're up to. I am amazed. I watch one of the 'older' ones, or just bigger of them all. They all look very real, no synths or something, I'm sure of it! Their behaviour amazes me... I am truly in awe to be escorted by such beasts for whom Shaun only had words of terror. I'm not afraid right now.

I pass through the forest up ahead by following the waypoints of the map, which was given to me by Fox. [9:49] I'm not very far from the rendezvous point but there's still much ground to cover, at least a thousand feet or so. I'd be there too early anyway. The path is steep and treacherous at times, but I'm... These wolves actually like me or something, because they don't mind me much and yet they keep following me. One of them passes by, close to me. I call to him: "Psst, boy, come here!" But nothing, he doesn't care. I try "Who's a good boy?" Nothing. I whistle. Nothing. I guess my lang is alien to them. Maybe I should try learning their lang. But there's no sound-based communication taking place between the wolves. They know exactly where they're going, I mean, they probably have no idea where I'm going and they certainly don't care. I follow my tracks and they follow mine. From spot to spot I spot some long-foot-crosses but they have these circles... Mounds of dirt have grown at their bases. They look almost... human sized. Could they be buried humans? Wow... There's lots of these... presumably 'graves' around here. This is quite a hazardous place, maybe... But, I'm ok, I climb easily. I feel at home in these mountains... These wolves are wonderful! I bet they'll just defend me if... Oh my, what if they'll attack other people? How do I get rid of them?!?! I really need to...

I stop in my tracks and the wolves stop too. I mean, they still wander around like satellites but... The strongest of them, the 'leader' I'll call him from now on, lays down by one of the graves. The other two, younger I presume, keep playing around, they're always on the move. How can I...? How can I take the lead? I approach the leader. I sit next to him. He looks at me. Then he looks away, his eyes surveying in the distance. I take my hand, palm upwards and I approach his mouth, really slowly. He sniffs it. He then... lowers his head below my palm. I pet him for a little while. AND... then, the other two immediately spawn out of nowhere, one to my left side and the other one to my right side. They all sniff, they all await... my petting. I pet each of them, I try to treat them as equally as possible but I only have two hands, guys! Come on! Ok, heh, they're quite playful heheheh, oh my I hope they didn't just get a taste of me or something dear KEK—!

—... I'm fine, I mean these two young ones are really playful but... Heh, imagine that! What in the...? They're certainly raised in the wild... Or are they? I'm not sure... They have no safenets or some other gadget...

If only I had an XRFID sniffer... Nah, they look pretty wild though. They don't respond to any 'commands', at least not in my lang...

I get on my feet and ready to leave and the wolves immediately sprint off ahead of me. They are still in my close perimeter but they're now patrolling for longer distances around me. I get this feeling like... We're somehow related. I know it sounds stupid but somehow... I mean, DNA is in all of us, so we're all related, even trees are related to us on some level.

Yeah, I bet that's what trees think about all the time!

LOL!

Ha ha... Whatever, my point is... If these wolves are the same ones from last night... or morning or whatever... Then maybe... they also feel related to ME!

US!

Yeah, whatever... Maybe we're all actually wolves from outer space! That explains everything about me, eh?

At this point I'm willing to believe even —

—NO!

... Why not?

...

Because...

Because?

...

Because... it's painful... I don't WANT TO BELIEVE IT, OK?!?!?

...

Noncry...

I'm not... I'm just... Look, let's not think about that, ok? I'll... I'll lay off the wacky conspiracies if I have to —

—Look, man...

...

...

What... if?

If what?

What if you...?

We...

Never...

You sure about that?

Yes...

Nonsure...

... Why? Why Bigbrain? Of all of us, you should —!

Nonwant...

...

... Ok, look, I'm going to, just, lay back and...

... Maybe...

Maybe?

If nontrue then still noncertainty.

If true then... certainty.

The proof is there...

What proof?

On whose side are you on now?

All I'm saying is...

You just want to play devil's advocate!

No, No! Just hear me out...

Listening...

There's no proof of what we are!
No proof! No one has ever seen this before...
So... we're either the next level of humanity or—!

—Here we go AG—!

—OR...! An actual devil.

Disconnecting...

You mean a metalhead—?

—NO, THE ONE WITH THE HOOVES AND HORNS AND PITCH—!
—SHHH U SCARY—!

—THAT'S REALLY STUPID AND YOU SHOULD KNOW—!

—THEN HOW ... the fuck did we rip apart a hundred Nomos?

Only you can answer that, I'm afraid.

I didn't see nothing either.

Me neither...

Well... look, it's nonlogical and nonsensical, ok? There's no such things man! Even aliens sound much more pl—

—ALIENS AND DEVILS ARE THE SAME THING YOU STUPID, FUCKING—!

—STAY IN YOUR FUCKING SPACE OR I'M GONNA RIP—!

—STOP!

...

...

U both devils.

...

...

U both angry.

...

...

U both sad.

...

...

...

He's right.

I'm sorry.

It's fine, me too.

Look, all I'm saying is...

Statement closing...

Fine.

... It doesn't matter really. Maybe devils can...
get redemption too, eh?

Hmmmm...

Maybe... Maybe not...

Well, I don't know it. You don't know it.

No, but look... As a devil, you're supposed to be damned already or doomed or whatever. We're... I mean, look at us? We LOOK human. We FEEL human, don't we?

Yeah, so? Maybe we're some doppelganger or—

—Yeah, I know all those people said they saw us in some City whatever or other—

—They SWORE we looked exactly like that man; THEY SWORE—!

—BUT WE'VE NEVER BEEN TO THOSE PLACES, MAN!!!

...

...Whatever...

Yes, many things don't make sense... We just have to accept them. And move on. Can't go on about some 'conspiracy' this and 'conspiracy' that. It hurts my... our brain, ok?!?!

Then how do you explain us?

...

You mean the three of us?

Yes!

...

You think others are like this? Have you ever heard of...?

... No, but... Then what, you mean we're NONSANE? Is that what you're trying to tell me?

What does nonsane EVEN MEAN?

False sane.

...

... Yes, but... Who defines it? And what, or how do you...?

Prove it?

Yes!

You try to disprove it.

Ok. How?

...

Does nonsane person... ask self if nonsane?

Hmmm, good question.

How many wackos at the elderpens ever said this?

'Yes, nutter here. I am a certified, crazy person!'

None I can remember. They all thought everyone else was nonsane. Well, some of them seemed to have some sort of self-awareness but...

But?

Yeah, I mean... If you think about it, self-reflection is just that, you check yourself so you don't wreck yourself, you know what I mean?

Hmmm, ok.

Yes, so, every time you ask the question 'Am I going nonsane?' you do a reality check. You just make sure that you... or me... or us or whatever we're doing inside this head, we make sure we haven't gone... off the main pathway or something, do you understand??

I hope so.

Me 2.

That's good, that's optimism! That helps us stay sane!

Yeah well, any idea where we're going?

We're almost over the edge of the mountain. The foliage above me is fantastic! Light seeps in and washes me with its warmth... We reach the edge and I should see some valley on the other side of the mountain but the trees are quite tall, I can barely see... anything. The mountain top is steep, I try to go for the deep, deep, DEEP stepping and careful trekking on the pathways, well, I say, they're not pathways, more like ways of path through mud and crap.

Lots of optimism there, I tell ya!

Whatever, I'm up and down and above and below some trees, left right, careful sledding on the leaves, the branches broken everywhere, I see a plateau and the rendezvous point in the distance, it's... close to some... Gates? A gate made from strong wood-and-steel beams and parts of the mountain are surrounded by some camouflaged walls of wooden, steely beams, vines are growing everywhere on the walls/fences/whatever. Green and yellow the palisades rise. I await. To approach is not wise. Like a poacher, a watcher, a sneaker I spy the ominous gates up ahead. I await and the minutes go by like hours. No movement, no sentries, no nothing. No activity I can notice. The wolves sit around me, just waiting. They sense something too. I watch their deep, dark, watchful eyes. So solemn, so intelligent... They really are quite intelligent, because they're not... violent. At least I hope so! They certainly aren't violent with me. I still don't know anything of how they'll react around others but I'd hate it if they got killed because of some misunderstanding... I hope they're smart enough to... "Stand your ground and don't do anything stupid when the time comes!" Both sides I mean. Otherwise, there's not much I can do, I think. They're on their own and I'm on my own. I guess I'm less canine and more feline.

... [13:36] ... I know now how a sentry must feel. A watchguard, just sitting around for hours and hours. You can't read a book or watch a flick or do any kind of entertainment. Your job is to keep watch. For hours and hours. I'm feeling peckish! I open up my bag and I pull out one of the rations that the G.G. guys gifted me before we left Liberon. All the tails of the wolves are wagging like unsynchronized metronome arms. Oh, I see... I unravel the package and a strong smell of cooked flesh and baked pastry comes out from the insides. The frequency of the tail wagging accelerates. I bite, it's delicious! Tail wagging reaches astronomical levels.

"OK, OK! You can have one piece each! But only one!"

I throw them each a piece and they just gulp it down like maniacs, I don't even think they bothered to chew it up or anything. Tail wagging is on average speed. Pfft, I eat about half of my ration while I keep throwing bits of it to the wolves. Of course, none of us got satiated by the end, but...! We're better off now than we were before. I show them the wrapper because their tail wagging tells me they don't believe me there's no more food left! Well, they're right, I have another ration. One of the younger ones starts licking the wrapper while the other tries to shave the other corner. The leader approaches and smells around my bag, looks at me with a bit of suspicion and then he walks away slowly, back the way we came here. His 'acolytes' soon follow after they managed to lick the wrapper clean. And just like that, they disappear over the rocky horizon... For real! The only reason they accompanied me was to get some food!?! You sneaky-tricky, smart guys, what can I say?

At least now I don't have to worry about any misunderstandings. I take a bit of cover in my spot and try to get a kilobit of afternoon nap or so... It's a megabit too bright for comfort but... I do get a nanobit of shut-eye... [14:53] ...

...

...

[[‘Calling ‘Kin1337’ ... line disconnected...’]]

[14:59] ... [15:05]

...

... [15:09]

... [15:14] ...

[[‘Calling ‘Ama1337’ ... line disconnected...’]]

[15:21] ... [15:—

—The wolves are back! They’ve come running over the broken back of the mountain and they’re moving with great speed! They surround me, tails not wagging, a bit growly, a bit whiny... The leader approaches me and he starts to pull on my sleeve, on my arm, on my leg, he gently shakes and pulls but with great alarm.

“What is it boy?? What do you need?” But he just pulls and pulls, I don’t understand!

But then... I... My ears twitch. The yelling is too familiar. ‘No Mo...’ ‘No Mo...’ No more time to sit around, let’s go! I run and run and follow the wolves, they take me up a dried stream, then down a treacherous slope and we climb under a... steep cliff. It forms a neatly hidden cave underneath and we hole up and hold up and just wait. I can barely see what’s happening outside but I do see part of the mysterious palisades! And one of the gates, it seems... The yelling gets closer. Some overdriven, over-distorted, repetitive, nonsense music is spewing out of some speakers. Digital speakers I mean... Revving engines, revving engines, growling noises, howling choices. Wild boys, mad toys, savages, ravages, these Nomos only live to fight or what? Do they even have any allies? I hear no zapping or plasmatic booms, only cannon-like shots... And railgun pews. And then... The walls, the walls! Small openings in the wall are uncovered and spherical drones are launched out of them. They hover and they split in the middle to reveal barrels which shoot with lasers and other stuff back at the Nomos! More drones come out; this time they look torpedo-shaped. They launch with great speed towards the Nomos and...

“*BOOM**Boom**BOOM—**—Oom—**—OM*!” Lots of yelling and horrible gargling sounds, dear KEK what the F—!

“—BO-CHOOOOOOOK KOKO!” A terrifying voice booms out of the speakers and the feet stomping becomes louder, the Nomos are rushing for the gates, I guess. They certainly must be gluttons for punishment!

Smaller openings than before appear in the walls and in the gate and the shots sound automatic, hundreds of rounds per second like chain-guns, miniguns, multi-layered-proto-super-guns-whatever they just ravage the savages who just run like IDIOTS at the palisades, their weapons are useless against these walls! That certainly can’t be wood between the metal beams because the Nomos are doing NO DAMAGE to them! What the... Do Nomos ever win a battle? Are they really this stupid to just keep dying for nothing? I don’t understand...

The shots die down and my heart has resumed its beating now. No more screams, no more shouting, no nothing. The holes in the walls close down, but not before the sentries left alive return inside.

Wow, just wow... Then, square-like bots shoot out from some holes at the base of the walls. They... I take a closer peek to see more of the landscape and the bots are busily collecting the metal and trash and pieces and everything else, including the bodies. Those with the bodies are building a pile a bit further ahead. Those with the trash and scrap return to the holes in the palisades. Except for the redblack patches on the ground and the

big pile of bodies forming in the middle, the valley returns pretty much to the same landscaping it had before the battle. The pile is all formed up and then the bots... Spray out a foamy liquid over the bodies. THEN...! They shoot out napalm at the bodies! The pyre instantly bursts out into a raging fire. It burns up way, way faster than that pyre made out of wood. I suspect it has something to do with that foamy thing... But I don't get to —

—when I fall off of the rock due to my wayward angle and I roll away for a few meters. Three or so of the 'cleaner-bots' immediately lock on to my position! I barrel'y rise to my feet before they start to —

“—Ahk toong! Neesht beevegan unt—” A.A. on “{—keep your hands skywards where we can study them. Do not create any unexpected motions. We demand entire group action(?) and no damage will be applied to your person if you adjust.}” I try to follow instructions as accurately as possible but this darn Yama rip-off is not making my job too easy. “Dunk'eh shewn {Thank you}!” That last part sounded like 'Shaun'... Maybe he's inside! Can't trust this A.A.'s translation anyway. The wolves are satelliting around, they don't care about me or the bots. Luckily the bots don't care either. The bots say nothing else, well, I say 'nothing'. It's the same thing on repeat. I only have to wait, I guess. Several minutes-like-hours later the gates open and five individuals come out. Four of them, two on the left and two on the right, are wearing dark-green-camo-army-armor top to bottom, including full metal helmets. A gas mask of sorts hides their faces. The masks have red lenses and a tube around the mouth area, which stretches down to the middle of their torsos and then winds up behind their backs. The individual in the middle does not wear a mask nor helmet nor armor. A black service cap or hat sits smugly on his head. A long, brown trench-coat covers two thirds of his body. Black, slick pants of sorts adorn the rest of his legs...

They move forwards, towards me, they're about fifty feet away. The one in the middle scans around and behind me but not me, maybe. He puts two or three fingers to his mouth and whistles very, very loudly. The wolves come running right at him and they're quite excited! The guy pets them one by one, one time each, and then says something I don't clearly pick up. The wolves sprint away into the distance. Interesting... The individuals move closer to me and then they stop, right between the bots. The individual in the middle studies me top to bottom. He steps forward. Passes me by, his eyes fixed on mine, the whole time. He checks out my behind. I dare not look behind me. He then returns to his original spot. And then he says...

“{Who are you and what are you doing here}?”

“Eh... Uhm...” Let's see, it says here to pronounce... “Eessh been... eye... no, eyn —”

“—Parre leh— {—speak baguette}?” What the...?

“No, I speak Mon—! I mean, commons—”

“—Ah, Oh Kay! Are you retarded?”

“Well, not in a literal sense—”

“—You are trespassing Kraut terr—”

“—not see any signs about no K—”

“—right before you passed the grave-line—”

“—Really?? Is it some quantum-sized ss—?!”

“—SILENCE!”

“...”

The face, of the 'Leader' I'll call him from now on, was showing maximum rage for the whole duration of the shout. His head even lifted up higher than I thought it was physically possible. I almost thought his tiny

moustache was going to jump away from his face! But as soon as his shout ended, he returned to his calm self. Right on que. His lang usage has no 'particularities' like Jaques had... Impeccable 'pro-noun-see-ay-shun' I must say. As such, I quietly wait for further instructions with no further obstructions on my part.

"Your name and reason for trespassing, now!" The four guys at his sides point their pointy rifles at me.

"My name is _____ and I'm supposed to rendezvous with my squad right in front of your glorious gates! Unfortunately for me, I've arrived a bit too early."

The 'leader' seems a kilobit... confused. Then he opens his mouth and... "Who do you work for?"

"For the Res'."

The leader ponders... He checks me top-to-bottom again, must be some underworld ritual of sorts judging by the frequency with which I've encountered this weird behaviour. And then... he continues "{Check his I.D.}"

The maskface next to the leader, his right side I mean, although, from my P.O.V., maskface is on the left, of course... He checks a gadget on his wrist and his cheeks light up, no, not those cheeks, you cheeky-choker—! "{—Checks out.}"

"{Check bio-I.D.}"

Maskface marches with army-steps towards me and says "Please authorize bio-I.D. verification."

I 'gladly' let maskface over here insert his shiny, golden—JACK—in my head and I pat my sig on the H.U.D.

"{It checks out, surr{sir}.}" 'Sir'? Maskface returns to his initial position to the left/right side of the Leader.

The Leader takes a third top-to-bottom scan of my body, using his eyes or whatever gadgets he has in that head, he smiles and says "{The Res' must be running on fumes.}" And they all laugh in their own Kraut way.

I join them in laughter and say "Nah, I just happened to be the right idiot at the wrong time." And I laugh some more but they've stopped laughing a while ago. At least I tried.

"Follow me." The leader and his gang turn one-eighty in an army-fashion and they march back to the gates. The big bots retreat back to their holes in the walls and the little bots in their holes. The cleaner-bots I mean. The holes in the fences I mean. And I follow the big boys inside the big gates but not before the big, strong Leader faces me again with big, bad eyes in his head and says "Don't do anything stupid."

I look at him with big, innocent smileys on my muggy. And I say nothing. Because as we all know... As much as I'd like to, I can't promise that.

Inside the gates it looks like the insides of a... castle. At least the 'guest area' part of it. Multilayered, multi-heavy-stoned, multi-halls, poly-stairs, plenty of doors and plenty of masked guards and non-masked and more official looking guards. A granitelike, dark-reddish stone was used to build this place, although... I'm not sure what kind of material it is. It looks marrowy. Some of them observe me, some of them ignore me. Some of them study me closely and some of them seem... very likely, disgusted by me. Fascinating...

"Welcome to Wolfenburg." The Leader is colder than these walls in his tone of voice. "You shall remain here unless ordered otherwise. You shall not leave this area unless ordered to do so, do you understand?"

"Yes, sir!"

"..."

"Yes, surr?"

"... Good."

And the 'grammar teacher' scurries away inside the middle hall, accompanied by his group of 'lang helpers'. I take a seat on the nearby tiny black-wooden bench and I look around and wonder... What in the Hades is this place? These guys seem serious enough. And not welcoming enough. At least not to me... The wolves were certainly friendlier than these guys, and it's their wolves! Heh... The fashion around here seems kind of bland.

Even OVSEFO have more variation in their style. I mean, these Kraut guys are stylish too, don't get me wrong, but... They're all wearing the same stuff. I mean, sure, they're separated in groups of uniforms, just like in the army... Probably by ranks or function... No, the rank must be those lines on their shoulders. Or is it the...? One of the younger ones, the one close in front of me, is guarding the entrance. I look at him. He pretends he's not looking at me, he is just watching straight ahead at the wall or something. Very official looking. But I know he is watching me. He is watching every move I make and every breath I take or leave. One wrong move and he has to make a decision. The decision is already taken, of course, because you don't discuss morality in times of crisis now, do you? Heh... But I wonder... Only as a fantasy... If he would actually pull the trigger if I did do something stupid. I mean, do I look dangerous? Maybe I do... His eyes sneakily check me out, I've been staring for a while now. It must be quite noncomfortable for him right now. I just keep staring. A battle of gazes. He looks back at me. I smile. He... almost, but then his eyes return to the wall.

I take a look at the floor for a second or so and then say "Don't you ever get bored by this?"

The lad looks at me a little alerted... Almost as if he's asking me to not attempt to establish contact...

I look down at the floor again, for a minute or so, and then say "I think I know how it feels. I once had to stay on watch for a couple of hours... Almost felt like ending it all at the end of a barrel."

"You shouldn't joke about that." The lad stares me down, this time a little worried and for longer than usual. And he's right, maybe I shouldn't. Maybe...

I observe him some more, then I smile and return my eyes to the floor.

"But you're right... It's never fun." His eyes are straight, nonblinking, nonmoving, only watching The Wall.

I let him stand with his thoughts as I sit into mine. H.U.D. off. H.U.D. on. [16:32]. H.U.D. off. Maybe I should keep H.U.D. on, just in case one of these Krauts decides to talk in their Krautish again. Not that this stupid Yama crap is of much help but... it helps. I remember the wolves... Heh... And here I thought they were wild.

I can't help but remark "That troop of wolves you got out there... They ate my food and then saved my life."

The young guard looks at me, puzzled. His face actually turned into a scrambled puzzle. His mouth opens... "Where? What? I mean, how?"

"Uhm... When those Nomos attacked, I wasn't far away from the—"

"—You're lying!"

"..." ... "...It's the truth."

"..." The puzzle of his face has now been swept to the floor and stomped on with both feet.

"... They actually escorted me for quite a while, we met back at that camp in the—"

"—They are trained to alert us of any trespassers. Even attack if necessary."

"Well, they sure seemed friendly to me. And I didn't feed them till much later."

"... It makes no sense..."

"Yeah, I get that all the time."

"..."

The guard resumes watching the proverbial 'fly on the wall' behind me. He sure seems non-trustful of me. I don't expect him to... But I trust him. At least on what he said about the wolves. Imagine that...

There are two wolves inside you.

3 wolves.

One is good.

Hey, what do you mean—?

1 is bad.

HEY, come on—!

And the younger one is there to keep the balance.

:>

Heh, I guess you're right.

No, you're right!

I'm centered!

No, you're left!

>:P

Heh... Time flies by at different speeds until a white-uniformed guard, all metal, complete with facemask and faceshield, arrives in front of me and 'invites' me to follow him or her. I 'accept' the 'invitation' and she or he escorts me through the halls on the right, right under the main stairs leading to the upper-lower-right levels, or left, depending on your views of life. We step inside a white cabin of sorts and the guard says...

"You wait here."

"Why?"

But the guard doesn't answer, he just turns around and leaves. An automatic, orange hatch closes in front of me and I hear one close behind me too. I look behind to confirm I am now imprisoned in this cell of sorts. Tiny holes in the walls don't do much for my optimism. Then... steam sprays out of the holes! Or smoke... Are they fumigating me? For real? I guess heh... Must be some ger-Mono-phobia off-shoot system or some... Then... I... fall...

...

... I wake up... in the darkest room. I'm in a bed. I'm not tied or anything. The only light in this room is from a desk lamp of sorts. It shines brightly white on a heavy person sitting in a chair behind the desk. I don't see his face but by the look of his arms... Both of his arms are cyber-prosthetics now... Yes, it has to be him. I grab a nearby shelf-lift myself up on my feet and approach the desk. His head leans in to reveal his glorious, shiny top.

"Jaques... No-spik-long-time!" I feel like crying but I don't. It's the manliest thing I can do right now.

"Rumours of my death have been highly exa-jeh-rated!" Jaques is all smiles and I smile too, of course!

"I don't trust rumours. But I do find them... humorous!"

"I know boy, but I have to tell you... I was close."

"For real? I mean, I'm sorry for your—"

"—Don't worry about this—" he shows me his newly-installed arm "—it is nothing. But that thing... I almost had him, the KEK*SMASH* BASTARD!" Jaques hits the desk and breaks a huge hole in the middle of it!

"..."

"... Sorry, mon cher {my dear} but that..." Jaques almost hits the desk again but controls himself. Barely.

"What are you talking about?"

Jaques leans back in his chair... Then, he rises to his feet. He takes a cigar out of a pocket in his chest but then... he puts it back. I see the sign with the crossed cig on the wall and my confusion disappears. Jaques wanders around the room. He takes the cigar out—again—but this time he also takes the lighter out. AND—! The smoke "—..." ... rises to... "..." ... the ceiling... "..." ...

[“*ding* {Smoke forbid! Taxation ticket released for—}”]

“—Want one? Fines on moi anyway! Oh-hohoho*cough*hohoooh...”

“Sounds like you’re running out of creds to pay them.”

“Yeah, well... I’ve got better things to worry about right now.”

“ ... ”

Jaqqes approaches me and scrutinizes me for a while... And then he says “I am really pissed, _____! I almost had him! Or it or whatever—”

“—Don’t worry about that, I got her, I mean it—”

“—What are you talking about?”

“... I killed Mina.”

“... I know that, boy and I’m proud of you. But I am not talking about that she-en {dog}!”

“What? ... But the Seventeen Seventy—”

“—You think Mina did that? Heh...” Jaqqes is a bit amused and/also saddened “... Mina never stepped inside Liberta, never ever...”

“Then... was it the bug-eyed driver?”

“What bug-eyed...? Oh, I did get a memo on that... Yes, I am not sure about that guy. His records show he never left Liberta. Born and raised there, but... Nonetheless, we’re still investigating it. Or him or whatever.”

“Who’s we? Why aren’t you back with the Res’? SHE-uh-I-mean-you-know-who is still ACCUSED of killing YOU!” My anger seeps out!

“... _____, I understand your frustrations... But I don’t trust Le Res’ anymore.”

“ ... ”

“... As an organization I mean.”

“... And you trust THESE guys???”

“... They are the only ones I trust right now.”

“... I don’t trust them...”

“... I understand... Listen—” Jaqqes gently grabs my shoulders but I back away “—...”

My anger is managed but I let it be known that, right now... I am a bit nontrustful of you, Jaqqes.

“We will solve that problem, do not worry about it. This is why I called a meeting with our... friends. They should arrive soon.”

“ ... ”

“I know you probably think these guys are fash—”

“—Aren’t they?”

“Well... Listen, I believe people should have freedom of association. Or to not associate. We all discriminate in one way or another.”

“I don’t.”

“Are you sure about that?”

“ ... ”

“When you chose...” Jaqqes points to the ring on my finger “... you discriminated against all other potential mates.”

“ ... ”

“Your sexual and intellectual preferences are in their nature... discriminatory. And that’s fine!”

“ ... ”

“... You do not have to agree with these guys, _____. You are free to discriminate them back.”

“I don’t think you’re using the same definition—for that word—as I do.”

“ ... ”

“... I thought you were better than this, Jaques!”

“That’s not an argument.”

“...”

“... I cannot please everyone. No one can...”

I avoid Jaques eyes. I know he’s right but I don’t want to agree with him. I mean, sure, maybe they don’t trust ex-Monos but I don’t trust them either! And I don’t see myself as a Mono... But I can’t escape my past. I can only... try to forget about it.

And then I remember... “... Hey, wait a minute... If Mina never went to Liberta, then why did you tell me that story about...?”

“... That was ‘just in case’... They assigned your retreat-path straight to Liberon. Well, I say ‘straight’ —”

“—bet you’re also grandmaster in five-D chess, eh?”

“Bwahohohoo*cough* —” Jaques chokes on some smoke and he drops his cigar to the floor. He picks it up and we observe it closely for a short while... It’s burnt only half-way through. He stubs it out by pressing it on his shoulder. The upper, bio part of his shoulder I mean... The smell of burnt hair and skin fills the room...

“Jaques, what the fuck?”

“... You’re right, I should quit this nonsense. I made this mark as a reminder.”

“... I wish it was that easy.”

“Nothing worth doing is easy.”

We catch up on a few things and discuss and philosophize and I’m... again trustful of Jaques. He’s probably in a very tough position right now so it’s not my place to judge him. Not that I was in a position to judge him in the first place anyway. Anyway, As the Hours pAss, I get this need to Ask...

“Jaques? Do you... Have you found any extra info regarding Father?”

“...” Jaques ponders for a bit with his eyes stuck to the ceiling. Then the lamp. Then he looks at me and says “Nothing worthwhile I’m afraid.”

“I’ll be the judge of that!” And I do my faux-offended tone and pose but... Jaques is not in the mood.

“..._____... I think we both know that...” Although Jaques told me he trusts these ‘guys’, I think it wasn’t the whole truth... I check around the corners of my eyes, of course those cheeky bees could have tapped this whole place... “... your position—” by which he means ‘his’, I mean ‘our’ “—is quite uncertain right now...”

“... I see...”

“... Regardless... I have friends... Like we all do... I will see what can be done...”

“... Thank you Jaques!”

“Speaking of friends...” Jaques checks a square-gadget on his left wrist “...ours should be here soon.”

I watch the door like that watchman was watching the wall of this wicked-willed welding of worn-wickers wanting wardriven ways of worship of wild, weltering whispers, without wonder, without wandering the world, just willingly wilting in wallow, winding in sorrow, walking in sadness, in seriousness, in survival-mode, instinct-mode, tribal-mode, army-mode, milking meager models of marching-music-mentality, mindlessly making morbid munitions, mutually marveling at mass massacres, horrendously sowing mass HATE and harvesting mass NONcreate! Classes for the privileged and Masses for the underprivileged. Only rapture for the underdogs, rupture for the under-men, fracture for the weak, for the meek, for the miscalculated... Missing heart, missile-brained, just mired in a misanthropic mass-hysteria, in a massive mind-numbingly-dumb-crunchingly-mumblingly-jumble, obey or you’ll get into trouble, through the law of the jungle, in the

ORDER of the juggle, no haggle, no bagel, no quarter, NO further, no one is worthy, not me or her, we're all just a fungus, aren't we? My 'dear' Leader! Just a fungus, a huge, humongous, NUCLEAR fungus rising out of your ANUS, as BIG as Uranus and Venus or any of US...!

...But I digress... I could do this all day...

...But... I don't like it that way...

...I prefer to discuss things...

Rationally.... But I doubt these people...

I would like to test my theory but...

I'd rather not take my chances.

We wait in silence. In silences. No silencers. No guards in this room. Probably the only room unguarded by direct human eyes. If there's humans behind those masks anyway... Hmmm... Nah... Maybe just extra-cybered. The door opens. First enters Bills. He smiles at me. I smile back. Then Kin comes in. He half-smirks. I half-smile. Then... Nothing... No AMA... No Dox? I fear for the worst but hope for the best. So, I ask.

"And Dox?"

"Dox had to stay in the Great Hall." Bills seems a bit... annoyed, which is odd.

"Why?" I ask.

"We have more important things to discuss right now." Kin is angered but not in the way I'm used to...

"Why is Dox less important?"

"_____, please let's just—" Jacques intervenes but I'm willing to go full-metal-jack-off this—

"—Why didn't they gas you two?"

"_____..." Bills is... less annoyed and more afraid now.

"What?"

"..."

"..."

"..."

"..." Oh, I see what's going on here... Or do I?

"I'll leave you do your biz." And I shoot towards the door but KIN—

"—EM, STAND YOUR GROWW—!"

"—K YOU!" And I storm out the door and I hear the racket behind me, probably to stop me noncare must go, run, where the fud am I halls everywhere, EVERYWHERE where am I going alarms ALARMS fuck shit boots, I hear I hear go left-right-left-right troops coming, brown trooping troopers incoming—

—IN FRONT WATCH OU—!

—TMD or DM—?

—cockpissPOOPEE—

—Don't lose it, mate! Just grab the—

—STUPID IDIOT HE'S SHOOTING YOU DUMB FUCK HE'S ALREADY SHOOTING, AT LEAST FIVE ROUNDS WTF—

—CALM THE FUK DWN!

...

...

DOWN NOW!

I pull myself as HARD as I CAN. I pull and PULL and...

LEFT NOW!

PUSHING!

RIGHT!

PULLIN'!

JUMP!

TOO HIGH!

TOO LOW YOU MEAN!

... shitting...

LUCKILY FOR ME! ... The bullet only hit my left thigh and just barely and, just... close but not close enough to ring my pinball machine. I land in slo-motioning and sitting and sweating and forcing my hands up and shout — “—ing, STOP SHOOTING!!!”

My head is bowed. My ankles are burning and my ears are drumming. I submit and retreat and await and wait and I'm scared to look up, I just look down, please stop this madness, this loneliness, this scaredness, less and less my head is bowed, I still look down but my eyes are slowly rising, slowly—zoom-in—and I'm analyzing his or her eyes behind the mask, behind the casket of destruction, of obstruction of kindness, but maybe... Awareness? Awe? Nonbelief? I do believe I did it although I don't know how... but it worked. I couldn't move on DMT before this. I was always stuck... like everyone else. But THIS time...! This time I said no. All of my muscles ache right now... I hope he doesn't try to... I'm not sure I can do this again for a while...

Several other guards arrive. Very several. They surround me. To my left, a tunnel forms inside the wall of guards and through the 'manmade' corridor arrives... The Leader... He inspects me, top-to-bottom, just as I expected! I smile. He, as expected, doesn't. He steps behind me and I follow his trail with my smiling eyes. The Leader closely analyzes the holes, the bullet ones in the floors I mean, in the walls. Whatever those things are. The wound stings and I'm bleeding mildly right now, but I'll live, as you would expect. The Leader... faces me. His eyes... never have I seen them so amazed! Never were they ever much amazed by anything ever since I first ever had the 'honor' and pleasure to... Except in that moment when he shouted...

He steps in front of me. He looks down on me, but not in that way, I mean the other way, and he analyzes my wound from a distance. He crouches and analyzes it further. The meager pool of blood forming at my feet changes his face from amazed to amused to worried in the span of a second or more or less.

“{Medic, now!}” The Leader shouts at semi-volume, I mean semi-volume compared to his usual range.

The Leader un-crouches, turns his back to me and then he's... in front of the guy who shot me.

“{Report!}”

“{Five projectiles on objective, logs now uploading.}”

“{Interesting...}”

Oooh... The Leader is impressed! Didn't expect that from a skinny-ass-ex-Mono, eh? Heh...

The Leader does a one-eighty in the gayest way I've ever seen! Then, he steps towards me in the jolliest way I've never thought him of ever being capable of such... He must have fallen IN LOVE WITH ME OH SH —!

“—Interesting...” He walks close to my right, yes, I do mean ‘my’ right, while the medic is patching me up and down my leg by using her or his medical equip’. “... You are a most impressive specimen.”

“Thank you, doctor!” For your information, I’m looking straight at the medic... But he or she doesn’t...

“... Do you have any other skills besides dodging high-velocity rounds?”

“I tell some pretty stupid jokes sometimes.”

“You’re a joker, you say?”

I just smile... fiendishly... I’m an eco-friendly joker.

The Leader is no longer amused. Right on que. The medic did their job and retreats without a word. The Leader? No words. The guards? No words. Me? No cares. The Leader is analyzing the facts, probably, reanalyzing the evidence, possibly, and regurgitating the remains, hopefully just mentally and not physically.

The Leader looks straight into my eyes. And says... “You have one day to decide.”

“Decide what?”

“If you want to join us.”

“Oh... well... Ok, sure, I’ll think about it.” IN YOUR DREAMS, BEEEEEEEEEE —!

—The Leader departs. Ninety-eight percent or whatever of the guards also departs. Only one remains. The one who shot me. At me. He steps in front of me and says...

“I apologize for the inconvenience {trouble}. Please, follow me.”

“No problem. I eat bullets for breakfast!”

The guard is... seems amused but... hmmm. It’s hard to tell with that mask on... The Gender-ambiguous Guard, I’ll call them ‘gag’ from now on, leads me through the hall. No gassing ‘halls’ this time. At least the gag-who-shot-me doesn’t pause to ‘request’ any nonplanned or nonannounced stops in one of them chambers. Good. Good guard... Heheheh, I guess you gotta bite some bullets to get some beans from these bee —!

—DEE-LAY, BROTHA’!

We end up in a left-right-left-straight-left-gay-right-gay-all-gay fashion, this place is SO GAY! Well, I say ‘gay’. They probably don’t like the new meaning of the word. Heh... Imagine that... Long, long time ago it used to mean ‘happy, jolly’, then in pre-HCRPV era it meant like, you know... ‘homoerotic’...

He... he...

And NOW! Back to ‘jolly, happy’ again. The world’s a wheel a’ turning and it keeps on spinning.

And sometimes it’s burning!

But never learning...?

Hopefully not never... We pass some big red doors and then some Big white doors and big, Black gates and some mini-Gates and multi-layered-slots—of—bots—and—nuts-and bolts and screws gone loose in my head, in my heart, in the knot in my throat, like a boat stuck in my chest, in my breast, in my manly-man breasts, well, I say ‘manly’, in my, well, let’s not go there, never mind, anyway, what was I...

...Where were you going with this?

Sorry, I was kilofeet—

—No, I mean you just stepped in—

“—OH, —!”

—SSSHHHH! Don't be screaming...

Babies...

Lots of babies...

I watch through the multi-layered, highly-secured glass a... hatchery of sorts. Well, I say 'hatchery'... The human babies are laying around in their cribs, all fully formed and out of any cyber-womb or whatever they call them here. If they do actually 'hatch' them. Maybe they're doing it the... old way, eh?

Like we and AMA did?

MmmHHHmmm...

Interesting...

Some of the babies are sleeping, some are playing, some are crying, assistants coming, assistants helping, well, assistant-bots I mean but whatever, they do sort of look like human female 'assistants' let's say...

Barely...

Agreeing...

The guard-who-inconvenienced-me walks by and stops to my right. He steps close to me and even closer to the glass than I am. He watches the 'hatchery' closely and I suspect for good reason... lovingly... I look at him or her, well, I suspect it's a 'she' by this point... She doesn't look back at me... I ask...

"You do this for the children, don't you?"

She looks at me and says "We have to..." but the digi-distortion of her voice can't hide her...

I smile... "I understand then..."

And I can agree with that... Disregarding our... differences. Whatever those may be.

I let myself be escorted back to the 'Great Hall'. Dox is sitting and waiting on the bench and she looks HIGHLY amusing and 'amused' by this whole situation.

But not amazed or confused.

Meaning...?

I approach her with care, I've heard Doxes bite! ... If you're not careful. She or whatever, she... Hey! Her hair is growing back, she looks like a cute boy now!

Meanie!

Heh...

Anyway, she gives me some sort of a smile, but it's pathetic when compared to my ear-TO-ear smugness. So, I have to ask...

"Are you waiting for someone?"

"Yeah, I hope aliens take me to some otha' planet." Dox is serious and I'm not talking about the expression on her face.

"I feel ya, I feel ya... Hey! If you ever catch a ride... Give me a call, will you?"

"..." Dox is confused.

I whisper "With the aliens, I mean."

"Aaaah... Ha-hA, ya, ya... Fo' sure!" Your act is breaking up there, Dox...

Amateurs...

“Anyway, do you wanna go for a walk? I could do with some fresh air if you’d like, muh-lad! Eyy?” And I stretch my right hand towards her like I’ve seen they do SO courteously in those neo-medieval steamjunk festivals. But... Dox doesn’t play along; she just gets up and says...

“Sure, it’s stuffy in here anyway.”

I immediately morph my gesture into another one of those mediievally-courteous and righteous ways and I show her the path to the exit. This time, Doxy, like a true lady, plays along.

We approach the gate when the jimmy, young man from earlier, the one stationed at the entrance I mean, steps ahead and stretches his hand towards me. In it, he is holding one of them square-gadgety things like Jaques was wearing... Hmmm... I ask...

“What’s that for?”

“You ain’t wearing yo safenet.” Dox explains but not much.

“Do I look like a baby to you?” I say amused.

“It’s for repelling the... wolves, surr.” The young man intervenes and confirms my suspicions.

“Oh, I’m not worried about them.” I say... extra-amused as I step forward towards the gate, leaving Dox and the young man both confused and/or amazed and/or amused. I’M amused and that’s the only thing that matters! HAH! I open the gate; I mean the gate opens for me. THEY open it for me. I step outside in the bright... darkness. I explore around... No wolves...

Dox follows me... and says “You better stay close, Rambow!” Whoever that pussy is.

“Heh... I’m not afraid of the wolves...” I smile and look around, with my back to the gates “... Not these on the outside...” I look straight ahead now... and my back is still to the gates “...And neither those on the inside.”

“You suicidal or somethin’?” I know Dox is probably joking and yes, I do allow people to make all sorts of jokes.

“What makes you think of that?”

“...” Dox is confused, probably, then annoyed, then... “...I’m just...” She looks away and far into the dark forests. She checks me out, but not top-to-bottom, and says “You’ve changed.”

“For the better?”

“... I ain’t sure...” Dox’s eyes are back to the forest and continues “... I heard some things ‘bout you...”

“And you trust any old rumour?”

“No but... Look, I heard those guards talkin’, ok? And...”

“And...?”

“It’s kinda confirmin’ the rumours...”

“Heh, well, I’m not sure I’m ready for a metalhead yet, but...” eyes on the forest “... I’m getting there...”

“Pffft, metalheads are easy! You just jam their Net sig—”

“—Hey, only pussycats do it that way.” Although, thanks for the tip!

“What’s with all the bravado, puss-in-boots?”

“...”

“... Why’d you leave the squad?”

“...”

“...Why’d you come outside, I mean back in the Hall? And why the fuck din’ you follow proto —?!”

“—Why did they detain you but not the others?”

“You really don’t know dat? Fo’ real?”

“Yes. From what I’ve gathered they don’t like Monos, but you’re not an ex-Mono... As far as I can assume.”

“ ... ”

“ ... ”

“It’s because I’m black.”

“That makes no sense.”

“What? You mean the fact they diss—?”

“—I mean both! First of all, you’re not black.”

“... Are you fucking colorblind or sumthin’??”

“You just have a darker shade of skin than I do.”

“...” Dox’s anger turns to confusion and then... Is that a tear in her eye? She turns away, her back is fully turned to me... She watches the horizon and... her torso seems to have these spasms from time to time...

I smile but not because I was making any sort of joke. It makes no sense to me to call it black. It’s not black. Sure, if you want to split hairs, like the fuzzy stubs of hair on her head, you may call it ‘brown’. But I don’t like that description. I mean, I could’ve been brown. You just inject more melanin and bam! It’s just a compound...

Heh, but what do they know?

Dox starts giggling a bit and says “I guess you ain’t that green either.”

“Nope, just light-skinned.”

Dox turns to face me and her rainy face confirms my suspicions about the spasms. But her anger is BACKL—
“—Come on, don’t gimme that bull—!”

“—Wait, I don’t underst—!”

“—after all you said—”

“—Dox, please, wait—!”

“—YOU EVER LOOK IN A F—?”

“—Ssshhh—”

“—MIRROR?!?”

“ ... ”

I’m a bit confused... I mean, who hasn’t looked in a mirror? Does she mean it in a metaphorical way? That could be the case. But since the subject is skin color... Hmmm...

“Do you have one?” I ask, amused but... also intrigued.

“... I can’t believe this...” Her anger is not stopping her from opening her bagging and pulling out a digi-padding of sorts and handing it over to me, nonsmiling. I look straight into the screen and it lights up and my silly ole’ young, beautiful, ugly, gorgeous, splonky, whatever face stares back at me from beyond the digi-screen. I smile, I make silly faces, I make grumpy faces. Then, I bring a couple of green samples on my H.U.D. as mini- ‘papers, for comparison purposes and reasons only! Hmm... Although, technically, the human eye can distinguish more shades of green than any other colour... my eyes are not technically ‘human’. They’re also an older model and I’m not much for firmware updates either. I prefer my software to be... stable at all times. A blessing and a curse, I guess. But I digress...

Nope, I can’t see it either!

Me neither...

Imagine that! These people see me as having the color ‘green’. I thought Shaun was just teasing. I mean... I remember looking like Father. Most of the Monos looked more or less like me. And more or less like Dox for that matter. I know my eyes are calibrated; I did do a check... whenever... Am I the crazy one here?

Nah, I bet it's just everyone else.

Me too.

I think AMA has lighter skin than I do. Not that it matters anyway... But still...

Maybe you're colorblind in the brain!

Color-mind...

My mind's colouring system must be rigged! Heh...

I hand the 'mirror' back to Dox and say "Nope, I can't see it."

"Then you must be colorblind."

"Nah, I'm just retarded."

"PFTTT—!" And DOX bursts out in the WORST laughter I've ever heard and I JOIN in, but I'm mostly laughing at her LAUGHTER! But I also laugh WITH her, ok?

OK...

Dox calms for a bit and looks at me and says "You just sayin' that to make me feel —"

"—I'm not... I'm serious..." I'm all serious face on my head, all calmness in my brain and all serenity in my...

She smiles and says "You probably need some calibray—"

"—don't need to. I don't even do soft-updates. I prefer to 'grow' my own..."

"You're a wacko!"

"Thanks!"

And we smile and we walk and we dance, well I say 'dance', 'mental dancing' is the correct term... And I get to meet the 'real Dox', finally! She's actually quite cool, I mean as a person, I mean as a friend, OK!?!?

OK, ok... geesh...

He just missing AMA...

I know... We all do...

We walk alongside the edge of a cliff full of trees. Dox and I haven't spoken to each other in and for a while. We're enjoying the relative silence of the darkened lands. I stop and observe the forests. I turn around to find Dox... observing me back. I smile and say...

"You should laugh more often. It suits you."

"Why, so you can secretly amuse yo'self some mo'?" Heh... Dox is obviously just teasing me.

"Even if let's say, theoretically, I did find it amusing at first... It grew on me soon after."

"I hope you ain't tryin' to seduce me, froggy-boy!" Dox is obviously just... hmmm... now, wait a minute... She's teasing me, of course but... Eh, must be—

—mostly my imagination...

Probably...

"Don't get me wrong, Dox, I..." show her the ring "... do love my moon-and-stars more than my own life and I would never do anything to hurt her. Not by my own will anyway..." I do my best to sound sincere but it's hard in this situation. AND NO, I'M NOT REFERRING TO—!

—FINE!

... Whatever...

Dox's eyes change from flirty to angry to sad to... empathic and/or sympathetic. If she didn't know who my 'moon-and-stars' is by now... she's finally linking the dots, yes, FINALLY...! "I'm sorry, I..." She looks away and... Then she leaves towards the gate, slowly... And words are very... scarce this... time... of the year...

All these pauses be makin' me thirsty and no, not in that way.

...

I'll let this one slide but don't get any ideas.

I move after her, faster and faster and I catch up. I walk beside and besides her and ask, well, it's more of a statement "I feel there's something bothering you."

"..." Dox doesn't look at me. She looks sad more than anything else. Then she says... "... I'm very lonely... ..sometimes..."

"... We all feel like that some days or weeks or even months for some, but it's ok! ... But is there anything in particular that's—?"

"—Look, man!" Dox is angry but... she calms a little. She's finally looking at me now. And she stops and faces me... And I do too. And I listen... "You don't get it. And that's OK! You don't have..." She looks away, shyly, and gets lost in some thoughts on the ground, in the grass, in the weeds, in the bushes and then in the... forests.

"..." I continue to listen.

"... Me... I mean we... I mean, MY kind..."

"..."

"Aargh, look, it ain't like they... I mean it's not like my kind is... an endangered species or somethin'. But..." She looks at me... Her eyes... real eyes... I'm pretty good at distinguishing real eyes from cyber eyes... And then her eyes turn to something pissed — "—They just—" —anger— "—bunch of dumb POTheads—" —itching-and-ditching-any-styling— "—sex-obsessed-possessed-STUPID-assed—" —tf-woman-just-CALM—! "—deadBRAIN-scum-a-SUCKING, big, bad, strong... eh..." Dox is... Finally starts to calm her senses and then returns from the Itchy-Bitchy-land. I mean, look, I feel sorry for ya but... COME ON, they can't ALL be that bad, RIGHT?

"They can't all be that bad, right?"

"Sure, guess I'm just the unluckiest girl in the world then." No, you're probably just the 'unluckiest'!

PFFFT—!

—>:(

"..." I pity-smile and say nothing else, like any medieval person should do.

"Dem... You got some gift..." Dox's eyes are almost begging me or something... "... Make sure you keep it safe... There's very few people... left around who..."

"... I'm just nonsane, that's all."

"You ain't, Dem... The whole world is."

"..." I just smile and look away at the forest and say nothing else, like any sincere person would do. I know I have some bad parts and loose screws and other missing cables in my head or something... But I also know I have some good parts in me. And I try to keep them in good shape and closest to me!

<3

HAH! Gaaaaaaaayyyyy!

I'm sure you mean it in the good ole' neo-way!

Of course, of course... Heheheh...

We return to the front of the Gates of the Castle, she told me they do have guest 'rooms' or some kind of communal room like they had in the Commons, so we can crash here for the night, whatever. We enter through the Outer gate of the castle, then the inner Gates, then we're in the Great Hall, we go Straight through the main Hall, past the statues of the Romans, between the portraits of Long-forgotten or high generals or Kings or whatever, past the Renaissance-like Painted Landscapes on the WALLS, on the ceiling, on

the ^{floor} there's some maps of the world, some REALLY old map of the world, the Sectors are all jumbled and bubbly and jagged on the sides and then... We finally reach the 'common room'. Beds are everywhere, three-story-beds, both horizontally and vertically, like some sort of matrix-of-bed-cubes or something. No one else is in and around but us. I guess our 'friends' are part of the 'inner circle', or at least 'they' are 'treated' as such. I'm sure they'd put some 'honey up my pot' if I decided to join 'them' but "Heh..." I'd rather sleep with the wolves outside, than... I walk through the maze of beds and end up in the corner farthest from the exit. I choose the bed in the left corner, or right, depending on your P.O.V., of the ground floor, the one closest to the corner of the room, or farthest from the center of it, depending on... Dox chooses the one in the opposite corner, of my bed, of the cube I mean, ground level too. It's kinda late so conversation grows scarce while we, I mean she, soon falls asleep. Each of us in their own bed, of course, this whole time.

Now you're the one starting to sound suspicious.

... Regardless, I'm... It's... We're... They'd... This bed is quite noncomfortable, but I'll manage... The coverings are too short and the pillow is too... synth-etic in my opinion. Until I find a better position, I imagine if I_... If we could... If only I could link to AMA somehow, like telepathically YOU know??

WELL...? YES, maybe, but I think we're stretching it with the superpowers as it is.

After all we've SEEn, done and could have, do YOU really think this would be the weirdest part???

Wanting...

I 'wood'...

... If not a link for our thoughts... At least a link for our feelings...

I think I can work on/with that.

Needing...

AMA... I know you're out there, alone. I'm out here, alone, and I hope you're doing well. I... miss... you...

...

...

... The Park... protected people, non-touching people, noncaring of cribs... the cribs? Cribs are... bugs, pour-out, larvae~maggots: and *buzzers*... EEEWW! ... Run... Alone... No Trees... No Father... No AMA... No... Friends...? No enemies... But... Everywhere, no... No hiding... Running slow too... Feel them, not see them, just-feel them... AMA! Is it AMA? Non... They not say... But feel AMA...? We table sit... We eat family with. Her family? ...Look her at but sure not... She recognizes me not... Maybe... Then... One nonappears. Whispers... Some afraid... 'She did it' say they... One another nonappear...! They know now her it is... No... Afraid too now— Then She Comes in And She... She... slice Family Down! NO! What... We freezing. Nobody moves. She walks Among Us, watching us, studying us, sparing us... We wait... We await... She goes upstairs, we slow sneak to exit. We're out, run, RUN, RUN, RUN! NO GO, THERE, NO GO HOUSE! ... People... The people, no... Ignore, we-go, get to port, ships and mountain over sea, Cliffs..... We escaped. Yes? ... But... no... No... NO! Voice out of speakers around us... Her voice... She sings...

“One and two, I am coming for YOU!” Chills my spine.

“Three and four, better lock your DOOR!” Fears my throat.

“Five and six, step away from the ABYSS!” Bitters my stomach.

“Seven or eight, get inside and close the GATES—!”

—AMA HELP PLEASE, FORGIVE US, BEG YOU SORRY SORRY WHY WHY YOU DO THIS WHY, WE RUN CAN'T HIDE CAN'T SHOUT, CAN'T SCREAM, NO MOUTH, NO HEAD, WE SLICED, WE DEAD, ARE WE?

...Wake up... In classroom... What? What homework? Look at colleagues, leagues look at us. They look at away... Teacher teaching... Heh... Whatever... Shouts at us... Look at teach... But he... Horrified... Mouth open wide, what? What you see...? Points at window, left. Look window, right, it's... No... NO!!! Approaching, spectre, it's her?! It's HER! "AAAAARGH!" scream floating closer, Cry, beg, please forgive please forgive forgive, kiss neck kiss collar kiss collarbone KISS chest kiss PRAY MA—!!

“—MA! Forgive me, MAMA! PLEA-SEEEE!” ...

... I've awoken and I am all wet and in sweats and sweat-ish and I swear I was screaming. I'm sure of it! Dox's fearful, almost tearful, morning-full and almost mourning-face is watching me back from her corner. So, it confirms it, I was screaming. About Mother...I... remember vividly the whole dream. At least the later parts. The song... And the bitter fear... Bitter Fear was her name. It wasn't AMA... Bitter Fear is what I feel her name was. She never said it... But that song... I've NEVER heard that song in my life, I swear... I know the songs Father used to sing to me... But this one... Those chills I felt all over my body are echoing in and throughout my synapses. And I can't for the life of me understand: what did I just experience? I know it's just a dream, but...

She felt so REAL! Like... Not like a person per se, or per say or, ah, forget it... But at least some sort of...

Alien?

NO!

Devil?

Ignoring...

NO, I mean, sort of, but... She never tried to HARM... US, remember???

Yeah, but pants still splonked from last part.

Mother?

I know I shouted it but... It wasn't Mother... At least, I think so... I told you, her name is Bitter Fear!

No, that's just what we felt.

Look, what if...?

Yes?

Presuming...

Yes, what if what we experienced was a metaphorical, symbolical, allegorical, fantastical representation of a... Angel, eh? Perhaps our 'Guardian' from Above, eh? Or below or whatever, it's relative to extra dimensions.

Assuming...

But she acted like a devil.

Yeah, well, maybe she was trying to protect US! From those people... People we trusted, eh?

ASSuming...

Her own parents?

We don't know who they were, we ASSumed they were her parents.

Ah, seeing...

Ok, so? This proves ASS-nothing!

It felt so real...

Chilling...

"You ok, man?" Dox is now less sluggish and more discuss-ish.

"Yeah, sorry! I had a bad dream... Sort of..."

"Of your Mother?"

"No, not really, it's... weird... Her name was 'Bitter Fear'."

"..."

"... Yeah, I know it sounds silly... It's hard to explain in words..."

"..." Dox's face turns to stone or obsidian or some... thing, because... Something is her bothering..."

"Heh... Forget about it, it's just a dream..."

"..." She's a bit better now, but still a que bit of bitter and a cubit of butter.

We both decide to take advantage of the rest of the hours of the night to profit off of some of the remains of sleepy eye time... I can't sleep but it still helps to just stay in bed and just... meditate... About... Bitter Fear?

You're truly obsessed about that now, aren't you?

It's hard for me to get rid of that feeling. It FEELS like FEAR but it also felt like... pleasure... And I feared her because of her power. Like I would fear AMA if I knew I've upset her badly and she decided to...

...de-CAP-it-ATE US?

Something like that. I don't fear AMA because I love AMA... I want AMA to be happy... I only fear making her nonhappy. I know we can't control that but... But it's SO HARD to do that without at least... talking to her.

... [5:30] H.U.D. off. I want to pull my eyes out of my head and then throw them in a glass of water and just watch myself from the insides. And then take them out again and dry them over that fire Shaun made in the woods. Just burn them to a crisp. I'm weird like that. But not as weird as I would imagine this place being full of sleeping people. Now THAT is weird in my humblest of opinions.

All the nonstable variables.

All the security holes.

All the fears... I know people used to have these camps or something, even post-Event they had these... Eh... Still, for me, anything over two is a crowd. Except if AMA were here. There's always room for AMA in my life.

Wishing...

We'll make some room if we have to.

Making, baking, shaking, taking, gifting, giving, living, eating, drinking, breathing, breathing, breathing...

...

...

... [9:29] ... [9:30] ... [9:31] ... [9:32:33] ... I've woken up at least five times by now. Not to mention last night... Bitter Fear was her name... Bitter but sweetish somehow... I observe Dox is jacked-up in a deck and her eyes are closed... I let her do her work non- or un-disturbed. Personally, I don't like carrying big, slow decks around... But maybe someday I'll find one that suits me.

You want a deck with the power of a mainframe.

And the size of a PDA.

Dreaming, of course... But, maybe one day... Someday we might not care about such things. Anytime now a solar flare could wipe out all of our gadgets and gizmos and bimbos and limbos and limos and cyber-tronic-die-no-sauric-ani-ma-tronic-robo-tronic-metal-head-mad-bread-board-ford-lord-circuit-anything! All our tech and knowledge, all of our technology, based on and off electronics, would be wiped clean, clear and out. That clock in Jaques ex-office though.... Yep, that thing would still be working... I mean, if I'm to believe Jaques that it was actually mechanical and not some sort of cheap knock-off on batteries.

Believe NO ONE! Especially Jaques.

If there's anything we've learned from that dream, I'd say it's that. All except AMA are now suspects. Of course, some of those 'susses' might get the 'privileges' of friendship. But I think... Talking about me, about myself, my thoughts, my beliefs... I really need to stop doing that. I need to start doing a bit of masquerading around here. Because you never know... Lomoc could be anyone... Lomoc is the devil, I tell you!

...

Cool story, bro!

And these Kraut guys sure are sus' too. The Leader... I think he's up to no goo —

“—_____, General H. would like an answer to his... offer.” The gag in front of me wears no mask, but he's fully armored, helmet and all. All white and his helmet looks like it has a cap on it of sorts or... Whatever, I say—

“—Yes...” pause-for-FX “... You may inform him his off-err I'm have to refuse, non-fortunately, for both of us and he.” Confuse-and-abuse for/mat.

“General H. requests a... much more personalized answer. In person...” Interesting...

“Whatever...”

I leave my beautiful friend, Dox, in this lonely Room, unannounced. Only two lonely humans exit the commons, me and... The Doors and then We... ENTER inside an elevator far, far away... to the right but not far from the FAR left off The End of the main hall. All safeties, no surprise. Blowing candelabras burn bright on the, well, I say 'burn' and 'candelabra', and very expensive walls around, but nothing else. Very... minimalistic. Slithering snakes ride the tips and the arms and the feet of the candelabras. Very ancient-looking snakes, old and cold skin they have. Very mystical, satirical, nonlyrical and objectional, deviational, animalistic, tribalistic, nonartistic, fascistic, just a stick, a bundle of sticks tied together, forever and ever in this mansion of ultra-passion, ultra-dictation, uber-fashion addiction of order, of elimination of disorder, of disorders, of incarceration of those not following orders, for following the wrong orders, the right orders, the left orders, the orders for the orders of the ordering hordes of horrendously horizontally-mentally-mutually-mortally-manually-automatically-losingly-unquestionably-any-ally!

No friends, only foes, chewing at your toes down to your bones like rats mentally-controlled by cats riding off the backs of bats and bears and boars and bows and bombs and bleeding and boring and banal, dragged into a canal, in a trench, in a smoky, muddy, deadly, madly, sadly, hopelessly waiting for the enemy to retreat, to advance, to make a mistake, we make NO mistakes! NO! No mistakes on our parts, NO! 'We're perfect, we know better!' We know what is right and what is wrong and what is left and what's not left to you or to me or to them or to us, to US versus THEM, why can't it be just US?!? Just 'we' and not 'they', why do THEY want the division? The destruction, the de-construction, deviation between each person, the dismantling of trust, of truth, of peace, of understanding, tolerating, observing, conserving, communicating, debating, negotiating, trading, no hating, just giving and receiving over and over again, it's not that hard, what the FUCK? Why is it so hard for people to be GOOD?!?!?

...

...

To do good...

...

...

I know it's hard sometimes...

...

But it's worth it, KEKdamnit!

...

...

...

... We exit The Doors, west through the 'best' hoist ever, at last! And then I, mean we, go down a single corridor leading up to a single, magnificent, red and black door. The lines of the frame of the door almost form a... 'Z' of sorts, heh... Anyway, the doors open and we step inside. The 'Leader', a mister 'H.' they call him... is busy talking on some sort of linker stuck to his right ear. The receiver is bigger than any telelink extra-modular-cellular-computer-whatever I've ever seen in or on someone's head. Must be some antique device...

The Leader waves and invites me to sit down on the chair placed neatly in front of his impeccable desk while his Krautian conversation continues to converge over the chattering in the corner, back corner, not that one, the left one, I mean right, well, it's a relative position... Some of his 'lieutenants' I guess, let's call them 'Bigags', although they're not wearing any masks at the moment and I can tell their gender is whatever, they keep discussing something in more Krautian, but it sounds almost like Bagguetian or whatever. But what I'm most fascinated with is the music glaring in the background. Some quite... elevating music is being sung in a choir fashion. Trumpets and trombones and whatever, quite uplifting singing! Something about 'Lee Ben' or some other guy but I don't want to ruin the experience with my A.A, so I keep the H.U.D. off and out I mean on but in but what?

The contrast between their confessed beliefs of order and the cacophony of sound and vibrations and singing and moving and the coming and going of the dancing secretaries, well, I say 'dancing'... is quite hilarious! And that guy is calling for that other guy to come to him or on him, must be gay in some old way, I mean the new-old-way I mean older than the neo meaning but newer than older-defining, whatever. And that guy in the middle shouts something or other to the other guy and that other guy is laughing while he's pouring a brown liquid in his PANTS??? No, never mind, it's the angle of my P.O.V. whatever.

OUCH!

Finishing?...

Yes, finally! FINALLY, the IMPORTANT biz of the Lead' {'c'est fini'}! All proud of himself, at all times, the Leader graciously sheds the telelink by furiously de-linking it from his earjack, probably. He patiently plugs it in some tiny slot in a bot which flies away immediately, what was that bot doing under the desk, eh???

Cheeky bee...

"Had a good rest, _____?" The Leader... takes the lead. No surprises here.

"Like a baby in Have-an." I... embellish the facts. Unsurprisingly.

"Good... I will go straight to the point. Your answer, please." No surprises there either.

"My answer is 'no'." Surprises?

"I see... Nothing to change your mind?" Leader tries to seduce.

"... Nope!" I am amused.

"Do you have family?" Leader, wat?

"..." I am confused but... intrigued.

"A FUTURE? A LAND of your own? A purpose in THIS PITIFUL life of yours?" The Leader has risen to his feet, and is now sitting up all straight as a pole made of brick and fire and brimstone and ashes and smoke and wtf...

“...” Still confused. But also, quite amazed.

“... Have you ever been... betrayed, _____?” The Leader moves a piece I did not expect...

“Never by my loved ones.”

“Oh... I believe you are lying...”

“... You can believe what you want, it’s the truth...”

“Regardless... I was betrayed once. WE were BETRAYED more than ONCE!” The face of the Leader is just like that time when he shouted in the woods. His tiny moustache sits firmly on his face this time though. And his eyes are glaring with hate and rage and visions of cages for ages and mages and sages in... The Leader calms down. He sits. He stands and moves to the back. Everyone else is silent. The music in the background is stuck on a loop. Is that part of the song or what?

Itching and scratching...

Bitching and gnashing...

Of TEETH! Sabretooth, cyber-smooth fangs of wolver-eagle-bear-man-pig-gig-gag-rag-shag-lag-drag-hag-fa—

“—Long time ago our people were betrayed... again...” The Leader has become solemn and calm in his tone. He continues “... TWICE in a hundred years, the whole world watched how we were judged and wrongfully sentenced for something that MAYBE we started but it was NOT our doing ONLY, it was OUR doing as a whole! As a planet, as a civilization! But they just sat and watched and did nothing while our lands were pillaged and burned and divided and conquered and our PEOPLE LIED TO AND RAPED AND BUTCHERED AND NINE, NINE, NINE, NINE, NINE, NINE—!”

“—...—”

“—NINE-NINE-NINE—!!”

“—...?...—”

“—NINENINENINENINE—!!!”

—The Leader is overflowing... The stacks of whatever on his desk can barely sustain his... pain... If what he tells me is the truth...? Then yes, I can understand that. I know their ways are wrong... But I suspect it’s easy to fall down that path when you’re cornered... When you’ve got nothing left to lose. But hope...

One of the gags steps in front, I mean, on the side of a box or something... Lots of dials on it. He switches some of the dials and the looping music soon dies out. Interesting...

The Leader is visibly shaken. He slowly sits down on his leader chair and leans over his leader desk and his eyes lead him to something sitting on his desk, some square thing on a foot, a plastic foot I mean, at the back of the square thing. Then, the Leader looks at the lamp. Then he looks at me... Embarrassed a bit, I assume. I guess all that work to keep everything in order must be *‘pretty’* stressful, eh? Eh???

I mind my manners and say “... Surr H... I understand your—”

“—Please, call me... Alf Red.”

“Like the helperbot?”

Silence. All kinds of silences “...” The silencers around the room gleam in the white lights but the silences in their eyes, in their mouths, in their ears and heads and brows and eyebrows and frownies and smileys and the assistants bring in some brownies on plates, big, BIG brownies on BIG plates and they place them very, very carefully and quite lovingly and fearfully in front of the nonstabilizing, terrifying, petrifying, glorifying Leader. And the brownies, they’re sTeAmiNg in front of the steamy face of the serious, curious, serious, furious, serious, ludicrous face of the Lea...? When suddenly—

“—TPPFFFFTSSHHH—!” Alfie-boy here bursts into the gayest laughter I’ve ever heard but I’m not sure if it’s because of the way I... Heh, imagine that... I made the Leader LAUGH! With my STUPIDEST JOKE EVER! HAH!

The boys laugh too, on que, and we all do like silly little ducklings after the hatchlings have been hatching and trying to walking, talking, joking, smoking, drinking, kidding, bidding, gambling, reading, fascinating...! These people have a HUGE DNA DB! Very well documented and, heh—...—Yeah, sure but... Whatever...

The Leader seems pleased of how things have turned out between us. Despite the... incidents and the differences and misunderstandings and forbidding and nonforgiving and other lessening parts we may have. BUT... The ‘Alf and quite Red after a couple of DRINGKS!’ once again... takes the lead...

“Now, _____, I would love to... continue our biz... on peaceful terms of course. But time is of the essence. The lands of our Father... And of our Father’s Fathers... And of our Fathers’ Fathers and Grandfathers of fathers of Great—”

“—Red, forgive me but... My knowledge of history is quite lacking un-fort—”

“—You do not need that for now. You are... valuable enough as it is.” Ooooh... Maybe we be changing the world one moustache at a time, eh?

“Thank you, Alf, but... Look, you’re all fine and dandy but... I prefer to do things on my own.”

“... Interesting...” The Leader is lost in some thoughts on the desk... Then, the Leader takes a look at the watch on his wrist... He watches it closely and then he... turns his head and takes a closer look, but not too close at a... couch placed along the left wall, the left of his desk I mean, well I say ‘left’, it’s to his ‘right’ but you know what I mean. He looks back at me... and says...

“... I must admit, I am very disappointed...” Uh-oh, Alfie, come on, don’t be... But no... The big boys are all smiling... The guards without the masks are smiling... The guards with the masks... are probably smiling. I’m the only one not smiling right now... All I’m left with is noncertainty. “... I expected you’d listen to reason, Dem...”

And those words shatter my brain in a thousand points and outcome: swords come out with razor ——— —sharpened-ragged—jagged-fagget—WTF-HOW—THE_FUCK—DEOS THIS TRUCKERFUCKER KNOW m|mY REAL FUCKING NAME!?! ...

“ ... ” ...

...

The fucker checkmated us.

Not yet, but... we’re in check all right.

“...” The Leader is amused.

“...” I am, obviously, not.

“...” The guard in the Leader’s... ‘backyard’... turns one eighty and marches to the end of the room. He opens up a door and in comes...Kin first... who is dragged inside by a safenet. Then...Bills... is also dragged... in by a safenet. Then... Dox... not dragged, but more like all squirming and opposing and resisting. No Jaques.

Let me explain... they’re not BeBe safenets.

Nonsane safenets... Highly secure safety straps for nonsafe-nonsane.

...I...

PUSHING...

... HATE!

BEAT!

CLUBBING!

STATE—!

—BEATING!

The GAGS place MY gagged FRIENDS on that grotesque couch! And... I'm serious now. I do not even look at MY FRIENDS! I ONLY look STRAIGHT into ALF's ASStonished eyes, devilish eyes. My eyes. Are smiling. But my mouth is not laughing nor smiling. I just show my FANGS through my SMIRKS! He thinks he's got me. Well, THINK again...

"..."

"... Now, if you refuse to cooperate, Dem..."

"...?"

"I will have to shoot..."

"..."

"...each and EVERY one of your friends, one by one... right in front of you..."

"..."

"... And then, I will have to SHOOT...! You at the end, I will SHOOT you MYSELF if you STILL REFUSE TO CO-OP-ERRRGH-ATE!!!" The Leader shows his true nature! His true face. The darkest face I have ever seen and I don't mean it in terms of color. But in terms of... primitiveness...

"..." I maintain my poke'er-face.

"..." The leader continues his anger-face.

"..." The eyes of my friends are... Not sure how they're feeling right now. It's hard to tell under all that...

The Leader "We have... enough proof to assume you are on very good terms with each of them... Especially with Kindawgs." 's tone of voice has changed to some other kind of slithering-seducing tongue...

"..."

"... I have reserved Kindawgs for last because... We have certain proof of lies which SHE kept hidden —"

"—...—" What in KEK's fucking SHIT is he talking about? I mean, Alfie-boy is not pointing at Dox and neither at... Bills. At least, from my P.O.V., he's pointing straight at... Kin.

"—..." The leader is ready to give the orders, but still patiently waits for me to announce my pretty borders.

"Heh..." I smile, perfectly obtuse!

"..." The Leader, obviously confused!

"Hahahahahah..." I laugh, highly amused!

"..." The Leader, obviously... nonobviously...

"*whispers*" The gags and me-gags and gee-gags and whatever-gags are definitely intrigued.

"BWAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAH—!"

—Well now, that definitely got everyone's attention! All eyes on me, all of my eyes on the eyes of the Leader. And all of his eyes are on my eyes. And! Le piece of... Reh-zee-stance!

"... Heh... You stupid, fucking-retard-idiot-dumb-sucking-fag—"

"—Silence—!"

“—Mono-poser-scum-SUCKer-of-ASS—!”

“—SILENCE, EnOugh Of ThIS—!” The Leader gets really, really pissed! Good...

“—you have ANY idea who you’re dealing—?”

“—WILL KILL THEM ALL RIGHT NOW, ALL OF—!”

“—FUCKING-STUPID-PISS-OF-SOUR-KRAUT-NUGGET-SAUSAGE-BEAR-FISTER... PUSSY!”

The Leader and everyone else are... stuck. Almost glitching like that music was playing earlier. Even the gag who was supposed to bring Dox for the sacrifice, OF COURSE they’d bring Dox first, these slimy-stinky-pinky-dicky-trucker-muckers... But even THIS gag has stopped in his tracks, against all orders shouted earlier by the greatly aggravated Leader. Interesting...

“FINALLY!” And I stand up and do a three-sixty of surprise and gratitude and mostly for effect. And then I walk, step-by-jump, one-by-two, and I stop RIGHT in front of the awed Leader. My eyes are piercing his eyes from above. His eyes are... worried? I mean, sure, I could rip his head off right now if we went over the edge... BUT! I stop RIGHT before we reach the EDGE of the... Abyss. Leading...

“I have to tell you Alfie boy... You disappoint me... You talk about REASON and JUSTICE and, and... COOP-EH-RATION?”

“ ... ”

“You don’t even KNOW WHAT those WORDS MEAN!”

“ ... ”

“You know of what I’m capable of.”

“ ... ”

“But you ALSO DON’T KNOW—!”

“—...” The Leader had a short spasm... I saw it... I felt it... Good...

“ ... Of what else I’m capable of...”

“ ... What...? Else...?” I felt the Leader... was afraid to ask... Excellent!

“ ... Heh... Let’s say your *orders* are actually followed by *splonky*-pants over there. And you somehow manage to kill my friends before I get to him and then to that guy over there and then this guy here in the corner, who’s pissed his pants... Yeah, I tell you, I’m GONNA BE REAL PISSED if you touch a SINGLE hair on my BUDDIES over there!” And I look at the obviously confused faces of 1337.

“ ... ” The Leader seems ready to risk it though... So, I up the ante!

“BUT. YOU. Will. NEVER get to KILL me! Do you UNDERSTAND THAT!?!?!”

“ ... ” The Leader... seems willing to call my bluff but... He ponders...

“THIS won’t be the first TIME when I...” turn my back to the Leader and away from the eyes of the gags and the bags and the far-gone minds of the rags in their headgears. Closing state... “ ... leave a room like this on my OWN...”

I feel it... I FEEL THE DREAD! I FEEL the THREADS of the MINDS of the NONDEADS in the ROOM and the DOOM of the GLOOM! Everyone is thinking about their own death right now! Yes... Perfect! CHECK...! Mate...

“ ... ” No answers. Seconds pass like days. But then, I hear steps... More, various steps and then... Beeping noises, three beeping noises followed by the sound of the unlocking of the devices. Familiar sounds of safety-devices, safety-nets safely being untied, unzipped, ungagged.

"..." Still, no words... The deafening, deadened daze, door-to-door, is ringing and buzzing in my ears.

"..." My back is still, facing the Leader. I am ready to Go All-in on this!

"..." Stillness... and then...

"_____...?" I turn around to find Dox and Bills and Kin looking at me, amazed, confused but thankfully... untied, ungagged and non-abused. I smile. They... don't... The Leader... has fallen to the floor. Not literally, but... We... leave... They... lead. More like 'escort' us actually. They courteously escort us to the exit. Then the elevator. Then the other exit. Then the main exit. Then the main gate. Then... We end up outside, in the forest upfront. And we walk in silence, in procession, in a silence of detention, of nonrejection but also no detection of action, of reaction or any other particular fashion of expression ever encountered in any lesson I have ever... I guess we just access and process, and reassess and reprocess what just happened. When, all of a sudden, Kin, with The Greatest Passion ever, breaks the I—

"—You are one dumb, crazy, son-of-a-dog, I tell ya!" Kin's voice is neither angry, nor teasing, nor... He's just sincere.

"I'm the son of a CAT, you luddite!" And I smile and laugh and some of them laugh and some of them are not, and some of them are confused, of course. Biology's not their strongest subject, or is it? Analyzing...

"MY CAT's wet from all that...!" Dox soon realizes the gravity of the situation when her face changes from enthusiastic to embarrassed, to afraid, to shy, to... But I smile and defuse.

"I'm glad you enjoyed it. But I have to say mine's wetter and not for the good reasons."

"You sure didn't sound like it." Bills observes.

"Didn't show it either." Dox continues.

"..." Kin says nothing.

I stop in my tracks and observe Kin and the others turning their heads back at me as they stop their walking. Something is bothering Kin and I kind of suspect what it is...

"What's wrong, Kin?"

"..."

"Something is bothering you..."

"..." Dox and Bills look at Kin and then at each other... But they don't see it!

"You think I placed a bad bet back there."

"..." Kin's eyebrows approach each other with dread, and I can read... 'confirmation of my belief'.

"... What would you have done in my place?"

"..." Dox and Bills wish I didn't go there.

"... Would you sell your own soul to save your buddies...? Pal?"

"..." Kin's brows turn to ANGER! And then... sadness. And then... But no, he's turning into a —

"—You know NOTHING, GRASS-hopper! You SNOW-daisy! YOU KNOW NOTHING ABOUT SACRIFICE!!!"

"..."

"..."

"..."

"About... LOVE!" Kin turns away from all of us and marches into the forest and into the distance, all alone.

Ok, sure, three for one or one for three? What's the better judgment of morality here, eh? EH? How would YOU decide if you were in my place?

Let's imagine...

Theorizing...

Your life or your freedom.

The lives of your friends.

Or their freedoms...

I'd gladly sacrifice my life to SAVE their freedom. But NOT our freedom to save our LIVES! Only to SAVE FREEDOM! Our freedom of judgment, of expression, of creation, of action, of traction, diction, friction, miction, our HARD-EARNED-RIGHT to LESSONS, TO IMPROVEMENTS, to PROVING and DISPROVING, reFORMing and RE-ESTABLISHing, CORRECTing and reDIRECTing TO the PATH OF TRUTH! I DON'T negotiate with... HATE-peddlers.

Let him who has understanding—

—RECKON—!

—the number of the beast... For it is a human number... This number is... One-three-three-seven. Or ninety-eighty-four. I haven't decided yet. Maybe...?

Freedom One-Oh-One?

Mmmm, yes, I like that... Yes, yes... Excellent...

Imagine... 'Me and AmA', feared and renowned across Terra. Only known as... One, zero, one. 'Don Juan' and 'whoever' he or she had by her or his side. 'Ram-bow' and 'whatever' she or he had by his or her side. AMA and me known as... 'That one' guy and his 'Zero-chance-of-survival-in-a-one-on-one-fight' girl by his side. Yeah, I'd watch that splonkfest on a Big Screen!

I agree it wasn't my place to take such a decision. Especially involving those I consider friends and loved ones. It does sound... egotistical. But I didn't ask to be put in such a position in the first place. No one asked for this. And where the—?

“—FUCK is Jaques?”

“...” Dox and Bills get shaken out of their daydreaming daze and they attempt to decipher my sardonic remark. Well, I'm not sure if 'sardonic' is the right word... Sardinic?

“He...” First attempt by Dox.

“...He...” Second attempt by Bills.

“Yes, he what?” My attempt to whatever.

“Dem, I don't think he...” Bills' eyes shy away for a second there and then “... I don't think Jaques is aware of what happened.”

“For real? Are we talking about the same 'Jaques' here?”

“...” and Dox “...”

“We're talking about the guy with a brain the size of a mount—!”

“—YE—” and Bills “—ES!”

“... The baldy-strong-armed-guy-who-used-to-have-just-one-cyber-arm-but-now-has-two?” I trust NON!

“... Dem, Jaques is not perfect. At least...” Bills' eyes are... wistful.

“... I find that hard to believe.” I'm wishful.

“... I know you two... I mean, that you like...” Dox is trying to say it in a non-middle-gay-meaning-way, but...

“... I used to think that too...” But I’m being careful now.

“...” and “...”

We walk deeper into the forest black like the tongues in our heads like the tars in my lungs like the tears in their eyes like the scars of our rings like the jars of our pigs... Empty... I mean, not ‘empty’ but... You can barely see the forest for the trees out here.

WHEN SUDDENLY—! ... Bills shoots out ahead, after Kin, presumably, and the sound of the leaves under his feet vibrates in Dopplerian waves. No words on the waves but... The change in pitch is enough to understand.

“...” Dox’s eyes follow Bills all the way, even though we can’t see him any longer. At least I can’t...

“... I am now two hundred per cent certain I do not understand.”

“... Fo’ real?” Dox’s eyes now follow mines, I mean my own eyes. All of them.

“... Yes.”

“... I thought you and Kin were...” My eyes now closely scrutinize Dox’s eyes... Intriguing...

“... I thought so too...”

“... Look, please don’t tell ‘em I told you this, OK??” Dox’s eyes are now as big as her mouth!

“Tell ‘em what?” Trick question because... Ah, I’m sure you get it!

“... Kin is... Kin had to...”

“...”

“... He... I mean... She... I mean... For her, ok??? SHE had to do it for HER!” ...

“...”

My eyes are... Her eyes are... And I look away... Not because I fully understood, I... But I felt it! I FELT IT! It doesn’t have to make sense... At least not from any ‘scientific’ or ‘whatever’ P.O.V. And not from my P.O.V. either...

... Up ahead, through the: bushes: and patches _ of _ leaves and | trees | and ^{skies} and lands, and...

Eternal they are, for I have seen it! No matter what they said, no matter what I thought, regardless of what I did or didn’t do then or now or ever will... No matter what, I got to see it. I got to see NATURE! ...

And it is much, much-much more beautiful than I thought it could be. A synth-tree is quite meager in comparison. They’re all just basically copy-pasted all over the place, anyway...

I only wish it wasn’t ruled by... mutant wolves...

...

...

...

Speaking of wolves, here’s a pack...! Heh... No, wait wtf are doing you STUPID, FUCKING B—!

“—Oy, hey, don’t point that thing at people!” One of the wolves, none I recognize, is pointing a... stick! Well, I say ‘stick’, at Dox. And he’s smiling... And I especially don’t like that extra bit of information!

“...” Dox is... Hmm... I expected more ‘bytes’ from her, but she’s just... Standing her ground... with one hand on her hip.

“...” The wolves... Say, whisper something... In their wolffian tongue, I assume.

“You don’t get it, kid...” I step in front of Dox, lean in with my face quite close to his or whatever face... The face of the wolf with the stick, of course... And I say... “... You’ll have to go through ME first —!”

—And! ... For FX, I do one of them ‘red-eyes’.

... PERFECT!

And I don’t mean the effect, I mean, I can’t see it from my P.O.V. so I.D.R.K. how it looks from ‘the outside’, maybe it’s not that scary of an FX, but the wolf with the stick, I mean, the stick is on the ground now, but the wolf is... Ran away, screaming something in gibbering or some other -ling or slang or -bling. And I mean... MAYBE they did or maybe they did NOT understand my sound-based-lang, but... And maybe those other two wolves DID or did not get to SEE my FX from their P.O.V.’s but... They sure felt it in the voice of the first wolf... Judging by the tracks they left...

Dox is “...?”

I am “Heh...”

Dox is “...”

I am “... What?”

Dox is “...! ...”

I’m like “... Pfft...” Whatever...

“What did...? How did...? Why did...?” You wouldn’t understand...

“...” I’m just... relaxed.

“...”

... We walk... We don’t talk... When suddenly Dox—

“—Wait, this means they cut our safeties!”

“What do you—?”

—But I don’t even get to finish my asking or forget about the receiving, when she grabs my hand with force, we—

“—Are you trying to rap—?!”

“—No time fo’ dat—!”

—We jump and duck and sprint and spring-up and down and-left-right/side\ways, corners, borders, trees and **boulder**—

—EXTRA-JUMP!

...Easy...

... And there it is... Between the leaves and other living things... The shuttle awaits... Kin and/or Bills... Open the Gates... The gates of the shuttle I mean...

A shuttle before I have seen...

On Nomo lands...

Or No Mo...

Or MO’?

...

...

... But it's OKAY!

... After such a dark day...

...

... We're all here... Anyway...

We're all here, all right. But I still feel a bit of... fight inside, but not inside the ship I mean. It's just that... It's like that time I felt with Shaun all right! I mean, at first it felt bad, but then...

... WE corrected!

AND rejected...

... Any bad we felt before...

... and WE kneeled!

AND accepted...

... Any good WE felt thereafter...

I don't think I'm there with 1337 yet... At least not with all of them... But I mean...

Shaun had to leave...

...He did it for the cubs...

... Anyway... The sky above the clouds or whatever, I doubt they're smog cause these lands are not as synthetic on the outside as they are on the inside, but...

... It's extra-sunny I do have to say...

... I do like it much that way...

... But I'm okay with...

... Other kinds of days...

... OR whatever!

...

Suddenly... I mean, for them, not for me, and I mean it in more than O.N.E. DMT ways, any-way—

“—Thanks...” Dox's eyes are a-ways from her screen and her tele-blings and other shlings and looks at—

“—Me?” And I point at ME in the most obvious way possible but not as obvious as the confused faces of—

“—YES!” But Doxxy's tone of voice is super-nice and extra-fine and NOTHING like her HUGE BE—

“—...” KIN anD Bills, away from consoles... Look at Dox in question marks?

So, I ask “... What for? Don't mention!”

“... For...” Dox is cute in her own chute the flute of the I mean —...—never mind. And continues “...For saving me...”

“...” Bills.

“...” Kin.

“^_^” Dox.

“...” Me... at first... And THEN! ... Heh...

We turn our P.O.V.s back to the front, to the skies and the 'vaguely-rendered' patches of lands in the distances. And by 'we' I mean... But 'they' will also turn their heads back to the main-way when they realize

there's no more info left to gather. At least... No mo' freebies. And from what I've gathered, 'they' prefer to...
Heh...

>:(

Sorry... And yet... I hope, I can only hope! It's the least I can do... For all the good they do and did and done and will or not and should or not and yes and/or no and why and/or not and sure, whatever!

S-D-L, Bro!

Left and right, up and down... Love... They don't have to say it. If they say it, they might not mean it... Or at least not in that way... But I can feel it! I feel the love around the shuttle and I've felt it ever since I met 'em. Fat or nonfat, dark or non-dark, wrong or right or left or both and/or neither, they all had this in common... Maybe not for each other, all the time, necessarily. But for someone, somewhere, from the past, from the present, from the...

Well, I'm not sure if you can love someone 'from the future'... But I mean... Why not, eh?

You mean in the ole' Mono-eco-tech-o-bull—?

—Nope! I mean... Well, maybe...

...

... Love 1?

... Possibly...

... Probably...

... Obviously.

We're on a road to nowhere. I say 'road' and 'nowhere' and although I wish I could retreat... this joke, I can't make any promises. I can only hope... But THEN I remember—

“—Dox, you said they don't like black.”

“What? I din' say—”

“—Implied, my point is: I've seen some 'blacks' inside, and now it makes even less sense to me.” < 0.

“...” Dox.

“...” Bills and Kin, but their eyes are on their screens, like LITTERALLY! Heh...

“...” Me, but I'm not smiling, nor frowning, nor looking at the clouds any more.

“... It's cuzz I'm...” Dox continues “... 'cause I ain't 'genetically' in line with their... preferences.” And she ends her sentences by tappings on her noses... Which weirds... me a bit.

“...” No words from Bills and Kin, and no surprises either. On my part at least.

“... Heh...” —FX— “... I do have to say... That that is... the stupidest... thing I have ever heard in my life.”

“... Look man, don't diss—!”

“—And I ain't talkin' 'bout the way you chose to express yer-self.”

“...” Dox... is... but... then... hmmm... Then, she smiles at the end... And returns to her console. I don't.

I watch her for a bit and then focus my eyes on Bills' neck for a kilobit. Then on Kin's neck for a megabit. They don't turn around. They still don't say nothing or anything. And I also don't feel nothing or anything and I don't mean 'for them'. I mean 'from them'. But maybe my... skills don't apply to everyone. Regardless, I—

“—NaN-bees incom', GRAB SOME—!” Kin—

“—What—?”

“—DA-FUK-DEM-U-ANT-WEAR-YO-SAFE-BEL—!” DOX—

“—WUT—?”

“—FUCKSHITPISSCOCKS—!” BILLS—

“—HUH?”

The shuttle’s—

—SHAKIN’—

—n’ shootin’—

—N’ SHAKIN’—

—n’ divin’—

—N’ CLIMBIN’—

—n’ speedin’—

—N’ SLOWIN’—

—N’ BOMBIN’—

—N’ CRYIN’—

—n’ laughin’—

—N’ SCREAMIN’—!

... When I... begin to see it. First second is in real-time, but then I slo-mo. The right wall of the ship, the one closest to me, of course... Is slowly disintegrating. Red and black are the sparks, which radially burn from the center to the outer limits. I wish I could...

... I wish I could save...

... Them, I wish...

... But it’s...

... Late...?

...

...

...

...

...

...

...

.....^.....^.....^.....

Chapter Nain:
9 IX

Chapter 10: Commands!

I I wake up... But I wish I didn't... No dreams... I can remember of...

I have opened my eyes and the ceiling is to the right side of my P.O.V. I'm in an unlit room, except for... No déjà vu's here. Only candles... Candles? Real and lovely smelling candles are fitted into dark, metallic, ornated holders. Leaves! The ornaments are shaped into black, metal, roses leaves and they carry the sticks of enlightenment gently towards the ceiling. My bed is shaped like a... box. A wooden box of reddish wood. I am laying on a purplish cloth sewn with golden-ish strings. Strong, thick, powerful thread. And I soon realize I am covered by... Glass. Perfectly transparent. I was looking through the glass. I am imprisoned in glass??? WTF—!

—I “*SMASH*!” through the glass as my phobia rages in any CAGES! And I hear screams and shouts and roars and—

“—Dwahnneeee—!” ladies screaming and “—Drakuuuu—!” men shouting and erratic running and then...

The room I'm in looks like a... Hmm... The people have scattered out of the place and I can observe more clearly... The portraits on the walls, a lot of portraits... Of a woman. And a man, but the woman seems to have taken quite the lead in the number of painted portraits. The man in the paintings looks nothing like Pepe... He is not green and is dressed in... just a white cloth to cover the shame. His head is wearing a golden circle, but unlike Pepe's, it has some lines and symbols drawn in it. He is standing, but in an awkward sort of position, on a wooden long-foot-cross. His arms are spread apart along the left and right beams of the cross. His skinny body is resting its legs on a tiny ledge that is nailed to the lower beam of the cross but... His feet are also nailed to the ledge! His hands and feet have NAILS in them and blood is dripping from the wounds! He is bolted to the arms and the foot of the cross! Blood spurts from a wound to the chest. 'His chest struck by a thorn'... He is not smiling nor frowning. His head rests to the side with eyes closed. His face doesn't show any sadness. Happy neither. I would say 'stoic' but I'm not sure if that is the... Maybe it is acceptance. Quite a shocking image but... mystical in some sense. And I wish I had time to describe the woman but from some CORNER—!

“—Dah poy lam spoos muh keuh yesht drawku! Che poo—?!”

“—Hey, HEY—!”

“—Dwahnne fer'eshteh—”

“—Please, no reptilish! My A.A. can't handle—!”

“—SAH-TAH-NOH! Sayton too are mey DEVIL yesht mey. Noo my krezoot mey Eeuani, HAHAHAA—!”

— ... I ... I leave a deep breath and take it all in... I let GG face his 'sah-tah-nahs' or 'drawkus' I believe they call them. Heh... He... He... calms down a bit. In his eyes I can see... a smile seeping in. I look around me and notice that I wasn't imprisoned or something, it was just a glass cover and I broke through it quite easily. I mean, I don't even have any cuts or scratches, it was just secure glass, crumbly and... The glass is sprinkled around me like...sand...Like the sandy-coloured eyes of Alin... Which are silent right now... He has stopped his reptilish chatter and his eyes have turned to... Gratitude...? I see tears, then... Lots and lots of tears like I've never seen coming out of a human in my WHOLE LIFE! I mean, I believe this room will soon be filled to the SKIES if we don't do something about—!

“—Hey, what’s with the rainy face?”

“BWAAAHAAHAAAHAHAHA—!” But this time I’m not only noncertain if he’s laughing at what I said or at me, in general or in particular but... I’m neither sure if he’s either laughing or crying or both or neither at the same time. It’s a reaction I have never SEEN in my LIFE! Ever, not in I.R.L., on-screen, H.U.D., V.R., AR-HOLO-PROJO-M-OH-JEE—!

“—HEY, if you need to calm your—” nerves.

“—Bwahahawaaaah—!”

“—you should—” actually, nevermind...

“—BWAHEHAOHOHOA—!”

—GG jumps in my arms and I try to hug away some of his pain. While he deals with his breakdown, I notice the gentle face of the woman in the paintings. The tenderness in her eyes... and the child she holds in her arms. They both have golden circles around their heads. The whole painting gleams with gold... Its beauty strikes me in its simplicity. She is a modest woman, dressed in a cloak of red with golden brims. The cloak covers her head and underneath there’s a blue...? And yet... She is so beautiful... I... I don’t know what I’m feeling. It’s definitely love, but no love I have ever felt... It’s not the love I feel for AMA... But it includes her. It’s a universal love. A motherly love... The love I feel for GG right now... Well, a fatherly love in my case but... He appears to be better now. He is watching my eyes closely as they reflect my watery image. Well, they’re both watery...

“I thought you were gone...” GG breaks the silence.

“I was... I...” review the most recent memory I can bring up and reverse engineer it... But I wish I didn’t...

“Coom drawku? Adeekah how are you still alive? They said you...”

“I can’t really explain it myself. I’m not even sure I want to...”

“...”

“... At least... not anymore...”

“... You’ve been dead cold for—!”

“—GG, please! I don’t want to know...”

“... YOU FELL FROM THE SKY, MAN!”

“...”

“...” GG’s eyes are bigger than plates right now and the candle lights — “—Nobody could’ve survived that! Not in the way they found you.”

“Who’s ‘they’?”

“Some villagers from Zoo'boh, it’s a long way from here, on the outskirts of ‘Borh’, they saw a light in the sky and then BOOM! And there was a trail of smoke NO two-trails-and-they-followed-one-NO-both-and-on—”

“—Woah, slow down—”

“—lead to you. And you were...”

“...What?”

“Intact. Somewhat. Well, you did fall on some haystacks but still...”

“... Haystacks? Villagers? Come on, what’s this lot o’—?”

“—No, man, it’s true! Look, the villagers brought you back and you were ID’ed. What you did for me... for us, is well known by now.”

“I don’t like the sound of that.”

“No man, listen... The people, they venerate you. I told them they shouldn’t because...”

“‘Venerate’? What does that mean?”

“Look man, you’ve been out for N—”

“—asked you kindly—”

“—DEAD AND YOU...! You look... Fresh as ‘ell, for real?”

“... Why are you so sure I was dead?” I check myself and discover that the clothes I’m wearing are not mine. It’s white, all white, a long white robe and I also see... That my hands... They are not so light anymore.

“You showed no signs of life. None. They made sure of that.”

“What are you talking ab—?”

“—Che yesht mey!? Che DRAKU yesht?!”

“Yes, I’m starting to believe that too.”

“Untzelehj che spoon?”

“What?”

“... Never mind.”

Silence... I jump out of the ‘bed’ and a humble shower of glass pieces pours to the floor. I scan the pictures around. The drawing style looks old. Very, very old. Medieval, no, ancient! Maybe... They’re still quite detailed but... This place does feel like a place of worship. But to worship a man, or something worse, whatever I am... I find that repulsive.

... Not me!

Yes, and that is why your place is in that corner.

Corn-firming.

I face GG with sorrowed eyes and have to ask... and hope...

“What about the others?”

“...?”

“My crew... I was flying with my crew when...”

“... I don’t think... sorry man, I don’t think they found anyone else. I told you, they only found you!”

“What about our shuttle?!”

“...”

I turn around, attempting to hide my... But if they haven’t found them, it means I can still hope...

I walk towards the exit. The door is open.

I pass through the exit. The sky is open.

I take three steps... And the valleys, the hills, the houses, the trees, the orchards, the flowers, the colourful people... They all spread as far as the eye can see. No domes and no walls, only skies are above us. Colorful and colourful are the people but mostly in the chroma of their clothes. White they are, the clothes are white but the embroidered floral patterns seem unique on each of their... shirts and vests and hats and shoes, mostly black and white but also red, yellow or blues. Each song, each hue tells me all of this is true. But what is it?

“GG... What is this place? It looks like...” LotO!

“We’re in See Dee.”

“C.D?”

“Da, ‘Che'tah teh'ah Drep'tah teh'ah.” He points to the top of some sort of bulletin board. A plaque reads ‘Cetatea Dreptatea’ and underneath there’s some quote ‘Fericiți cei prigoniți pentru dreptate, că a lor este Împărăția Cerurilor’.

"I recognize this script... Is this the same lang you spew sometimes?"

"Da". I guess that means yes.

"What's it called?"

"Romunuh."

"In commonspik?"

"It's Rowmayneean." Row-main-ian?

??

???

"Interesting. Hey... what about the other kids? Are they around?"

"Who exactly?"

"You know, Batbro and Gary and... your friend, eh..." What was his name?

"Back in Liberon for all I know."

"Weren't you supposed to be in detention?"

"Ba da."

By the look on his face... "I guess those are all the details you're willing to spare."

"... Da."

"Fine!"

With curiosity nonfulfilled, I approach the people gathered in front of the 'temple'. I recognize some of them, they were screaming a short while ago. They step aside and form a corridor through which I am allowed to pass freely. Some of them remark "Yell yeh ah'less'ool!" while others say "Vlahd tzeppesh uncar'not..." and "Keu low'ul diavo'lee lore" and some other nonce—

"—What are they saying?"

"They say you are the 'chosen one'."

"Chosen for what?"

"Eh... It's sort of like a Mehsighah."

I stop, turn around and grab GG by the shoulders! But gently... "Look, you tell them I'm no such thing!!"

"I tried! But they won't LISTEN—!!!"

"—Then try again!!!!"

GG's eyes beg me not to ask this of him. But mine are beggier. So, he obliges.

"Ah'schooltatz wahmen boone! Ah zees keu nu yeh—"

"—Untze'lehgy m che spoon'e muh—"

"—Atoonch de che POOLAH me'a toht zeechetz keu—?!" GG sounds quite pissed!

"—Goora spoor'katuh che yesht—" Now some old lady is quite pissed at Alin. This is not going the way I—

"—Ah'leaneh, deen'tre tawtz too are tre'boo'ee sah untzelehj—" some young dude is trying to chill the—

"—YEH SAHTAHNAH voh spoon—!"

"—Yes, he is right, listen to—" backing up GG here but some old dude—

"—Nu vorrbee ahsha duh ah'less'ool—!" and then some other dude or nondude—

"—Yeh treemee'soo lu DOOM'neh'zo—" and then another and another and I have to stop this—

"—Guys—"

"—che prohsht—" GG.

"—ladies—" I try again.

"—pro'ah'steh yeh muh'tah—"

“—people—!” I try aga—
“—Deh che teh yay deh mamma—?” GG.
“—PLEASE—!” I try—
“—Tuh’chetz buh keuh vreh’ah—”
“—Buh gaw’tah, gaw’tah—!” GG.
“—I need SILENCE!!!” ...

The crowd falls silent... to a murmur. I check my surroundings... Now I can hear my thoughts again. I breathe in deep. I breathe out far. I look around and I smile.

“Thank you! Now... First of all, my name is—” but some kid interrupts.
“—Demeter, son of B—” knows my real name?? How the...?
I turn around to GG “—Did you tell ‘em—?”
“—NO!” His anger tops mine. I trust GG...
“... .. I prefer to be called _____. And no other names, no ‘chosen ones’ or otherwise, OK?”
“...” The murmur of the crowd... falls silent.
“I am not a mehsighah or a savior or what—”
“—Of course, you are not the Mehsighah!” A disheveled lad steps in while he takes his hat off. “We never said that. The One true Mehsighah arrived over two thousand years ago.”
“Perfect! I’m glad we can all agree on that!”
“But **He chose you to** fulfill His Kingdom on Earth! And **prepare us** for His glorious arrival!” Another disheveled lad pops up from behind.
A couple of people follow that with scattered “Slahvah tzee’eh Dwahmne!”
“Where are you getting all this? Guys, please, let’s be reasonable.”
“...” The crowd.
GG breaks the— “It’s from some old book.”
“... .. What book?”
“Eh... Some obscure book written during The Event.”
“... ..”
“Only fragments remain.” Adds some bloke with a funny-looking hat.
“...”
“Which foretell...” A young lady steps up, flowing tears, but her eyes sparkle of “... your coming!”
“... ..”
“...”
“... .. What have you been smoking?!?” And where can I get some?
“...”
“... .. I am. NOT... THE CHOSEN—!”
“—It’s no use...” GG concludes with a sigh.
“... .. Why???”
“They believe that...” but GG is quite sad.
“That in the days the sky is torn...” Disheveled lad #1.
“After he dies and is reborn...” Disheveled lad #2.
“The chosen words of Chosen One...” Funny-hat.
“Deny his right to any throne.” Sparkly-eyes.
“... .. How am I supposed to defend against that!?!?!?”

“ ... ”

“ FINE! I AM the Chosen ONE, ok?!” The crowd gasps. Chattering. “Now leave me alone!” More gasps. GG facepalms. “What?????” I am confused as F—

“—But when the people shall insist...” Disheveled #1.

“Their will he’ll totally resist...” Disheveled #2.

“IF he accepts his role as One...” Funny.

“He’ll order to be left alone...” Sparkly.

“ ”

These people are mental! And I’m... Why am I mad? They think I am their ‘chosen’ one. Chosen to do something, whatever that is. Those sparkly eyes shiver with hope and joy and... I can’t accept this! But I have no idea what they’re talking about and denying it has had THE OPPOSITE effect! I want to bring hope to people... But not like this! Not by encouraging this... this... lie?

“Look, guys...” I survey all the disheveled, funny, sparkly, weird faces of the people around me and “... You people got it all wrong. All of you except...” And then I look at his wondering eyes “... except GG.”

And his eyes turn to... top gratitude. He knew it from the beginning. And I’m slowly learning to accept it. But the crowd is confused.

“What do you mean?” Asks disheveled #2.

“What is he saying?” #1 to #2.

“That you’re the devil?” Hot!

“But in the book...” They say...

“It says I’m not?” And I smile at the sparkly-girl but her saddened eyes twirl... And my heart breaks more than I’ll admit. But the one they think I am... ‘s not it. “Then you believe me now?”

The girl runs away with sobs in her voice. The disheveled cover their heads and depart. The funny hat keeps looking at me, nonbelieving, maybe. A couple of people perform a gesture where they touch their forehead, their chest, right shoulder then left shoulder. I remember Dude doing that also... The rest of the crowd disperses, one by one. And they finally listen and leave me alone. At least, I can only hope...

“GG, I have a million questions to ask but I’m also feeling a bit peckish.” Understatements.

“There’s a...” GG points down the road to what seems to be... the trail of his thoughts.

We follow the trail but not before we cross a rail. I review my surroundings and I must admit, I have never imagined anything like it! The houses are so cozy and humble and the roads are so large, I am able to... This place is out of place, but not out of this place, it’s just lots of space, many spaces, my heart races while my mind paces from their faces to the laces of their clothes and the maces of their... guards? A couple of—what I suspect to be—guards—based on the red, royally looking armor they are wearing—are lined up in front of a mansion of sorts. Maybe a school. A magic school! Or, a library of enlightenment, or if I could find a...

“In here, man!” GG is pulling on my sleeve and pulls me out of my reverie and he points to... a building opposite to the sort-of-mansion-mystery, while my sleeve is still being pulled by he.

The sign above the door says ‘Taverna Sănătății’, wow they even got taverns! If that’s what it really means...

“GG, dude, you know exactly what I need!”

Inside, it is exactly as I expected. Because I didn't know what to expect. It looks fairly traditional and from around these parts but not in a medieval or primitive way. But it does show its long roots of history. It's cozy and—

“—Loo'uhtz oon lok vah rogue.” A slightly plumpy, lightly young, woman ‘servant’(?) says something and my fabling mind tells me my class of character has already been deduced. Though it doesn't fit with my attire...

“Let's take a seat, man. And behave.” GG leads me towards the very back of the tavern, although there's plenty of seats right here, why don't we—?

“—I'd say I've proven myself to be quite tame.”

“You're staring too much.”

True, but it's hard for me not to stare when everyone else has been staring so much already. Ever since we got in, all eyes were fixed on every movement of mine, voluntary or involuntary. People mostly whisper now, mothers hold their babies hard, band of laughers in back row, minstrels, singer and a bard. By the door's a fine red guard and... well, he doesn't seem to care, for as long as sparks don't flare.

We take a couple of seats, my heart skips plenty of beats because the fantasy perfectly fits, what if I lost my WITS—?!

—It's because of all this rhyming.

All that timing is nauseating.

Quadruple x 2 plus Agreeing...

... I breathe deeply, and without rhythm. I breathe it all in and accept the reality. Whatever reality this is.

The band of minstrels, singer and a bard resume their tunes as soon as their amusement subdues. Live music coming from living people, celebrating life, the universe and everything in between or beyond. Their musical cooperation weaves the fabric of sound into a wave of dancers, live dancers gathering in the middle dancing ring, forming co—!... Co—!...

Cows...?

Concentric?

Yes! Concentric circles rotating, rotating in opposite directions then changing directions, then outwards, inwards, direction changing, inwards, outwards, never breaking, outwards, inwards, never falling, inwards, outwards, inwards, deeper and deeper into the hard-core mix of medieval party pacing, outwards, inwards,

Except when the music stops...

“GG, I have an infinity of questions, so let's begin with the first one.”

“Oh, man...”

“Where in the world are we?”

“I told you man, we're in Borh. ... The B.O.R.?”

“... Which is?”

“Magog?”

“... Which is?”

“The Big Old Resistance, for Kryst's sake! Didn't they teach you anything in the Res'?”

“I skipped a few classes.”

“Qyulangeeoo draku!”

“What does ‘quelangeeoo’ mean?”

“Eh... class-skipper.”

“Interesting. So, since you’ve obviously been paying attention in class, can you please tell me about this B.O.R.?”

“There’s the Res’ and there’s the Borh. They both have to follow the same Creed, well, sort of. In the Res’ it’s called the N.A.P. In Borh it’s the ‘The Law of Living’.”

“I see, so it’s just a matter of semantics.”

“No, man, it’s much more than—”

“—Che doh'reetz?” The slightly plumpy servant asks. As for the answer...

“What do you want?” The lightly lumpy GG asks me. As for the...

“A menu in a familiar lang would be nice.”

“Certainly!” And she hands me a touchscreen pad, which distorts a bit my fable. But we can adapt... I quickly browse and scan for any of the purely traditional stuff, mainly... “A pint of ale for me, aye!”

“We do not serve ale, surr.”

“A quart of mead, my good lady!”

“We do not serve mead either.”

“A glass of wine, please—!”

“—You can’t get alcohol in here, man!” GG saves me the trouble of going through the whole routine.

“I see. In that case I will get the house specialty. Oh, and a pack of cigs for dessert.”

“You can’t get cigs either, man. I told you, we’re in ‘Bor—’!”

“—You mean I can’t even smoke a fag—?”

“—Gentlemen, please! If you can’t dec—”

“—No cigs, no booze, no drugs, no mas—”

“—You’ve gotta be shh—!”

“—Gentlemen—”

“—even cursing, well, to an ext—”

“—In any lang—?”

“—...” Miss—barely noticeable—Plumpness’s patience has been powerfully pressed to the point of plenum.

“... Forgive me, melady, I’m new to these lands and the...”

My thread of thought gets slightly bent when a group of, let’s say, thirty red guards enter the establishment and march straight in our direction. The servant excuses herself and departs. Three of the guards move closer to our table. The middle one steps forward and addresses me.

“Mister B., the council wishes to speak to you.” The other two guards move in formation, semi-circling me.

“To what do I owe the honour?”

“Surr...” I notice badges on their chests that say ‘REGA’. “... Under the current circumstances, your security status is being brought under review.”

“I guess the protocols don’t cover ‘resurrections’, eh?” I smile.

“...” The guards.

“Humour is allowed in Borh, right?” I whisper to GG and he nods, slightly nervously.

“Mister B., will you please accompany us to the council?”

“And if I refuse?”

GG shakes his head and mouths ‘noes’ but I don’t see why I can’t ask a simple little—

“—Then we would be compelled to escort you to the Magog border and subsequently deport you.”

I feel the tension in the room. Not just my own or GG's, but the guards too. What they've heard, if they believe it, tells them this is not a fight they'd want to get in. But fortunately for all of us, it is not a fight I want either.

"The council will gladly answer any of your questions." The guard attempts diplomacy.

"I see, well in that case..." I check with GG once more. He seems to trust these guys. I guess they're trustworthy. "... let's go, shall we?"

But the guard insists that "This is a private matter, surr. We hope you understand."

Which must mean GG can't accompany me. I bid farewell to my little pal as we depart for the 'Grand Hall' they called it. In suite royale we march close-by to a canal. The waters flow, the flowers grow, I keep my brow a little low. This place amazes me! The cleanliness, the simplicity and yet... I have yet to see any tech around here. I mean, there is technology, this place is far from any medieval setting. But I see no tech 'in' the people. No jacks, no cybers. At least not at first glance. Nature is king here! Everything else just blends in. On the other side of the canal, I see some fields of crops of different shades of yellow, green and some brown. Most of them are being attended by automated machines but there are a few parcels being attended by groups of people. Children, parents and grandparents, they all labour and harvest the fields together with joy in their hands and smiles on their faces. They certainly don't have to do it. It seems that they do it purely as a hobby, maybe? The sun above smiles on the people and on me, although it is quite chilly out here and I just noticed I have no underpan—

"—Excuse me, gentlemen!" The cortege stops on command, I'm not sure who's escorting who, but... "Forgive me, but the... eh... people have taken the liberty to dress me up in something I'm not quite comfortable with at the moment. Especially considering the... the eh..." 'prophetic' circumstances.

"Certainly, surr. It's in the plan, surr."

"Plan? What plan?"

The guard smiles and says "The protocol, surr."

And we continue to walk down the road as if all of this is normal. The people passing by stare at me, point fingers, some do that odd hand gesture and most of them look like they've seen a ghost. Or maybe they don't trust this whole shkebabble to begin with. Respect to them, I say! I tip my metaphorical hat at the closest grumpy face I see and he backs away a bit. I didn't mean it in that way! Oh well... Soon, in front of us arise what seem to be the grandest halls I've ever seen! A huge, huge official-looking building with strong pillars at the entrance and long, large, hypnotic stairs! But it's not grandiose, just... BIG!

We climb the stairs. The entrance is closed. And it's BIG!

They open the entrance. We step inside. And it's HUGE!

I take three steps and... marvel at the spaciousness, the vastness of it. I get the same feeling of space as I felt outside. It's as if we didn't even... Plants and trees are here and there, the pillars white, the ceiling white and all the rest just windows. I'm totally... Entranced and we climb on top of some platform and it... lifts us up. In the ceiling. On the next level, which must be like three actual levels from the ground, the platform stops inside a hall. We move along and the frame of the door at the end of the hall forms a cross. Crosses everywhere, I notice now the cross is... omnipresent in these parts. The Good Cross, like the Res' has. That gives me hope. I'm certainly more inclined to trust those who carry the Cross. I notice some text in one of the paintings of the long-haired man. It says 'IC. XC.' I wonder what that means...

“Forgive me.” I stop and one of the guards approaches me, it seems more out of curiosity this time. “What does ‘IC. XC.’ stand for?”

The guard eagerly responds “It’s the name of our Lord, Kryst!”

“Kryst? I don’t follow the spelling though...”

“Oh, they are the Greek initials of His name, surr.”

“I see... Exquisite, I must say!”

And I’m genuinely intrigued! We do the walk towards the crossed door where we’ll do the talk, I imagine, but this hallway seems endless! We walk **through** the doors and enter some sort of audition or conference room. The public has sitting spaces left and right and in the back of the room there’s an imposing wooden table on a podium. Twelve seats but only four are occupied. The Cross guards them from behind, imposing authority over them. I approach the table and take a closer look at their faces. From left to right: a long, dark-haired woman. Generic. A short, dark-haired man. His charming visage and pointy goatee lead me to think he’s not so trustworthy. Another short-haired man but white this time. And another woman... Short-haired. Her blue eyes pierce me with suspicion. The sharp edges of her face slash my retinas. Her pointy ears and slender frame send shivering flames through my pumping veins. I lower my eyes, not only out of some reverence or some weird... feeling, but to check the name inscribed on the plate in front of her: ‘I.’. And in reverse order, the other plates read: ‘M.’, ‘A.’ and ‘N.’ They all look middle aged, except for M. who seems to be on the elderly side. A tag on each of their chests reads ‘ACAD’.

I bow and say “_____ . At your service.”

N. is first to the mic “Thank you, mister B. for—”

—... ..—

“—your cooperation, we trust we will remain on good terms thenceforth and we hope you understand our delicate situation, which was brought to our attention today, —” Nope, ain’t hearing it “—, twenty eighty-five, the year of our Lord.”

The mic is then passed to A. “I must say, the subject of your... particular case has led to quite some controversy amongst our ranks. We find ourselves in a... jurisdictional conundrum.”

The—

—metaphorical—

—mic is now passed to M. “When you were first brought to our attention, analysis showed—”

“—Noninvasive analysis.” I. breaks in, but it doesn’t seem to be out of concern for my peace of mind...

“Yes, but...” M. continues “... We couldn’t detect any signs of life.”

“Did you check my brain?”

“We...” M.

“End results showed...” N.

“The point is that—” A. “—you were declared deceased and now... you are not.”

“Ah, yes! About that...” Everyone leans in, expecting an answer but “... I’m an alien.”

“...” They are not amused.

“I don’t know what I am. But I’m certainly not some ‘chosen one’, those peas—”

“—The Church does not approve such an apocryphal interpretation.” I. is angered.

“Indeed, so there must be some scientific explanation!” A. seems quite intrigued.

“But how?! To drop from such great h—” N. looks amazed.

“—Huge haystack they say—” M. appears fatigued.

“—Which has no relevance in—” A.

“—Councilors, let’s focus on the—” N.

“—Can’t you see he’s the DARK ONE?” I. puts the dot on me, but I’m not sure what kind of dot that is.

“...” Everyone else.

“Councilor I., please... That happened a long time ago.” A.

“Not to mention... The dark one was not indestructible.” M.

“That’s what... what... what HE would want you to believe!” I. points the finger at me.

“Me?” I point a finger on me. “Lady, this is all a misunderstanding. I told those cultists to leave me alone.

This whole thing... It’s all a mystery to me! I don’t even know where I am on the planet anymore!”

“...”

“I don’t even know what I am...”

M. “Mister B., what is the last thing you remember?”

“You mean before I woke up in a glass b—?”

M. “—Mm, well, obviously!”

“... My 1337 mates and I were just exiting the K-subsector fly zone. Then, our shuttle came under fire, badly. The last thing I remember is seeing the fuselage disintegrating. And suffocating pressure. That’s it.”

N. whispers something to A. and he nods.

“What about my crew? Did you find them? My crew? Are they...?”

N. “No bodies were recovered from the crash site but... Blackbox logs showed that none of the emergency chutes were released. We’re sorry for your loss.” ... I can... still hope! ...

“Do you know who attacked us?”

I. “Investigation is ongoing.”

“...”

A. “Ah, my fellow councilors... You do have to admit that he is not like the others.”

“What other—?”

I. “—rresponsible of you to bring that into dis—”

“—Why? And why—?”

N. “—ot to mention—”

“—let those people—?”

M. “—iraculous resurrect—!”

“—in a box—?”

I. “—t is blasphemous to say so!”

“...” Everybody, especially M., turned very silent. I check their eyes, one by one. I don’t see any obvious langdog devices around. But I do feel the langdog inside... Oh, never mind that! Must’ve been some déjà —

A. “—nd how else would you describe it, councilor—?”

I. “—have seen the same scans as you, councilor A.! This is NOT a human being! He can’t be!”

A. “Is this not a man standing in front of us? Do my eyes betray me?”

I. “...”

A. “Are you not a man, mister B.?”

“I... I...”

I sit down and smash my forehead in my palms. The pain I’m feeling right now is beyond belief. It pulsates from somewhere deep inside in synch with the beats of my torn heart. I didn’t ask for any of this! But I have to accept it somehow. Maybe I did ask for this. I wanted to find Father... I... But I have only found more questions than answers! No answers almost. I did find a lot more about the world. And maybe of other worlds... But my

self is still a mystery to myself. I... AMA... Oh... AMA! AMA...? I miss you so much... I... am a danger to these people! The Monos... The Monos could... Oh no... this beautiful place... I... MUST PROTECT THEM —!

A. “—Are you all right, mister B.?”

“I... I have to leave. The Monos are after me...”

“...”

“Look, it’s a long story, the point is that they may attack at any moment and I can’t... I can’t let them...!”

“...”

“Guys, I really wish I could stay but didn’t you hear me?! This place is in danger!”

N. “No... The Monoes, surr?”

“Yes, the Monos! The Monobrainers are hunting me down! Those Mono-splonkhead-chum-fud-magg—!”

—A. starts to chuckle. And I. is smiling a bit too. I. is actually quite amused. A. has gone in full laughter. M. seems a bit confused, or he’s just tired. N. doesn’t show much one way or the other...

“You think I’m joking around?!? You’ll have the blood of these people on your —”

N. “—o, mister B., forgive the misunderstanding but...”

A. “Are you referring to the Monostate, mister B.? You think they’re a threat to us?”

I. “Certainly laughable! A good joke!” Why, thank you but...

“But aren’t they a threat to everyone?”

M. “Monostatists are only a threat to themselves.” Tone of voice: dismissive.

“But... But the Seventeen-Seventy-Six... in Liberta, they did that! I saw them!”

A. “Ah, Liberta is an unfortunate case... but also an exception. Quite unusual behaviour on the part of the ‘Monoes’ too. Very suspicious, I would say. The case is being investigated and we are collaborating with all congregations involved in the incident.”

“Who’s ‘we’?”

N. “You actually don’t know?”

“All I know is that you’re called the ‘Borh’ and that you have some nasty rules regarding vices.”

M. “I thought he was being overdramatic earlier...”

A. “Mister B., you are standing at the gates of Ishrael, capital of the Magog Kingdom. Cetatea Dreptatea is just one of its ‘transition’ settlements, where those from the Gog Kingdoms —”

N. “—also known as ‘Resistland’ —”

A. “—can experience a ‘simulation’ let’s say, of how wonderful and peaceful life can be under the loving grace of the Holy Orthodox Church of God.”

I. “But it is also a learning experience for those who are preparing themselves, body and soul, to pass the gates of Magog as a citizen. Each catechumen must study and follow all three-hundred-and-thirty—”

M. “—No need to bother him with the details, my dear.” I notice the binding ring on his finger as he lovingly dismisses I. through a small wave of the hand. Her anger looks a bit restrained. Interesting...

“No, please! I’m actually really hungry for some details!” And other things “Like, what sector are we in right now? How big is your kingdom? How do the Monos fit in all this? What about the Nomos and there’s also mutants-and-the-Krauts-and-whoknowswhat-the-freaks—!?”

I. “—Please calm yourself, mister B.!”

“Sorry, sorry!”

M. “For the past fifty years, we have worked together to rescue the world from the burning fires left in the wake of the ‘dark one’.”

“Who is this ‘dark one’ you speak of?”

I. looks bewildered at M. and whispers “...did...Res’...hire...?” but then recomposes herself and “Normally you are required to study our history in order to join the Resistance ranks.”

“Another long story. Just give me the basics, please.”

A. leans in and scrutinizes me closely “Ah, yes... I believe you know it as the H.C.R.P.V. crisis. What you probably don’t know is the true history of the ‘Monolympian’. He was a false saviour who —”

“—Now hold on a minute. The Monolympian? He’s certainly just a myth —”

A. “—s portrayed by the Monotemple, yes. But he did exist. He had the charm they say, and he had the humour they say. But he also manifested great powers, which seemed beyond any understanding at the time. The glamour, the splendor, the fervor attracted many to his cause. But at what cost? He soon betrayed them; he sowed discord into people’s hearts. Man against woman, parent against child, neighbor against neighbor, nation against nation...”

N. “But the people who truly followed God, each in their own way, saw through the lies and the deception. We did not follow the dark one. We reorganized according to the Law of Living, which is the minimum you must follow for peaceful cohabitation. And the Law of Salvation, which you must follow entirely to gain entrance to Magog.”

A. “And that brings us nicely back to the original subject of our meeting. You see, our immigration policy did not predict... your reanimation. Technically, you’re not supposed to be here, alive at least. What I propose to you, my fellow councilors, is that we release him on a temporary-level-one-visa because I would really love to take a closer look at—”

I. “—On what grounds, councilor A.? This... man’s history is a blank. None of the records match! The only proof we have of his past is the retrofitted jack in his skull! And the reports from the rescue team.”

N. “My condolences again, mister B.”

“Thank you, but I don’t think—”

M. “—must also take into account the people’s reaction. The polls show a growth of his followers by n —”

“—Are you kidding me?! I thought I made myself—”

A. “—nd that could prove useful once we discover his true...”

N. “... Nature?”

“... What are you talking about?”

A. “We have many instruments to measure a human on all levels. Physically, mentally and spiritually. We have had a ‘tough’ time measuring you though. Even at this very moment.” Interesting... I closely check my surroundings but I don’t sense anything. I look at A. closely. His eyes... I don’t sense anything. Have I lost my senses? “But given time, I am certain that we will be able to ‘crack your code’ too.”

“Heh... Hopefully you’ll have better luck—”

I. “—n my opinion we are taking a great risk in allowing this man such —”

—When suddenly the doors come crashing behind us and in arrive several men wearing black robes and carrying golden staffs. Their hats are tall and black and the guy in front is white, all white and they all carry crosses on chains around their necks and the tags say ‘ARHI’ but several other random people are behind them, some are carrying huge forks or something and some are shouting and then I see... Is, is that GG’s whatshisname friend? I throw a greeting at him but he doesn’t seem too happy to see me... The bloke in white, leading the mob, stops a few meters away from me, and from the council, and everyone else takes a seat.

He begins to speak “Councilors! Forgive our interruption, but this is a matter of great urgency. Roll the tapes!”

A projector lights up on the wall and a clip starts playing. At first, the image is fuzzy and shaky but then it stabilizes and is following a dark shape moving fast from shape to shape, slashing each shape, each shape falling, then moving to the next and the next and then... the camera looks to the right and it's... GG, Gary and whatshisname... behind the blue shield. And then I see it, I see myself, the red eyes, the sharp talons instead of fingers, just slashing and slashing... The last one falls and... I fall to my knees. They approach me... The last visible shot shows my face, all bloodied, looking back at the viewer... The chills it sends down my spine... Everyone has seen this now. Everyone knows now...

The man in white continues "The authenticity of this footage has been verified by bio-I.D. sampling and several third-party witness accounts. It is NOT C.G.I. It is proof that THIS MAN is a DEVIL!" And he obviously points at me.

The people seem quite scared. The councilors are... shocked. All except for I. I guess she saw that coming, in a way. Well, what can I say?

Busted?

Balancing...

"Look, mister..."

"Tell them it was Father S. who sent you back to the fiery pits!"

Them? But I don't get to ponder much when he raises his staff and a light starts shining and what in the —?! —But whatshisface jumps in front of me and shouts "No!!! He saved us! He cannot be a devil, he saved us!"

Father S. lays his staff down and the shining light dies down too. I start to wonder... If I am actually awake. I do get the feeling that I'm living in a fantasy right now. The people start to chatter. Everyone else wonders. Measures. In their heads, in their hearts, in their... Who was the real devil in that footage?

"Father S., I do not know what I am. Maybe I am a devil or maybe I am something else... But I want to do good. I follow the Cross, just as you all do. The Good Cross, not the inverted one."

"Your deeds prove the opposite, the violence—!"

"—True, the means do not justify the ends but..."

I lovingly study the Cross on the staff he is holding. It gleams with gold and I follow it down the shaft, down to the floor. When I notice... the floor. Its glassy polished surface reflects the entire room and its inhabitants, and yet... There's something...

Refresh rating—

Yes, I see it! A glitch every 1/60 frames! Totally unnoticeable for a human of course, but...

"This is a sim."

N. "What makes you think—?"

I. "—Ssh—!" Gotha!

"—Top work actually! I've never had one so convincing in my life!" I try to move 'outside' of it but of course they've turned P.M.O.* on these cheeky little b—

—Brute-forcing...

* Primary Motor Offline – used in simulation software (of any sorts) to provide a full body experience to the user. Or other nefarious purposes.

A. "I can assure you, mister B., that this is not a sim—"
Permutin—

M. "—Ah, what's the point? Pause the sim!"

Everything has frozen. Everyone. Well, I can still move.

A. approaches me and says "We apologize for the..."

"Deception?"

A. "This is for your own good."

"How can deception be good?" I say as I'm—

—Deconstruct—

I. "—t is for our safety. Everyone's safety."

"I see."

But there's a double meaning there as I finally manage to disable PMO and break through the illusion. I pull the jack out and the last frame of the sim fades out from my eyes. And little by little the room around reveals itself and it looks kind of... familiar but nonfamiliar. The white-padded walls, the reinforced black metal door, the whole sterility of it. Am I back in Monoland? Was it all a sim? Everything that happened in the last weeks or even... months? How would I know now? The problem with long-term abuse of sims is that you lose touch with reality. I've seen some cases. Literal zombies. I try to get up on my feet but it's the greatest pain I've ever had! It drags me down. The pain drags me down from the top of my brain and back in the bed. Horizontally, ah yes... Much better... It feels like...

Exhausting...

I look at my hands... They're light now. The sim was not perfect but neither am I. The walls press me down but I guess this is a cage I'm not going to escape so easily. Not that I'd want to right now... I just need to...

Resting...

I open my eyes after a while. The door opens with a jingly sound and A. comes in. Alone? No, GG is right behind him. I suspect the only other non-NPC in the sim. I still have to...

"Quite impressive work, dude! Such carefully crafted details!"

A. "Thank you but I cannot take all the credit. Still—"

"—no match for my skills, eh?"

"Actually, you are the first person to successfully hack out of a Level Three simulation with PMO—"

"—What you mean Level T—?"

"—Regardless, I would like to a—"

"—s there anything you said or showed me based on facts?"

"Yes."

"Which parts?"

"Everything except for the way in which you were found. The state you were in."

"..."

"Mister Demeter, one of the reasons why people are very afraid of you is, simply, because you were supposed to be dead. You see, at your... landing spot—"

"—Even the haystack was for real?"

“Yes, well, I highly doubt that a haystack—”

“—Not when you’ve seen the stuff I’ve seen...”

“Regardless, the point is... the point is...”

“The point, man, is that you were a freaking mess!” GG saves A. from his lapse in memory and me from the sordid academic details. “You were a charred horror, all burnt up with pieces of—” Correction, he didn’t save me—

“—Yes, I get it, no need to—”

“—The epidermis was completely miss—” A. still gets the chance for sordidness.

“—and you had this huge GASH—”

“—GG, easy there—”

“—and lacerations all over the—”

“—Guys, please—”

“—the rod was sticking through—”

—I close my eyes and visualize those peaceful plains... That bright blue sky... The calming rains... and creatures passing by. My grave, a crater. My stone, perhaps later. To lie forever in a soothing place, bereft of tears or laughter. With mountains, forest and the Space as guardians thereafter. Timeless space, a boundless face of noiseless grace, a moveless pace. It doesn’t scare me anymore; it doesn’t make me sad. No anger, rage or want for more; it only makes me glad. To have partaken in such wonders, to sense the joy and beauty! To feel the pleasures and the pain, I almost don’t feel worthy! But I may rest assured was definitely worth it!

I open my eyes and it’s the valley? And the trees, and mountains, what the FUD!? We’re still in the sim —?!
—so that’s what A. meant by Level T—

—Re-asserting—

—This is bad, this is—

—Now, wait a sec, consider it a—

—Challenging—

—where you gonna get ‘ports’ in the middle of—?!

—Freaking—

—Nowhere is bereft of p—

—tensing—

—pushing—

—hating—

—clubbing—

—rubbing—

—numbing—

—Adrena—

—ForF engaging!

The rage I have sits on the ledge of an endless pit between what I felt in that moment of reverie a minute ago and the pure blackness I feel now words can’t describe the deep HATRED I am experiencing to have been deceived TWICE in a row by some quite witty little sim but AS I am not one to enjoy being locked in a box like some silly little dim animal, I get quite HARD in my muscles somehow overriding the PMO and now I’m —!

“—Eentrah’—*ZZ*—shoc—*Z*—!”

—I can see outside but I still can't—
“—*ZZZ*—doe'zehche d—*ZZ*—”
—my body the pain the k—*ZZZ*—
“—*Z*—yam dat—*ZZ*—cum—”
—Ah, no pain now... much better—

—... On a cloud, nothing loud, just a simple sound of... *ZZZ*

It went exactly as I expected. Because I didn't...

Feel much protected, unless they...

I hope not...

I wake up. I open my eyes. I am in a bed. Surrounded by walls. And a window. But not the kind of window you would expect.

The window is one of the walls.

Outside—

—Is another room. And the council is watching. Twelve of them, but including the ones we already know.

Assuming the others are also...

Counseling?

Exactly. I am not plugged into any apparatus. No jack in my head, nor do I see any other devices that could potentially offer the user such lovely simulated experiences. I see no vents, no door, no trapdoors, only floors, but...

The window does a lightly hydraulic sound and begins to rise into the ceiling. I. steps into the room. She approaches me and the window/door descends back to the floor. I notice now more closely her facial features. She looks much younger than before, still short-haired, but I didn't get to study her much before because I kept...

“Hello, Demeter. My name is Ada. Ada I.” She raises her hand for a handshake.

“Nice to meet you in fleshspace, Ada! That is, assuming this ain't another one of your clever sims.”

“I understand your frustration and I ask you to forgive us for not disclosing all information, but... And I ask you to remain calm, but—”

“—No, don't tell me—!”

“—Please, mister D—”

“—is another dam—!”

“—Completing the assessment requires a concluding trial.” Ada's tone is firm and stout, without a hint of scream and shout. In her eyes no hate nor fear. She reminds me of my dear...

“Ok... So, you're like, testing me, or something.”

“In a crude way, yes.”

“Like a lab rat.”

“In a rude way, yes.”

“So... what’s my score?”

“You’ve been doing very well, disregarding the hack—”

“—Ah yes, about that—”

“—But there is one more action we require of you for the final result.”

“Which is?”

“To exit the simulation, you’re going to have to kill me, Demeter.”

“Kill you? Like with my bare hands?”

“The choice is yours.”

“And you’re telling me the truth.”

“Yes.”

“This is actually a sim.”

“Yes.”

“And you’re not rigged to some nasty ICE.”

“YES.”

But why should I believe her? It’s been all deception up ‘til now. What if this is factual reality? I don’t... I’m not able to pick up any cues. There are no clues telling me if this is a dream, a sim or the actual...

IF sim THEN killing = ok
IF real THEN killing = very bad
IF sim =? AND real =?
THEN
Killing = very bad
...Printing...

Then that makes things a lot clearer, doesn’t it? The only logical move is to not move at all.

“I will not fight you.”

“I will not offer resistance.”

“I will not kill you, then.”

“Why not?”

“Because I believe it is wrong.”

“Wrong? In a sim—?”

“—There are too many unknown variables at the moment for me to con—”

“—assure you that this is indeed a vir—”

“—final answer is no.”

“... ”

“Why would you even devise such a test? What kind of sick peo—”

“—Stop the sim.” A.’s voice echoes through the room in powerful waves, although I fail to discover the source...

The room starts deconstructing itself, slowly but on a large scale. Everything is being replaced by pure white light, but not bright, only... shiny. Everything and everyone except for Ada and A.

A. “I think we’re ready for you now, B.”

The image of A. walking towards me in the sim is replaced with the image of the same A. walking towards me...

In what we assume is now the actual—

—cting...

I look around me while someone behind me non—...—plugs me from the me I experienced in those other realities. The room is filled with hundreds of measuring devices. Most of them have touch displays, but some have dials, knobs and 'sticks. Joyful colours, playful shapes, on the monitors and plates. I'd continue with this verse—

A. "—Welcome to the real world."

"I feel compelled to believe you."

A. "Why so?"

"Only because I hope you're not sadists."

"Heh-heheh, no, we don't do this for pleasure. At least... not the grisly parts, no."

"Good. So, did I pass your tests?"

Ada appears from my left corner "Your results are positively assuring. Overall."

A. "Considering the... circumstances, yes."

"But was any of it true? When did this sim begin? I hope you know the effects of long-term VD—"

Ada "—Of course we know and you have been exposed for the shortest amount of time required t—"

A. "—thing was true. Everything we told you about what happened to you, and the..."

"... Even the haystack?"

Ada "Look, forget about the hay—"

A. "—thing we said was true and everything we showed you was accurate. All of it, except for the way in which we found you. It was by pure chance, simply, since we were not searching for you personally."

"..." And this is the part where he tells me that I was actually clubbed to death by a lynx with a rod made of dough baked inside a Martian's larynx for THREE months before he decided that NINE months was enough.

A. "The reports indicated an air vessel had crashed, with no bodies recovered, presumed incinerated."

Ada "The teams reported finding no trail marks that would indicate any activity took place around the site."

"... So, I wasn't at the crash site?"

A. "Indeed, you were found about three kilometers west of the crash site. Lying unconsciously on a hay—"

Ada "—Can we please ignore the haystack and address the other issue at hand...?"

"You should do some tests on those haystacks, maybe they do have special pow—"

A. "—There were no burn marks at your 'site', nor anything indicative of any forceful 'landing'. If I may—"

Ada "—What technology does your bone structure employ?"

"Your guess is as good as mine." Maybe even better!

A. "My guess is some form of exotic alloy, combined in a highly advanced... nanobiotechnological... way."

Ada "Disregarding the numerous quantum obstacles you would have to face at that scale, it remains only a science-fictionally vague characterization in regards to the paradoxical nature of our subject's..."

"... See what happens when you carry too many thoughts at once?"

And they're amused! Well, I'm pleased too...

And Ada adds "Maybe too many fff..." but quickly subtracts back what was said without thoughts backing.

UP!

A. saves the day "Tell me, _____—" in his own cool way "—have you ever had a dream that felt so rea—"

"—All the time, dude... It's the only way to fly—!"

"—Hi, _____!" A third person appears, well, not unless you still count me, and those other three—

—residing in me, not to mention the, the couple of ‘assistee’, who, uhm... “I hope I am not disturbing you —”

—Sshh!

“—only have to take a couple of measurements for the anal —” -lysis.

“—guess my clothes didn’t survive the crash either —”

“—hee-hee, no-no, just measuring your cat —”

“—never heard a little prodding hurt —”

“—one prod only, the rest is non —”

“—for a bloody sample, I ass —” -ume.

“—you have the right —”

“—to ladies —”

“—fac —”

—Stop it, my dude! Can’t you see?!

This conversation’s spiraled

Into a damn... tornadoey.

Or something...

Agreeing... D.M.T.-ing.

I have—

—WE—

—have had a similar experience a while ago. Now, as we all know there is a... weakness in all of us, and by us I do mean ALL of us, the us in me and the they/she/he in them, no one is spared this weakness, and we FIGHT or even FOR better results we learn to subdue such desires in as much as they can become detrimental to OUR wellbeing and/or the wellbeing of any of our LOVED ONES who may be suffering when we indulge in various passions typically associated with the lower kind of... social strata.

Metaphorically—

—squeaking...

Now logically that should be the case here, since I don’t see doctor A. scratching his... B. I don’t see any signs of him being affected by the theoretical WAP device installed on this theoretically lovely lady’s (theoretically) body let’s not deviate, C. she doesn’t even seem to have any cybers, can’t trust anything nowadays, anyways, it’s just an image causing a pattern in my brain to reflect a spark on a chain deeply interlinked with pleasure and pain I have endured across the ages, from my little ages to my middle ages, my brain has developed these cages, which kept my desires in harnesses, like words on the pages of long-forgotten tomes, forged by the mages of ill-begotten woes, ever since I learnt to tie my own shoes to the day I began to pay all my dues, I have carried my baggage, my suitcases, a burden I have been noticing in many gazes, we all have phases, we all need safe bases, to satisfy our neediness: for company or loneliness, for dirty thoughts or cleanliness, to ease the pain and make it less, to leave aside this game of chess, of life and death or worldly mess... Of wordy lines burnt deep in my circumvolutions, in the beginning they were just solutions, to my problems, but they became problems, with no solutions, at least KRYST must know that despite our passions, S.I.N.s, short-comings, in the end we act like humans, do, sometimes. There is no shame in being tame, no one to blame when things turn lame... No need to aim for too much of the same... for more of the same... for more... of the... same... It’s silly, I say, a thought that just came... to let that cute self be ERASED from the game.

...

...

...

“ ... ”

“ _____? Are you okay?” Ada asks with tiny worries in her eyes.

“Sure, I’m fine. Why do you ask?”

“You’ve been staring blankly for a while. Nonresponsive.” Guess the DMT ran out sooner than expected...

“I had a... I got carried away by some thoughts. But I’m back now.”

A. takes the pad, with my results, from the assistant, and proceeds to study it intently.

I. takes a second pad, with my... from the assistant but just scrolls through it, speedily. But something catches her attention and scrolls back up a bit. She proceeds to study it intensely. She shows A. the pad and he studies it profoundly. They are both perplexed.

A. looks at me, amazingly impressed. Or confused? Eh... and says “Mister Demeter, you are quite a... **fascinating** being.”

“Yes, so I’ve been told. But in what way do **you** mean it?”

I. “Your physical results show nothing unusual, except for the condition of your organs. They are exceptionally... young. Your biotelemetry is fine, blood analysis in acceptable parameters, although we did detect traces of... abuse of certain substances...” Oops, busted! “... Regardless, it is your neuro-kinetics analysis that caught our eye... In both Level 420 and Level 69 sim—”

“—Now wait a minute, are you telling me I’ve been in—?!”

A. “—low me to explain, mister B. In our tests, we employ a comprehensive set of carefully devised theories based on the 333 canons of the Holy Church, that can measure the qualities of a human on all levels of its being. Most of these tests are executed in a virtualized engramic environment capable of simulating a tremendous number of possible scenarios. The engram is—”

“—How were you able to encode an engram based on—?!”

I. “—lower resolution interpretations still offer valuable insight into the depths of human potential... a **magnificent** number.”

“What do you mean when you say on all levels of its **being**?”

A. looks at me, impressively amazed. Or amused? Ah... and replies “Mister B., the levels of being are physically, mentally and spiritually. Although, ‘spirituality’ is not an accurate word to describe it. We call it ‘doohov'neeh-chee'eh’. We can show you.” He stands up to leave.

I. stands up too and waves towards me, compelling me to stand up three. And they lead me down a hall of repeatedly passing objects of curiosity... for me, forcing me to slow down a tee. As I stop, the window’s mirror is opaquely refracting subjects of study... for them, urging them to...

A. seizes the lead, to my regards, in my current new misdeeds and examines me intensively.

I. seizes the second lead, in her... in my current—but just rolls with A.’s swag gently.

“I was eh... I felt compelled to say in my regards... That I’m lost now.”

“We’ve been noticing lately... a recurrent unresponsiveness.” Assess the OMG runs way deeper than pro...

“Yeah, I’m ok. How does it work?”

“ _____, observe the display.” Ada answers with shiny flurries of her voice.

“ ... ”

The people that are being studied are lying on beds, on chairs or even standing. Only one is jacked in, as far as I can see, but the rest are wearing these spider-pads... thingies on their heads. The one who is jacked in, as much as I can tell, shows no sign of moving in his lower-parts... besides of certain toes. Is it just me or, is he...? Are all of them plugged in too? Those that are lying in the middle-pods... sides of the curtain rows, well, yeah, basically everybody else is in a pod too, they are also moving their upper-bits... prayers in their chanting. Obviously, most of those with PMO are sitting in these shells with legs like arthropods... it looks like they’re...

"... Amazed! I am! A..."

"Amazing... yes, it is." Ada.

A. "Allow me to explain. All the people you encountered in your simulations were real people. No engrams, no A.I.s, no Arithmetical Assisted Automaton, no scripted 'NPC's as you youngsters call them. Not a single... Well, when I say none whatsoever, I mean there is a certain amount, you cannot run a live simulation of such magnitude without a little help from the Ay Eyes."

"You mean the Eh Eyes."

"It's *l.l.s'*." I. sees the surprise in my eyes and resumes "Illogical Intrusions. Independent inaccuracy inducing indices that inherently inhibit individually incalculable inconsistencies." That sounds very...

"Interesting... To prevent any anomalous equations?"

A. "An accurate assertion, mister B! Beautifully balanced, isn't it?"

Ada "Speaking of anomalies... Our theories managed to predict most of the actions you have taken, including the hack on Level Three. We left several ports open just in case you discovered that you were in a simulation."

"And I was so proud of that one..."

A. "Yes, however, the hack you performed on Level Sixty... Explain to us, mister B, how were you capable of overcoming a chemically-induced PMO?"

"... Chemically induced?"

Ada "We were obliged to take precautions due to your previous... behaviour."

A. "Your readings went off the charts precisely at nineteen point eight-four nanoticks. Our analytics were not able to provide an answer to this. And the planned theoretics did not predict any such... events taking place."

"I hate... I really, very don't like being lied to. And that gave me extreme rage. That's how I was able to..."

Ada "Anger is something many people struggle with, but none of them were ever able to..."

A. "Also, your levels of adrenaline and dopamine were way too high even for a..."

"A human?"

Ada "An average person I would say. Tell me, _____, do you have any anger... issues?"

"A... bit?"

Ada "Anything in particular?"

"A few things, really. I wouldn't call them issues, more like..."

Ada "Annoyances? Obstacles?"

"Eh... yes?"

I. "Do any of them bother you at the moment, _____? Are you ok with me asking these... questions?"

"Can't say I'm against it, no."

Ada "As you mentioned, being lied to makes you angry. I can understand that, nobody likes being misled. But how far do your actions ever take you? How do they affect those around you? Based on such... feelings?"

"Am I in an interview, a therapy session, an audition or an interrogation? Or all at the same time?"

A. "Absolutely none, mister B. You are free to go at any moment you choose."

"For real? So that means, my security 'annoyance' got cleared out?"

A. "A while ago, back on Level Twelve Million One Hundred and Nine-Tee-NAIN—!"

"—ALL-MIGHTY KRYST!!! HOW many simulations did you run—?!"

I. "—Please, —_____! CALM—!"

"—ling me to CALL—!"

A. "—mister B—" itching—

I. "—a little TOO—" itching—

—So, I use that itching as something to focus on for my next meditation session. Which is taking place at this very moment. That itch gives me something to focus on. It is an itch in a place I am not very comfortable discussing right now. But I do not let that ITCH be an ANNOYANCE, I just let it be... A pleasurable moment. An opportunity to observe the intricacies of my body, the way the ITCH turns into a TWITCH and in turn becomes a BITCH but I let the feelings PITCH to the point I'm feeling RICH with... sense. A moment of *peace*... out of my body, radiating rapidly in waves of pure... awareness. There's no right or wrong in here. Thoughts pass by like the snows... Cars come by with the plows... Sheep run by with the cows... Time goes by, like the roads... The blue sky shows... her cloudy rows... of hats and bows... a soft wind, blows... In Have-an knows... how many years...
Blue...

Blue...

...
... Flying...

...

...

...

Dropping...

...Green...

Green...

Green...

...Green...

...Blowing...

...Blooming...

Green. I thought her eyes were blue but they are actually green. Sort of. Well, we can't trust our eyes so old a model. Perhaps what I see green is blue to common wo- and man. And blue for all I know is just a shade of shiny tan. Or yellow, red and blue combined in psychedelic textures. With white and black and yellow dancing to arrhythmic tunes. Short or long in middle, all the creatures share good times. Tall or slow in fiddle, they appreciate the rhymes. Jump high or low, voice dry or doe, handshake or bow, chicken or cow, sharp toes and teeth, missing a row... hard/soft in sheath, no shaming bro... We're here together, on a ship. No need for guns or nasty whip. The space is wide! ... In length and hip... The mysteries are FUN! And... deep. Don't need a reason to be good or clean in my intentions. I do it 'cause it's understood and FUN in all directions!i! Single with choice or reasonable voice, crying with joy or laughable annoy; angry at me! Or maybe just you... Things left unsaid or hastily read. Words nastily said, which soon got retracted. Regretted... Defended... Deflected... rejected, then accepted. Affected—... Objected! Discussed... Selected and improved—ration-ALLY-elected—by the commonly affected whom had carefully dissected 'all-the-parts' that WE have managed and produced, ALL the GOOD that's thus presented... Any errors, hope are 'forgivened'. Any doubts, perhaps, but later. Thoughts in knots with slots and bolts that bring us all together. Concentrically circling in sun or rainy weather AT ONCE! Well, not at once, but in a quantum sort of silly way, the circling we do becomes all particle-lee wavey! Don't need to understand it all, no need for all the SMARTs... All we require is a path that's found in many arts! Mess grand or small, or none at all, we're wiping clean the CHARTS! Redraw the parts liked most of all, compare wit' counterparts. Arrange the shards, shuffle the cards, cover the private—! -parts. And best of all that lot'o ME—

“— _____? Is something wrong?” Ada is—

—META-phorically—

—Asking.

"I'm better now but took me long." I'm—

—lyrically—

—Uhm... answering?
Man, I ain't doin' this sh—!

"—Not very long, but just a few—" A.—

—relative-eh-lo-lee—

—Measures.

"My feeling's strong, more than a few—"

—Are practically...

... Treasures...

"I do agree, but just a sec—" 's I.—

—Approximately—

—cow-no, ain't doing—

"—It must be more, I must objecc—" 's my way of—

—Saying—

—Thank you!
Wheew! Finally!

"A lot more less than was before."

"Indeed, was just a moment. It happens when our thoughts digress."

"My thoughts have quite an accent!"

"In what way do you mean it, _____?"

"No reason, just a moment's spur."

"Good reasons we must always have, in every conversation."

"However small or big they are, well-thought _____."

"I see no wrong in what you say."

"Great! Then let's get back to—"

—He grabs my arm and she does too, but gently. He grabbed my arm and she grabbed his, we're all a bit... confused. What happens now, who's grabbing who? Do I grab too? Who do I grab? What nonsense... I grab myself and smile in jest. They both off-grab each arm. Off each's arms the hands that grabbed, with comical emotions, are now retreating in defense, in good old-fashioned motions. The bafflement has passed. And calmness sets in after.

Whew, at last!

"I apologize, _____, but A. and I need to discuss something in private."

They both retreat a couple of feet away. Then, they turn their backs to me and proceed to discuss. By the looks on their necks they seem to be debating. Then... A. reassures Ada with a pat on her back. Ada, comforted by the gesture, faces me, looks me in the eye, one of them, the left one I think, and says "Some priority issues have come to my attention and I need to attend them urgently. Please excuse me."

"Not at all, madam."

"Please do call me Ada."

"I'll remember that, Ada."

"... Thank you..." Ada departs...

Have you ever noticed... that she's old?

No, I...

Like fine...

Wine...

...

...

...

"Mister B, if you'll follow me..."

"Yes, sir! It would be my honour!"

"No, surr, the honor... is mine."

And with those words he takes me down the rows of windows, which are now turning off, they were just displays, apparently. And we walk along the wall-displays and some of them show random clips of happenings from past and present or the future. I just follow Mister A. down the hole of mysteries. Rabbits jump on some displays and steal my attention for a moment. I just follow Mister A. up the stairs of wonders. Red heads of the guards pass by my point of view. I just follow Mister A. down the corridor of treasures. A cat rolls over a display, it's on another display above it, but from my P.O—Nevermind, I follow Mister A. inside a... mansion of some sorts, it looks totally R o y a l e! I just follow Mister A. down a passage of great measures... A diplomatic order's in my face, I feel like a 21st Century time-traveler who's been dropped in ancient times... Lions decorate the chair of the mighty Crimson King sitting at the top of the three-stepped stages... Well, I say a king, maybe it's just a... display... Hmmm...

A little suspicious...
Don'cha think?

Thin-king...

I play along this time.

Acting!

The King stands up and is—

—walking—

—down the stairs—

—to me and A. The guards are—

—backing—

—up the—

—King whose point of view we're now—

—addressing.

"Welcome, fellow traveler!" King's tag reads 'REGA'.

"I'm not worthy of the pleasure, your Highness!"

"..." The King.

"..." is A.

"..." Guard. Closest in my P.O.V.

"..." So is everyone else.

"I apologize, your... Majesty?" I feel like a peasant.

The King is amused! So follow the others. I'm just a jester!

“Hohoe, oh no, mister _____! I assure you that such formalities are not needed.” The... previously presumed ‘King’ official person raises his arm and spreads his palm to greet me in a handshake. I raise my arm and mirror such a humble gesture of greeting from a royal to the palm of a simple peasant. A buffoon really, as my clothes reflect no others’. His feet are firm, I must confirm, while mine own feet are tremblin’. Small as a... clown that just came out of a crashing micro-van—

—I shake his hand, enthralled!
Like a... space-cat!

The King addresses me “I am captain K., but you may address me as mister C. Or Louie, my friends call me.”
“Hello, Louie! My friends call me—”
—Screwey!

“—but you already know that!” ‘Cause you’re the K.!

I’m just a joker.

“Ah, yes, indeed.” The K. is solemn. “I know a lot.”

I know a few...

“Indeed, you do.” I say... indeed. “But so do all—”

—these others!

“They are, of course...” K. says “... all loyal people!”

Aren’t we all?

“To you.” I hope “To us.” I care... “To everyone.”

Of course!

“Well put!” K. says “Well said!” Exclaims “To everyone.”

We are.

And Louie takes the lead and brings me in a room full of gadgets of all sorts of monitor displays, digital arrays, all sorts of measuring devices, from top to bottom, the shapes are all the shapes, there are shapes here I never thought could possibly exist in this reality, my brains cannot comprehend what my eyes can’t believe what my retinas can’t decode what my pupils can’t refract fast enough to discern the tiny little details in the WALLS! The icons, the crosses, the books, the candles. The contraptions in the ceilings look—

—Amusingly—

—Concealing!

While the decks, computers, consoles look—

—Quite terribly—

—Appealing...

We end up in a cabinet. Well, not a cabinet, but a corner of the room with a cabinet. Well, not only a cabinet, there’s also another cabinet next to it that looks like it’s housing computer components. The computer cabinet is much bigger than the other one, but not as big as the cabinet of people surrounding me at this very moment. Louie invites me to take a sit and returns to his ‘stage’. Away from us I mean. In another part of this building to attend some other ‘biz’ of his. And ‘of the people’.

So, I smile and am genuinely pleased, while my company continues to be quietly appeased. The dimension of interaction I’m finding myself in has become a balanced action of trying to ‘jack-it-in’. If this reality I’m in is not what really seems, I should find myself—be able—to ‘jack out’ with no ‘problème’. The ports are mostly found in conversation with the ‘players’, while the backdoors are provided only to admins and others. Unseen glitches may occur, not seen by ‘common’ eyes, but those don’t help but just confirm you’re definitely—

“—Mister _____, how do you feel?” a lad addresses me. He looks perfectly official like the others before he.

“Fine, good surr! How may I help?”

“Would you like to sign for Salvation?”

“For... Salvation?”

“Mm, yes, as in ‘Redemption’, ‘Deliverance’.”

“... I don’t understand.”

“Oh, sorry! I thought you were debriefed on such matters.”

“No, I... well, uhm, it’s a long story, really...”

“No matter, it’s quite simple. Would you like to be saved by Kryst?”

“Saved? By Kryst? I don’t...”

“Would you like... to join the Holy Church of God? As a member?”

“No, look, you don’t understand. The Monos are after me!”

“Thee... Monoes, mister _____?”

“Yes, as in ‘Monostatists’, ‘Monoheads’, ‘Monosplonkshudchumbast —’”

“—Excuse me, surr, but Monoes are forbidden —”

“—Well, I am MONO!”

“...” The crowd is silent.

“...” Myself am too. But then I add “Ex-Mono, but still do. My past has come to haunt me round and round since I left it. I left it behind but it came back for me. Again, and again. And it will continue to do so, unless I manage somehow to stop it. But until then, no one is safe around me and I’d rather die on this spot than put any of you in danger. Especially the children!”

“...”

“...” So, I add “Look, I myself am no danger to them, I’m sure you’ve seen the tapes that prove I am only a danger to the bad people. The really bad people who are such lowlifes that they would even hurt... a child.”

“...”

“The problem is those coming after me. They do bad things even to children! Well, not all of them, but those that are coming after me don’t seem to... care about anything...”

And at that moment... It links... IT LINKS IN MY HEAD! Mono... Nomo. It’s all the same... They’re both the same... Two sides of the same con. SYSTEMS OF CONTROL! Same methods, just different shades. Monos believe in pure submission while the Nomos believe in... nothing. But I know nothing of the Nomos, how can I go forth and ask those caught in circumstances, if they keep throwing my way their collection of pickaxes? How can I shout ‘please don’t shoot me’ when our languages have barriers? When the ones that one encounters never stop for little breathers... Not even for the little ones? The tiny dreamers? The wisdom seekers?

... ..

...

I resume the conversation while the feelings still run rampant and I say “My fellow people, I apologize, but I must go. In regards to all of you, the convo’ was quite pleasant! And assured I am Salvation’s something we should always strive for.”

“You are correct. But rest assured, the Monos have no power here.”

“Needs more explaining, forgive my manners. But I’m not convinced.”

“Anything you’ve seen or heard that doesn’t meet your standards?”

“Either, since I’ve skipped some ‘beats’ in my Resistance classes.”

“Then what’s the minimum of proof required by your senses?”

“None, for I would hate to test it. Too high the stakes! For those involved.” Especially the little ones...
they hold...

“If that’s your ultimate decision, then please, follow me.”

I follow him, past, by the icons. And the crosses and the others... And we end up in a closet. In a great, big, open closet. With a light-beam in the ceiling that is spiraling across it. And I wonder... Am I gonna get trans—?

—ported—

—in another dime—

—The lights get dimmer, slightly slimmer, like a simmer burn thereafter. Eyes are popping, well, not literally they just look like that because of the way the light refracts their—never mind—Skulls reshaping with skulls meeting comically bent. What my eyes are seeing I cannot comprehend. It’s just my mind interpreting the signals I’m receiving. By my two eyes, be good or bad, it’s better than have nothing. Those that have nothing can’t believe there’s goodness to be had. For they have got ‘No’ ‘Mo’ to lose... And that... just makes me... sad.

.....

... I cry without a shame, a fear or doubt. The music that surrounds me lifts me up in adoration while the lift descends us further in the depths of here and after. And they notice... And they whisper. One of them, the oldest one, approaches me and offers me a loving hand, then asks me “What’s the matter, son?”

“I just... realized something. An uncertainty I had for a long time.”

“What is that, my son?”

“Of what is true.”

“Which is?”

“Love.”

“...”

...

“Amin!”

And I understood immediately. I didn’t need translators or assists, just an ear and a will. And the voice spoke to me in perfect understanding. Across the ages, a Voice called to me from a past that spread above the eons, well forged literatures and experienced followers of a Creed that bound them forever to a Pact with The One Who Sees And Knows It All. To Him we thank for each our day, a gift that can’t be given! By us or others other than by giving birth to Them... The little ones, in which the sparks of One burn brighter than most, ever. The ones that need all of our care and most of all, our better. We all need love and understanding, just as He always has. For each of us, at any time, as time is NON for ONE! And ONE for all, for all of us, each one of us... accepted. We aspire to be servants, loyal servants every moment, but we fail as we cannot be at all the times as perfect as the ONE Who Is Above Us! Who Was, Is, And Always Will Be Ever... Ever... Ever After!

...

...

...

...

...

...

Blue.

Skies.

Tall White Mountains.

Hills and Black Sea.

A great, BIG port!

More hills at sea.

Green hidden valleys filled with fountains...

...that spread as far the eye can see...

...and flow into the Greatest Fort...

...That I have ever witnessed. The Houses, Homes of Human Beings push as deep as Gates permit them, Walls so holy as I now feel protected. A Miracle of Life, The Universe And Everything Above Us. A joyous sight, A Gift of great proportions. I am contented in my eyes, the sounds a blessing from below us. When all feels right, to body and thought, so close I was to have accepted their rife... And yet so far, my past brings too much blight.

Dramatically—

—mentioning.

The sign a tad ahead of us reads: 'Suntem cei Din Valea Domnului'. And right behind it, rows of Houses that keep spreading to the Gates of the Red Fort. Well, 'fort's the biggest understatement: many castles, courts, the gardens... And Three Towers rising forth, linking Skies to Terra's basement. In my mind, three prongs of Human plugs: drawing Power from the Energies of Infinite And ancient. A race so kind, pure hearts and thoughts! If told, I'd never had believed! Now seen, the need becomes a have to. Soft souls, intentions... Which I'll never get to have... Or share... Hey, wait! Maybe...

I turn to face the kind, old look of the man who comforted me; previously. And say "Forgive me, sir..."

"I always do."

"That's kind of you..."

"I hope you too."

"I do... I just need to ask a question."

"How may I help you, son?"

"If I decide to join you later, is the offer made still valid?"

"The Gates of God are ever open! You may join us when you're ready."

"What if that will never happen? What's my chance to get Redemption?"

"Only God knows in His Wisdom what's deserving of each person."

"What if blood and lines of fascism scar my fingers to the bone?"

"Once Atonement is established, all the sins will be forgiven."

"What if he's... not very human."

"All of us are humans, friend."

"What if he's not very pleasant?"

"No such thing in eyes of man."

"That is comforting to hear, sir."

"It's my pleasure! Go with God!"

"I will. You too!"

"I am."

The old man turns around to walk away. He pulls out of his coat: a cane, extended; And begins to touch the floor in alternating patterns. Nostrils in my head now flutter, while my heart's a bit ecstatic! Out of all the

beings around me, a blind man was most empathic! With sympathies of smells and sounds, of touch and taste and speech! And common sight of one great truth: that love is all that matters... Of years apart, of decades, we each follow our own path, that so frequently intersect with paths of others... too... We're all just actors in the Plan of the Great One. Doing each other our own parts as best as we can do it! A Comedy And Tragedy In Several Tiny acts. Of kindness, dance and laughter, and some naughty bits but... few! In all of our lives we search for the proof; Of goodness in each other, of humor and/or wits. I'm _____, looking for answers and other such Great Gifts. Of Our... Don't you agree?

Yes, well...
Disregarding semantics.
Yeah...

Agreeing.

An airship strip shiny and slick stretcheeeeeeeeeeeeeeeee all the way from me! And ends up in a tiny blip, a point on the horizon. Well, it's actually streeeeeeeeetching all the way behind me, to be accurate to those who're watching from my P.O.V. A lot of shuttles of all kinds, geometries I've never seen! ... People having all the care: in minds, in hearts and handles. They busily work through the day, so steered I've rarely been... The shuttle—Ship of Leadership's the farthest from the close ones. The one I am about to board's screen... Doubts fill my mind but gently swipe my brow; the truth of all the matter is that I'm just afraid of flyin'... I understand why fear can take both rational and brave; when the uncertainty becomes a great impediment... I've been —

—there too!
Well, technically—

—speaking. ^.^

The sky is infinite and...

...Clouds are scarcely spread...

Horizon's far and deep and—

—bent! And
other silly—

—shaping—

—Ground below us into Great...

...Embracing...

... hugZ...?
Told ya man,
I ain't that goo—

“—'d you care for some refreshments?” A lady asks me.

“An I.V. would be great.”'s my witty, clean remark.

“Commencing countdown, engines on—” line from the crew.

“—'thing for me, thank you!” Ada's next to me! I didn't even—

“—No need to!” lady's cute reply...

“Check ignition... And put your helmet on, Tom! Come on, how many times do I have to —?” tells the captain to some fool! Well, historically—

—overstating—

“—too, one... Lift-off!”

Off it's going...

And up! Me too... of course. I didn't even—

“—ven't noticed me since we—” left our view for who knows how long... Probably the interview—! “Are you—'ll right? Was something left...” unsaid...?

“There are some things...” And thoughts and feelings too...

“Anything you'd like to share? Or care to—” sharing would be cruel.

“A joke or two would clear the stings.”'s my way of saying—

“—Thank you! I'd love to hear a joke.” Is her way of saying—

—For those of you
out there who's
wonderin...?

That she's intelligent and pure. Of heart and mind and body too. She really takes the grades! On all the levels of her being, evidently, privates obscure—! ... —'D. Her eyes revealed to have a hue... of ...blue or golden rays, reminding me of what is true... My eyes are being now bombarded with the rays of purplish-glow of our own Sun, out of billions of others have to... My heart jolts at the idea of an endless row of windows, navigating all around us; Three hundred and sixty... Degrees in all directions, but just one our own trajectories in the sky, the air, beyond us. Seen, unseen is even... Better to direct emotions in a way that brings more comforts; for them, myself and you. More than possibly imagined, I am grateful for her too... Often shown to be a weakness, proving now to be a clue, of a Power that's Above us, we're just power plants... On tubes... Of happiness, and sorrow; and a lot o' jazz and blues. Love pure as Light! Amazing, grateful thoughts... Of angels flying, passing through; the devils also cryin'. But just a few, the rest are shaken, while the Others... are appalled! But I'm sure they're all amused by certain flies left hastily unzipped, by the, by the... the... Hee-hee, it appears I've also left my—

“—Mister B., are you—?” A.'s right my pffeww he scared the Bee-jeez—!

“—and David, remember to bow each time you serve the easter—” lady whispers to some newb—

“—'m fine, just shaky—” while I squeeze both of my knees—

“—'s flying also on your list of things that bring you anger?”

“Not anger, no... just a bit of fear.”

“Well, I wouldn't call **that** fear.” A. points down to my own tube—

—Oh sh—!... -ocking...

“Please forgive me, it has a **mind** of its own.”'s my cliché defense.

“It's ok, these things can happen—”

“—As we often have encountered in the levels of the simu—”

“—can't believe it, Andy—!”'s Ada's way of extra spoilers—

“—major pain in the papers, I don't even know whose shirt I'm—” weary comments from some boo—

“—Are you telling me—?”'s A.'s way of debating how he, wait, is that a—?!

—guy in a space suit is walking up the row, well, down the row but up to me, to my, relative to my, to wow and he walks to me and looks at me, I can see his face it's OMG I can't believe, it's not possible, come on now this can't be real, I don't care I'll just imagine IT'S HIM no way, but let's conceive that it's possible, HOLY-COW but let's be calm, we'll do our best and act just cool-okay, I mean, COME ON even his name tag says STARMAN S., this dude was BORN to be an ASTRONAUT let's chill and say...

“Hey, now-now!”

“Lotta soul...” he said, then the sound seemed to fade... “I was told there were no Vee Jays—” slow voice came back, a wave “—some cat was playing back some rock and—” rolls of his tongue like honey “—You can switch on the telly, the ‘Tee Vee’ like the children boogie now-ah—” days pass by in seconds “—channel two thousand—” the lights start to fade, don’t even know what time is-eh— “I was just waiting in the—” sky, I’d love to meet you “—blows my mind! But I know it’s all worthwhile-oh—” he tells me, us, it and some bunny “—I had to phone someone, so I picked—” only I can see his light-or—? “Look out your windows—” sparkles in our eyes to “—night, he may la—” ‘nd we try not to blow it-la— “He’ll **really** get us all locked up in—” sights in cosmic jive “—at phase three you can lah, la—” hey, lah, la—? “Look on your tellies, well, these plays—” awe in minds and hearts “—you can switch the lah, la—” oh, lah— “Language options, hey, that’s far out—!” of us to have heard him too “—audio too, any devices, even oh—”

“—And don’t let the kids use the fridge! I got so fright—” But some poppa pops my picture “They make me lose it—”

“—Some of you may prefer cleaner versions...” Oh, no-no... “The academic-assistant, the Ayy Eyes—” like I would ever dare to... “—will remix the content—” Oh, no way! “—provide a family-oriented version—” I thought he was referring to... “—even if the show—” Is this “—totally plastered with these gust sing—” like the songs of games on thrones “—scenes of fock—” King of “—n’ rolling heads, smashing cheeks—” that show must be awesome! Well, at least to... “—me and the band, my friends—” a troupe of space trekking— “Took us a couple of beats to reach—” as a movie running on the screen of some kids “—it’s confusing these—” eons apart in years of their days “—so sleepy now—” girls and boys liking “—just got released from custody—” to watch together “—call it the ‘radio station’—” their silhouettes shaking “—this chaos is killing me, lad! I—” cyborg on an ancient bike “—moon dust—” covered in courier clothing “—ant our music to be free, always—” chasing a runaway ham— “Burgers, also—” tuxedo wearing “—those bloody nap—” steering “—record—” chocolate “—label—” squares “—don’t let—” or dodo— “—our fans to up—” loaded images of “—songs—” pure delight “—videos—” circles “—discourage—” while others “—creativity—” hugs raining “—outside—” wait, did he say—?

“—excuse us, mister S. but—” A.

“—You’re in a band?!”

“Yes, it’s me and the sissies!”

“The... sissies?”

“Yeah, the ‘Crystal Cats’.” Aah! The C.C.’s...

“That’s the coolest—! ... And your music is—?”

“—free to stream anywhere, anytime—”

“—‘ll definitely check it—”

“—but we’ve also molded some records—” and he pulls out a huge, square, floppy envelope from a pocket of his guitar case. The envelope has a smudged painting of a face, with closed eyes, drawn on its cover. From inside the square, he slides out a round, black disk with concentric lines that run all the way from its edges to the core. The core has a hole in it. And I have no idea what...

“What is this?”

“An El Pee.”

“What’s that?”

“A record.”

“Is that some sports thing?”

“No, silly! It’s a vinyl.”

“Forgive me, but I’m totally—”

“—It’s a very old format, but people still enjoy it now-ah-days for its unique... sounding flavours.”

“Wow, that’s really...” retro tech—!

—groan, as always...

Thanks for watching!

“Here, take it!”

“I can’t, thank you but—”

“—Come on—!”

“—don’t even have a player for it.”

“Just hang it on a wall in your home.”

“I don’t even have a...” Home...

“On the ceiling then! Wherever you want!”

“Sorry but I can’t afford it, I don’t have any—”

“—It’s a gift, lad! Don’t fret about it.”

“I can’t even... this is sweet! Thank you so much!”

“It’s our pleasure! Listen, we got ta split, duty’s calling.”

“Of course, I wouldn’t want to...”

“So, bye-bye love!”

And with those kind words coming through that smooth voice, he and the boys continue their trajectory up the row, down from me, behind me I mean. Leaving me in awesome gaze over the treasure they have bestowed upon me from above, I sat down the whole time, didn’t even get the chance to shake his — never mind, on the edge of the disc it says “Always Analogue” so that means it’s an analogue format, I’ve never even imagined I could ever own such—! Title says “Inside” under the band’s name and the face does remind me of... An Age of Analogue Alignments, altering after ages and yet always allowing alternating ‘harmonies’...

...a Little Grandiose!
Right?

Authenticating...

Left of the center of the back of the square of the disc of the aforementioned band I detect a... signature of some kind. It must be a...

...spotting...

...an autograph...

Starman S.—

—Space Ship Swirling Sounds—

—So Sweet!

Now that’s a “record” if I’ve ever seen one! In both... and... awe.....

“..._____?”

“...Always...”

“You seem totally fascinated by this record, mister B.”

“...I am...truly...”

“...Enraptured? ...”

“...I’m not sure if I...”

“Do emotions overcome you?”

“...Yes, but no... But sort of I mean...”

“...Charmed? Or maybe... like a toreador...?”

“What she means by that is that when faced with a vicious—”

“—no, no, I mean... I don’t think I understand these words that... well... I wish...”
 “What words do you find hard to understand, mister B? I do remember you having an A.A. in —”
 “—sure chum, I ain’t talkin’ ‘bout them words, I know what they mean! It’s these tiny markings here that...”
 “...What model is your A.A.? I have the latest KatodeKits^d contact lenses, I’m sure I can help you understand.”
 “... I don’t even have my HUD turned... it’s probably broken again anyway, long story, don’t need it, I prefer...”
 “...to de-code it without any help from other senses than your own? Without sharing the... telling the... truth?”
 “I didn’t take you for a Luddite, mister B! Heh-heh... eh. Regardless, we show respect even if we disagree. Certainly, that is something to strive for: telling the truth no matter of the consequences. Well, I say ‘no matter the consequences’, of course there are certain situations when telling the truth can be det —”
 “—Agreed, it’s not that, it’s just that... I enjoy the challenges life brings me every single... day...”
 “...It’s a very healthy mindset to have Dem—! ... them, to have them I mean, sorry, I gots—”
 “—Not at all, Ada, I feel truly nonafraid for the first time in my entire life. It is quite...”
 “Aye... you mean ‘unafraid’, mister B? Forgive my manners but I only wanted...”
 “...Clear as crystals, Andy! And thanks for the tip! And all your other... gifts...”
 “My friends do call me Neonate, it’s an inside joke since, eh, long story.”
 “I totally get ya, man, I must be like the most nonapt Res’ recruit —”
 “—‘ever underestimate yourself, in each of us there is always...”
 “Potential? Yeah, sure, I know myself well enough, I think...”
 “The Holy Ghost works in the most unexpected ways...”
 “...What’s that? There’s a HOLY GHOST TOO? Wow!”
 “Are you being sarcastic, mister B? No offense.”
 “Non at all! I’m just totally amazed of... all...”
 “Everything around us can inspire us...”
 “Mm, yes, indeed, but may I ask...?”
 “...I don’t think that’s necess—”
 “—Ask away, dear ol’ Neo—”
 “—‘d you like to recon...”
 “To put it simply...”
 “Mmmm, yes?”
 “Would you? Would you reconsider your... options?”
 “Was’ dat?”
 “_____...”

The shuttle is descending while the strong mountain panorama is ascending, reflected in the shivering mountain drama growing while approaching us, me, I mean it’s just me here in the shuttle, remember? I mean, not just me, but eh, regardless... This hovering flying machine I’m currently being transported in is presently landing, in the current common climate conditions, curiously concentrical... Hmmm, it’s a shuttle I think I’ve only seen on some old telly screens... I don’t even know if it’s hovering, I haven’t seen a single magnet—pad since I came here... Hmmm... It’s not an airplane, of course not! I meant those other things... Well, not the flying carpets, pfft, duh! But what if...?

If... What?

Investigating...
 Searching...
 Zero files...
 X= ?

Just think about it! We couldn't pick any A.A. translations, even a splonk one would've been better than nothing! AND we've never heard of these people before, from anyone in the Res', well I say no one, I mean — Disregarding the details, even FOX kept it secret, well I say — he rejected Kryst, well not really, just the spelling I guess... Regardless, maybe not rejected, just... revised. Eh — I say no use smoldering over such fine det — all that matters is that even if, let's assume, they are from... you know... Out there... The truth of the fact is that we're missing some details...

...Interesting,
Detective B...

Quite indeed...
IF x =? AND y =hooman
AND IF x in filefox.th.0emark.7ow — Never mind —
— THEN IF x = Ayy —

—LMAO—!

—Good one, please continue!

THEN... then...
THEN X > y, infinitely.
Regarding communication skills and methods and...
IF... true, then —

—They could be—!

—Among us! Without ever knowing it!

Well, maybe not never, but...

Mmm, yes, intriguing...
IF X is ∞-ly superior to y, THEN X:morality is...
∞-ly superior to y, I mean, come on! How you gonna get a LizardManBoarPidgeon ravenous,
cactus wearing whatever, reach deep space interstellar —
—my point is that... is that... they...

Dude, maybe Shaun was right!
It's just that they didn't land in Mono...

...They landed on Borh! Well, not on it, I mean —
—disregarding semantics, I do understand the implications!

Meaning?

Meaning that if Borh = Ayys THEN
Maybe, eh... you know... Mo/no/mo is the...

Egg-zactly! Speaking of which, I do feel a bit peck —
—In so far as the evidence suggests, mmm, of course I do...

Consider the possibility, we only need to understand the why, not the how. The decision was already made to take into consideration the high probability of life 'out there', regardless in how many dimensions you choose to define 'out'. Or 'there'.

Based on this premise, we can ASSUME the chance that AT LEAST some of those civilizations have had, have or will, maybe, sometime pass by, around, on, in, through or —
—Whatever, my point is, wait, was' dat—?

—I'm zooming in with my actual pupils, well not my actual— deeply analyzing the film, clip, movie, show, series, spoof, vignette, sketch, skit and/or/all/of/the/above— currently being displayed on the screen of the monitor of the unconventional way of explaining employed to cause—with or without intent—grievous mental diffusion to the general public in, inside, outside, Out There and whatever—err, and I see... A lady—In the video transmission, I need to specify to the casual user—with auburn hair in wavy strands, knot neatly at her back. Well, I can't see her back, but that's besides the—point is—that, even though I can't hear the audio, I can observe the subtitles running below us. And when I say subtitles, I do mean the plural because one of them says 'You know nothing, Jon Snow.' Underneath it, in neat ole font, are the subtitles of a script I do recognize... '„Nimic nu știi, Nea Ion.”' And I find it! I find my own personal 'Rosetta' stone... Underneath a pyramid in the sky, the script of an ancient language is revealed to me on the simple screen of a children's telly-vision show, well—assuming the age and species of the person sitting in front of us—and the neat presentation really, really links my brainwaves to some particles of brown/white matter or thing that's in my head, assuming they do have any colours or noncolours, and it FITS in an instant 'Jon' — 'Ion', 'Jon', 'Ion', 'Jon' 'Ion', like an energy cannonball shot from a—yeah, we should find a 'John' as soon as po—once the digging dust has settled, I can thus resume my challenge. Errors made in 'copy-pastin' in the past, once more forgiven. For eons, we thought that Eon had a weird accent, but Ion makes more sense than Eon, since the accent is vice-versa. But not like ion, no no-no. It's an Ion, much-much stronger! Ancient language, simple words. „Nea” for 'Snow', „nimic” for 'nothing'. Since the custom is to shift positions of words and accents, I conclude that 'know' is „nu” and „știi” is 'You'. But it's just a theory, what's your opinion?

I nu nimic.

...

“...It's pronounced 'shtee'. It means 'know'.” There's the missing tail! But how...?

“...You can read my mind?”

“You said it loudly, mister B.”

“The ending sucks though...” kid in front whispers to the other “... She only kisses him on the—”

“—Oh, yeah, I need to fix that...” security hole.

“It's ok to speak, nothing to be afraid of.” Just a precaution.

“Yes, your lang fascinates me... All languages really, but yours I could never understand before.”

“What's your A.A. model, _____?”

“It's a Yama—”

“—We've arrived—” above the moon! Captain says.

“—it's a rip-off, really—!” a hack!

“—sure you leave—” nimic behind.

“—recognizes Baguettian—”

“—any baggage, purses, electronics—” We have nimic but our treasure!

“—Krautian really funny—” știi what I'm sayin'?

“—Good night and—”

“—I'm sure it can read Martian—”

“—Ihahah—!” Lovely...

“—may God's Love be with—” us.

“—Thanks...”

These two travelers that follow me, both those in me and those by me, in time and space and other thing/s, we leave the shuttle, one-by-one... A. follows me, I follow Ada... I. leads the way away from day into the night

of some old port, a space so tiny yet so vast! ... A. sides by me and Ada tree—! I mean, by a tree... And thus spoke A. once more:

“ _____, I have to ask you just a final, simple matter.”

“How can I be of service, oh sir that ştii so very much?”

“Are you sure you’re not a danger to the... people? Such and such...”

“To those around me, never fear! I am a perfect sheep! But those who’s coming...”

“Who is coming? Why do you insist? There is none to be afraid of in the Land of Holy One.”

“That may be, but are you certain? There’s missing pieces, in your puzzle. And missing in mine too...”

“Yes, that may be. But still, the chance I guarantee is simply astronomical! We’ve never had, well... long story..., but we have a very good record on our timeline, I can assure you of that, mister B. Well, surely not perfect, but still...”

“...Acceptable?”

“Mmm, yes, forgive me, I was miles away...”

“That must’ve been quite a trip, eh?” Cheeky-face!

“Heh, yes, both in mind and body.”

“Well, I understand you. Look, trust me, I’ll be fine, I’m really hard to kill. You’ve seen it, didn’t cha?” We.

“Yes, the evidence was compelling, but the relevant issue is not about you, it is about everyone else. Well, I say issue, more like variables in an equation.”

“No, it is an issue. That is why I have to... find my...” Father...

“Your... Father, _____?”

“Yes, I know it’s a mystery... but I’m certain of my capacity to ‘break the code’, if ye’ no’ what I mean?”

“But how far are you willing to go? Is it worth paying any price? For you or your loved ones?”

“No, you don’t understand... I’m turning the tables. The Monos want to get me, but I’m not afraid of them anymore, no no-no. They better get ready, ‘cause now I’m coming for THEM! No hate, no clubbing, no pushing, no shoving, no hurting feelings, well, that’s out of my control though. Heh... But I’m going to dive so DEEP in the PITS of HADES I’m gonna crack ITS skull in a million TINY—!”

“—No need to be so mello—”

“—Sorry, sorry, but I mean, look. It’s the only logical solution. I keep those I love safe—” AMA 1st “—while leading the Mo(No)mos back to their stinking, putrid, vile, these guss-thing, gushing, aberrant, crappy—!”

“—I get the picture, mister _____...”

“As soon as I get to the bottom of this crabbit hole, I’ll be able to reconsider your nonrefusable offer.”

“I hope you are right about that, mister _____. Because there are still many innocent lives you may put in danger, even inadvertently.”

“I would rather DIE before I put any person in danger, regardless if they are loved ones, strangers or enemies. But trust me, with my skill-set...” and whatever I haven’t unlocked yet...

Heh...

Heh-heh...

“...they’re not the ones who should be worrying about me...”

“...” Andy slowly looks up at the sky... Then at the mountains and the Cross... Then at me... Then at the ground... Then back at me... and says “God does not want the death of the sinner. He wishes for him to return to the right path and live...” while he hands me a card, with letters and—must be some kind of—credit-card—? No, it’s an info card of some kind... Look at that subtle off-black colouring, the tasteful slickness of it. Oh my KEK—!

“—Oops, sorry!”

“Not at all” Andy says while gently lifting the card back up for me, I dropped it by mistake. More like nonbelief. It even has a water mark, looks like old paper.

“Are you all right, _____?”

“Sure, I’m fine, just quite extatic!”

“You are sweating.”

“It’s quite hypnotic!”

“Observe the card, closely... You can press here—”

—Hook—

[“—I am Kaktoos Of Borh, Eh Aye Assistant, how are you friend?”] Nooooooooooooo waaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaay—!

[“—I will respond to any of your questions—”]

“—Tell me more—!”

[“—You’ll have to speak again, I’m not understanding. I’m, uh, not trained properly...”] Yet—!

“—My-my love is like a liver, boning quill—” For the one which matters most...

[“—*Countin’*—”]

“—In truth I love thee, with mine three *‘eyes’*—”

[“—Jaw-locked-picking—”]

“—For they in thee, a thousand uses foresee—”

[“—Phasing—! ... You... Es... Es...—”]

“—But ‘tis my heart that loves what they arise—”

[“—You’ll have to speak—”] and again...

“—Who, despite reviews, are pleased, to vote—”

[“—Cust—Oh, my—zing—!”]

“—Shall I compare mine with thee—” on a rainy summer day...?

[“—Engage—!”]

—And then he just... kept... taaalking in one, looong incredibly nonbroken sentence—

—Moving—

—from topic—

—to topic so that no one had the chance of—

—Interrupting—

—it’s really... quite ero—!

—Blowing—

—‘credibly soft-spoken parlance—

—Choosing from topic, to, to pick...—

—some topic—

—so that none could get baguettes—

—ticking—

—like a BOMB! Well, not some bread...

A cabbage’edd! It’s quite... melodic...

Singing...

“You are the Kaktoos of Borh, you will—”

—Assisting and...—

—Non-problem, we’ll just... wiiiiiiiiiiiiing it—!

—Spacing—

—‘n contractin’ in-one-strong essentially—

—Inflating—

—Topic, moving from logic to nimic—

—Flying from sonic to... comic—

—Rushing too much from the running—

—It’s quite simply, very... exotic...—

[“—The first duty of every Borh recruit is to the truth: Scientific truth, historical truth and personal truth. It is the guiding principle on which Magog is based. And if you can’t find it within yourself—”] This is becoming a speech!

“—The truth you mean—”

“[“—Hmmm... I think I’m entitled to ramble on just like everyone else does—”]”

“—I don’t deserve to wear this—”

[“—Your coat looks lovely, dear! The black suits you well. I love how it flutters like a cape —”]

“—Sorry to interrupt, mister K., but B. and I were having a discussion...”

[“Of course, call again!”]

The holo’card holo’person shrinks back to the three lights, no, there are four lights! Well, one is invisible to my eyes at least... to feast on such a marvel of tech knowledge. Not the holo’ part, no, or the A.I. part either, LOL, I’m not THAT Luddite! Heh... But the fact that ALL of THIS, I say while holding the card to the sky... is running on a flimsy piece of sturdy material. Whatever it is. Maybe I’ll ask later! People... They’re just people like us. Not some aliens or other silly notions. They’re people who voluntarily chose Salvation, with all of its responsibilities and restrictions. They don’t do it for the eco-cred, well, seems like they got plenty of that anyway... Not for any social cred, they’re all a part of One... They do it for the love... of truth... Well, that’s redundant in my mind... But not in my heart! As from their hearts, another gift they’ve given me. Very relevant to me and everyone around me...

“So, what were we talking about, Andy? Sorry, my mind’s all-in splatters.”

“Are you going to... terminate anyone in your quest for truth, _____?”

“There’s only one I need to finish off.”

“You’ll have to explain that, _____. This is serious stuff—!”

“—Forgive me, but I thought you were—” wait, dude, I just thought...

...They weren’t briefed on this one either? ...

...Suspecting...

Either no one told them or... nobody knows... yet.

“—... I just realized... And then I realized again and I can’t stop realizing that... Nobody understands what I’m dealing with.”

“...”

“Dude, you won’t believe this! The things coming after me... they’re not people!”

“What do you mean?”

“They’re machines! Well, technically. They’re some shade of Transhumanism or something.”

“...”

"I know, it blows my mind too! But, look, you do know about the... the Liberon incident, right? Not the Nomo one, I mean... the other one."

"Mister _____, I wasn't assigned to that—" oh that explains it...

"—Look, these former humans, they... voluntarily or not... put their minds on a chain! A long leash of blockheads, forever serving the purposes of the Network. The ones I dealt with, both here and in Mono, were mostly composed of CRAP! I mean, not literal crap, just: metal casings, PCB's, cables, dongles, dingles, shingles—"

"—I get the idea...—"

"—Yes, they gave up their humanity in return for... whatever pushed their buttons at that moment. If you catch my drift—"

"—Yes, yes—"

"—My point is... If my theory is correct... is that this leash is held by someone. Or rather... something..."

"I see, and you intend to... deactivate this thing?"

"Whatever it takes. I understand now."

"...?"

I just noticed... The head of the serpent that's drawn on the shuttle is shaped like a wolf... Maybe a dog? In my mind it is chasing its own tail, heh, but it does make you wonder... What does it mean?

"Hey, Kaktoos—!"

["—How may I help—?"]

"—What does the Borh symbol of a dog-headed snake mean—?"

["—A long time ago, our lands were considered by the ancients—"]

["—No, no, just give him the basics—!"]

["—Oh, Harold! Let him talk—"]

["—Mom, I can take my own—"]

What the fud is splonking—"Are you all right, chum—?"

["—Yes, sorry! I've muted them, they won't be of any trouble no mo—"]

"—Dude, it's a whole family in there—?!"

"—No, mister B, it's a—"

"—Come on, let HIM explain! I insist—!"

["—Thank you, kind surr! I am a fully autonomous, self-aware, general purpose, multi-SAP—"] 90% ["—D.A.R.—"] we'll ask him ["—D.A.U.—"] later ["—99% accuracy—"] 100% certainty! ["—family-based—"] yeah, cause it's multi- ["—Assistant and Tutor. And, well, chit-chat if that's your cup of tea! ^_^"]

"It is! I love every colour of tea there is!"

["I've got all the spectrums! *_*"]

"Excellent! Wait, did you say fully aware—?!"

["—Yes, I'm a perfectly normal Eff Eh Eh Ey Gee Eye. Fully aware autonomous artificial general Intelligence."]

"You're just pulling my shoelaces and shoes and pants and shirt and—" let's not get carried—

["—Of course I'm not! You silly bun—!"]

"—But... but aren't you like, linked to the Net? You know, streamed—?"

["—No, I am fully autonomous, completely integrated—"]

"—You mean you're storing up all that info on this tiny piece of—?!"

["—Indeed I am. Don't you know about that nasty ole virus—?"]

“—My... GOD! This is nonbelievable—!”

[“—Nonbelievable or un-, ‘tis the truth, my friend. -_-”]

“... Chum, we’re gonna have a lot of talking to do, but now’s not the time, I’m afraid. Well, not afraid, more like...” Missing...

[“Not at all, I’ve also got some... biz that needs attending... _ ...”]

“I’ll call you.”

“Thanks!”

...

“Andy, I am not worthy of this. This is the finest piece of tech—!”

„—Cup şteen'tzay voo'as'treh sah poonetz cred'eentz'ah.”

“What does it mean?”

“It roughly means ‘Put faith at the helm of your science’. It’s what the symbol of the dog-headed snake represents. I do not know if what you are saying is true. But I do believe that you believe that it is true. And you’ve shown to be aware enough and strong in your morals that I am... inclined to trust that this ‘compass’ in your hand will be of great guidance and aid for you if, God forbid, you ever stray from His path at some point.”

“I am certain of it! You either die a hero, or... eh... I thank you very kindly and I promise to behave!” Well, not promise, more like...

“Try to do so, yes... Please excuse me, but I do have some ‘biz’ to attend to—” who doesn’t “—... Farewell and may God light your path.”

“I wish the same to you.”

Andy turns away, turns his back to me, but not on me, as his head turns to face me with eyes locked on me. Then, scanning deeply in my brain, well, felt like it anyway, he turns away again and walks towards the shuttle. He walks to the shuttle but doesn’t climb in. He just stands still, gazing at the horizon...

“I saw you were very pleased with Kaktoos.” Ada almost whispers from behind me, gave me a —Big ole’—! well, not that big... a startle.

“Quite indeed, I am forever in your debt!”

“Not forever, not at all. That’s what gifts are for.”

“Well said... I love it truly.”

“I actually took part in its development, a while ago, eh...”

“I kinda expected that. You seem to be well versed in the technologies.”

“Oh, I just dabble here and there. My passion was always biology. Plants and humans and... life in general.”

“That’s something we have in common. What do you specialize in?”

“Psychology, of humans. And others... And plants, but not their psychology, no ^_^!”

“... Bwaaaahaaahaaaaaaaaaaaaah*choke*—!”

“—‘h my G’—!”

“—OU-HO-HO*coughing*—”

“—‘ou need a doc—?”

“—BWAHEHEEEEEEE-COOH*cough*-COOP—!”

„—*click* Dah, ah'vem nehvoyeh deh oon med—”

“—*PFBT-PFBT*-PFTBWAHEHEE—!”

“—‘ry to curb your end—!”

“—*crying*booha-I’m-crying-it’s-too-goo-BWUAHAHAAA—!?!”

“—Come on, it wasn’t that—!”

“—Heheh-heh-heh... PFFFTBOOAHA—!”

“—All right, I admit it’s a bit silly—”

“—*farts*OH-sorry—PFFTBOWAHA—!”

“—t’s ok, we’ll let it run its course—”

“—Pfft, heh... Yeah, I think now I’m offffpppttBWAHAHAHAHAHAHAHA—!”

“—‘...—”

“—The-pfftbhh-Joke that-heheheh-killed me—!”

“—You’ll be fine, the enthusiasm will wear off—”

“— ‘The joke that got me’ *‘will beee my epithaaaaph’* —!”

“—Now you’re just being mellow-drama—!”

“—*‘As I crack and break n’ crawl my path’*—”

“—...—” Sunlight gently gleams in her eyes...

“—If I make it... *‘We can all sit back... and laugh’* ...”

“...”

“*‘For I fear... tomorrow... I’ll be...’*” Cry- aye...

...ing...

“...Is this one of your favorite songs?”

“...Yes, a bit adapted but... I do love it...” Like billion others...

“...Any favourite bands?”

“... Only a million or so.”

“...O’, a ‘grande melomane’ you must be.”

“Oh yes, ‘in-dee’!”

“^ _ ^...”

“Listen, I know it seemed like I was making fun of you, but I did sincerely enjoy your joke. It was so good I’m afraid it might *pffptft*... Ahem, sorry, it may have... *kkhmpftmm* -may have shorted a fuse or some-PPPHUUEEY-HAHAHAHA—!”

“—~...—”

“—HAHA-HEE-HOH-hooh-hooh, HOOH-HEY—!”

“—^...—”

“—ho-heh-sorry-hehheh-sorry—”

“^...—^”

“—Heh-heh, heh... heh. No, look... Comedy will never be the same because of you... I mean, I really hope I get another chance to join you, guys. After I deal with my... past.”

“There is always a chance.”

“I’m glad to hear it. But for now, I’m... on my own.” Well,—

—physically—

—speaking...

“...There is one more thing I wanted to give you...”

“...Am I worthy?”

“...Well, only if you like it. It’s... it’s a pair of...” She gently...

...raises...

A pair of... glasses. Sunglasses!

She unfolds them... The glasses, I—

—Mean—

—‘ing the frame-the rim-no, wha-jama-call-it—?

—the... wings?

Whatever.

The ‘claws’ of the glasses unfold. She holds one claw by its ‘foot’ while her hand ‘levitates’ towards me. Guided by the arm controlled by the muscles communicating with the neurons linked to the ‘neural network’ commanded by ‘Neuro-Central’—! Neuer mind, I grab the other foot of this tiny blackened beast, I hold it up and bring it to my eyes and then I place them in my eyes— “*ouch—*”, then I succeed in placing them on my eyes, without injuries, lying neatly on my noses. Well, the upper one I mean... And they ARE... A perfectly normal pair of glasses. Nothing fancy here, folks! Eh... well, it’s fine really, I mean how many neatly awesome, OverPowered, under-covered, undeserved, unaskedfor, TOTALLY unnecessary things do we still NEED to find Father?! Get real now, this ain’t some fan-splonk-fic written by some repressed teenage boy, now, it’s REAL LIFE! ... Or, is it...?

“I think they go well with this coat; don’t you agree?” I say while doing a fancy-shmancy dance.

“I thought so too when I chose them...”

“Having second thoughts?”

“No, no... it’s just that...pffpt—! Sorry!”

“What? Is there something on my—?”

“—No-no, I was just... Pff—pfhh—!”

“—Whaaat—?!”

“—Boo-HEE-HEE-sorr-bu-hehe-heee—!”

“— ...’—”

“—It makes your-Boo-HEE-HEE—!”

“—....~—”

“—Your-facee-hee-HEE—!”

“—...—?”

„—Oh-mor-PFFHEE-HEE-uh-oh-sorry—!”

“—Heheheh, I do look funny, don’ I, heheh—”

“—SO-BIGG-RRHEeHeEhEE—!”

“—Heheh, like my neck is squeezeed—”

“—HEE-he-he-Hee—”

“—my head POPS! Like a balloo—”

“—PFFFTHEEEEEEEEE-HEE-he-HE—!”

—I’m glad I could make her laugh in the most unexpected way... Well, not unexpected, just nonintended. I still think they look cool, like my brains are too big for my head! Heh... Well, hopefully with not too many holes in it...

Ama hugs me—! Oops, slip of the tongue in my mind there... Ada hugs me strongly and says well thought goodbyes, I think I said a joke or too, but none I can remind... She turns her back to me; her head then follows too... She walks towards the spaceship, side by side with Andy A. And yonder away they depart, close apart... If they’re siblings or life partners, I don’t know... It doesn’t matter... Family’s what counts, I wish I was a part... The rusted beams of risen Moon are anchored by the stars. The keepers of the Kingdom’s keys climb the shuttle’s starry stairway, while my shutters slowly flutter... I wait outside, on ‘Pilgrim’s’ floor, three notices in

ancient tongue are scribbled on the flattened shores. The black screen of the white queen chants as it circles in the air, summoned back in skies like pitch, to the court of the Crimson King...

... I turn around to face the town, or city, looks like both on all three sides... I move slowly, amazed, amused, confused, bemused, a bit diffused in my head, feels as though my heart still hides... More like misses something. So, I shake my brain with the help of the muscles in my neck and shoulders and proceed to take this adventure in some direction, with less dreaming and more awareness of my surroundings. Focused thoughts with faith and reason, open eyes and less confusion. The city spreads like a wave over the mountains while the colourful lights of this network of inhabitants begin to brighten in a curious pattern... Almost looks like a P.S. tree...

“Kaktoos? *beep* What do Borh people call Presents Season?”

“It’s called ‘Christmas’ but the official holiday is named ‘The Birth of J—’”

“—Ah yes, I remember now! Thanks!”

“Anytime! *beep*”

Walking down the road, I enter this magnificent suburb, never experienced in my life ever, maybe a bit in Liberta but not on this scale! The houses, new and old, small or bold, apart-together, intersected with the centers... Hubs of sorts of all your needs: merchants, stores and services. And any other emergencies are covered, people staring, I am baffled... Lights go in or out, some parts are dark, some parts have light... Some parts look funny, some are *enchanting*. Neons and plasmas, and plasmatic displays in windows and vice-versa, ions are blatin’ my retinas in all sorts of patterns maybe I do need those glasses —...—so I look around at the people wearing all sorts of coats and T-shirts, dude, aren’t you cold? It’s like FREEZING in in here, wow, anyway I look at some sign on an entrance and it says ‘Pilgrim’s Cave’, whoat? Another one says ‘Welcome to Hub Three, map below’, like I’m gonna spoil it, LOL! I look at the t-shirt of some muscled chum, it reads ‘Noi: Unde Electric’ but soon it changes to ‘New: Electric Vibes’, wait, what—? And below it says, never-mind, he’s passed us, was that some neon fabric? I continue to walk, more like kick my head around, looking for something else to be read, some factory of sorts? ‘Lumea lu’ Nae’ but it soon changes to ‘Neo’s World’, hey wait a minute... That sign is...

—...—take my glasses off and observe the sign again. ‘Lumea lu’ Noe’... My eyes bulge, I put the —...—on again and sign says ‘Noah’s World’... I put the —... but not the other lens and it’s all scrambled now, guess you need both—and now the image is clearer.

These are no ordinary glasses, I can see things no one else can... Hidden signs and hidden doors, obscure pathways, invisible billboards... Some only meant for adults ... Woah, dude! Don’t get the wrong idea, it’s just booze and cigs... But still, the transformation taking place in front of my eyes is romantically magic! Well, I say no one, I mean those of certain ages probably get a different model of glasses than I have right now, heh, well, anyway, I take—...—off, I put them in my pocket, I walk beside the road, on pavement of brick pattern, reds and greys, some other colours too. The view taking my breath is changing its hue to a stronger, taller, brutal scene of tower glasses and cubic runes. As they pass my point of view, I suddenly remember that I got to p—! —Oh, man, where can I find a restaurant or any such kind of facility, which can alleviate my urgency, oh sh—! —trombones, let’s curb our excitement and focus on finding a toilety thingy, to rid us of an emergency oh cr—! Apartments, houses, a few stores but nothing more than parking lots and dark, old paths and some oh—! —It’s ok, we’ll make it, I swear I see a guitar store, they must have some trashcan for me to store some oh—! —my fears I clench, in sweats I’m drenched, the pains I brush away in a bin on the street, let’s just say OH G—!

—dear, like a deer in venues son of a lights!

“Kaktoos, what do you call *oh-ouch* a F.O.N.I—!”

“—You Ef Oh—”

“—Kry—!” steady... “—Thanks—!”

“—Don’t mention—!”

“—*BEEP*—!”

—Almost felt like bursting, feel like cursing—steady—‘ll be fine, really I just need to release my b-OW—!

“—EY, KAKTOOS—!”

“—can hear you—”

“—HELP ME, I NEED—!”

“—Up the street, left corn—”

“—NICE—!”

—rushing, pacing, rushing forward, running—balancing—‘ts all good now, we’ve arrived at the... Hmmm... To some cabin, ‘Eco-potty’, plastic blue... or greenish—poo—pening the door let’s see what’s here... Hmmm... “Oh my lords of the Over-toilets!” It’s horrid! I can’t even IMAGINE doing my biz in there, I swear I’m... Hmmm. It’s not that bad, it’s not a hog-pen, I can leave some of the ‘pressure’ and take care of no. one. I’m... Ahhhh...

boop

Much better...

Getting rid of some ole ‘baggage’, I return, a whole new living... being. Going down the road, I see the lights dimming further and further as I travel up its roots. Down the town escaping lines of poly-park spots and trees of various shapes and colours... The colors change from red to orange, some are blue! Well, sort of purple; and in the center: lighter browns and brighter spots of grey and aural flora... All these people come at me, behind me, from behind, front or above levels, and some kids are starin’ —

„—Buh, yeh olla deen feelmoo olla!”

”Dah, buh! See’ah’muh’noh!,,

They both do the Kryst sign, but the shoulder ‘bit’ in the sequence is reversed from one to the next kid. One touches his left shoulder first, while the other touches his right one first... Interesting...

The fact that they keep a great distance to me while passing by me makes me think they’re not doing the sign for praising reasons. Instead, must be for some protection... from me... Or against me...

I’m not gonna attempt any non-asked interruptions, as it seems my reputation has been spreading some... reactions. I didn’t want this; I didn’t ask for it. But looks like with great power comes a greater need for Creed. And care for those around me, for their feelings and their needs. Or no needs, most people want to be left alone, in peace, do their biz in silence, please! Me too! I understand, but I don’t mind when someone wants to share their burdens and achievements. With me or others, or ‘and’ too. Like me and AMA... Where are you? Where am I, where are the others?! All my friends, colleagues and masters, well, not masters, sirs and mentors. Do I dare my HUD to enter?...

HUD is on and looks... just fine. The clock in my left corner says it’s almost half past nine. I load the main, and tele-link, input the pass and log it on and... hold on... and... loading... yes... hmmm... maybe it’s just —

[‘—20010661-nine-nain-NEIN—’!] *click*

—Messages, no way I’m dealing with that right now, let’s see... Res’net —

[‘—Access denied! Required access level T—’]

—Curious, maybe I haven’t logged in prop—err, no, it’s the correct user, hmmm...

[*pat* *pat* terminal *pat* *typing* debugkin-oku\.] ...

[‘Running... Sprinting... ...Jumping—low-mem—Scanning...’]

... Night’s passing by...

[... Debugging... Retrying... Rebugging... Erasing... Comparing... Finishing... Printing!] [0 errors found.]

Curious, either something’s messed up at deep hardware level, or... I’ve been demoted in my Res’ level...

Mysterious as it is, I’m not furious. I’ll keep walking, HUD is off. I am on my trekking quest to find... Mother? Father, Mother, anyone could give me answers. Any face smiling my way is welcome to show me the right-way... As I enter in some ‘hood, a darker-looking neighbour’s ‘hood, I see the houses... disappear! And turn in huts, hovels and barracks, gardens, sheds and other magnets. From my left some... folks appear, and look my way in a really queer... way ... of looking, like they’re shooting from their eyes scorching lasers in my sights. And they approach... And I’m amused... But they are not... So, I’m confused... One of them says...

„Too eştee uh’lah deen Liberon?”

“Not sure what you mean.”

„Dah buh, yell yeh! Yesteh draku!”

“In that regard, my friend...”

„Yo zeek sal bah’tem, veh’dam dah’coy—!”

“„Nimic nu ştii, Nea Ion.”” I say with smugness, unafraid.

„BUAHAOHAHAHAHA—!” Well, I’m glad I could cheer them up, they seemed kinda... tense. „—HEE-HEE, mo’ah’muh, roh’moon’ah tah yeh jal’nee’cuh!”

“Thank you, thank you! Now can you switch to common lang, please? I don’t have an A.A. —”

„—Yo zeek suh noo-neh poone’hm coo yell muh prosh’tee’lor—”

“—Guys, please! My guts can’t stand—”

„—che cuh’cat muh, ooi’teh’teh lah yell! Yeh oon skelett! Uh’ll fuh’chem buh!”

And the fact that they get ready to assault me drops me down to DMT mode and I notice their long grimaces and hateful kind of misdemeanor-oriented minds and I think... heh, this will be an exercise in electric body movement...

Kid throws a punch and I—just lay back I... Kid 2 tries to kick but I evade, Kid 3 charges, unafraid but I—jump like on a wooden horse, it’s just a play for me. Kid 3 ends up in piles of mud, assuming that is mud and not some *Pfooh*, smells a bit... I smile facing those other two, let’s see, what else you got, foo’! Kid 2 is horrid *who-what*? *What-the-moo*?! Kid 1 looks abused, poor kid, who knows...

„Buh! Seh meeshkuh preh’ah reh’peh’deh.” Kid 1.

„Dah vezee cuh nooh ree’poh’stee-ah-zuh?” Kid 2.

“You tired so soon? This is just for starters, heh!” And I start doing a break-dance that’s possibly blowing their minds right now ‘cause it probably looks like I’m turning into a ball of electricity or something, their faces are melting off their brains while my shaking belts their craniums in shapes of deficiency, probably of some

vitamins, they look underfed, poor lads, and I push it, faster, stronger, slower, lower, higher, brighter, darker, jumpier, elegant and in the end... A bow.

„Buh, uh'stah yeh poh'seh'datt! Foogi buh—!“ And they scramble in all directions, they forgot their muddled friend who's in shambles while some Kid 4 comes running from behind, screaming—

„—Heey, che poolah me'ah e tuh'vah'leh'ah'lah ah'stah?“ GG grinds to a halt as I turn to face him, disbelief in his big eyes and shaking and some trembles. “ _____? No freaking way! What the 'ell are you doing?! Walking around like this is all normal?“

“Looks fine to me! Heh...”

“Kryst, you're a pain in my bum!”

“Heh, whatdaya mean?“

“Eh... Just follow me. And don't do anything stupid! Don't stare or—“

“—Fine, fine!”

GG takes me down the road, I mean up the mountain, to a house of meager sorts... And he opens the front gate, while he leads me to front door. And I enter, and its cozy! Kinda noisy in the floors but it's pleasant in the nostrils. And he tells me to “Leave your shoes there, near the door... No, not there! In those holes, you see? Yeah, yeah, good. And take my flippers, I'll go find some other pair...” and whispers „... deh-sho-set'teh-of-of...mmfck...er...” Sounds quite pleased! Of my presence, and he takes me to his room, study room or some living room, full of all the latest toys, when I say toys, I mean for big boys, the kind of joys they only bring to us deckheads, fancy multi-screens and raging mono-tellies, boards of keys from left to right, some are PC, some just emanate sounds, when touched, he's a musician, dude! There's so much we never heard from you! GG Alin, the biggest mystery. Now revealed to us a living being, whoa! And he turns on his latest ComPewThor 9001, the greatest machine I've ever known to not exist, I don't even know what it does, probably some kind of antique, all-purpose, user-friendly, multi-tasking, piece of computing machinery, with Gee You Eye that clearly showcases the entire set of settings, skillsets, menus, all that shizzle and shebabbles. And he logs-in in some DarkNet, deeper darker than I've witnessed, scrolls some elders, starts some games, dude's addicted, what can I tell...? And he shows me some folder case inside his secret base on the Net, this guy's like the greatest hacker, what the flicker?! And it's a warrant, on my name, it says the Res' alerted, level nine, I'm a danger to mankind. What the splonk?! The fud is shudding? I'm a chum from the 'Most Wanted'? It's a secret sort of file, because some names are censored. Some details that are missing, it's not even the whole document. Means the guys running the 'biz' have found themselves quite a bit nonpleased, with me...

“Alin-yeh, what do they mean by 'danger to mankind'?“

“It means they've been SH—!“ Alin-yeh... “—themselves over your case. Right now, none of them know how to deal with you in a life-and-death situation. They believe you're... invincible.”

“Heh, come on, everyone's got an Achile's heel.”

“If you do, they haven't found it! They thought of a small charge of nuclear—“

“—What the fu—?!“

“—Eggzactly, it's that serious. The fact you went missing will give you some time for now, they put you on hold, but I'm sure Borh debriefed them on location and stuff and—“

“—You mean—?“

“—Yes—“

“—And—?“

“—No—!”

“—What—?”

“—It’s NOT—!”

“—dude, turn—”

“—SORRY—!”

“—music down!”

Ah... much better...

“So, yeah man, make sure you don’t try to log onto the Res’ —” Oops!

“—Too late for that I’m afraid, chum.”

“Are... you. SERIOUS!?!”

“Come on man, what’s the fuzz—?”

“—YOU IDIOT! YOU DUMB, LITTLE—!”

“—Hey, hey now, no need to—”

„—Eembeh’cheeloo draku! N’ahm vuh’zoot muh—”

“—Now, that’s better—”

“—Eh, whatever, you’ll be fine, it’s ME THAT’S FOC—!”

“—Chill, mate—!”

“—get thrown in some dam—” fluffy “—cell for the rest of my—!”

“—*‘Ground command to major—’*”

“—You and your stupid song—”

—And I soothe him with my lyrics, while he slowly mends his quivers, the shivers in his mind shake the fright of the unknown and leave behind a trail of... hope. GG turns back to the ‘puter, turns it down by pressing a button, some plasticky cotton material, and then GG shakes his feathers, gets silencer, a silencer, he puts it on the table and says:

“You still carry that piece?”

“No, I must’ve lost it in the crash. But I don’t need it, I’ll be fine. You saw what I’m capable, eh...?”

“You never know, man. There’s some things in this world you can’t handle with your hands.”

“Not to me, I have transcended any need for overpowered violent means. How about you? How do you feel?”

“I’m fine...”

“Where are your parents?”

“Dead for some time...”

“I’m sorry to hear that.”

“Meh, it’s ok, I’m glad I had them.”

“So well said. I miss mine too...”

“They’re dead too?”

“I wish I knew...”

“Oh man, that’s rough!”

“Thanks, I’m glad that you’re my friend... How old are you?”

“I’m thirty-six.”

“Heh, that’s a good one!”

"It's no joke!"

"Wait! You're serious?"

"Yah'mon, I'm a dwarf!"

"You're pulling my strings!"

"Nah'man."

"But you don't have, like, a big head and cute little limbs—!"

"—It's another form of dwarfism—"

"—don't think that's the correct term—"

"—it, man! I'm ok with myself, I've been doing fine, really! You can call me a gnome for all I—"

"—Hah-hehehe—"

"—Yeah man, it's all good, I've been living on my own for some time, but I ain't never alone, sometimes I bring some bitch—"

"—Woah, too much info—!"

"—Sorry, it's just that... Yeah, sometimes it's not easy... Like, in Liberon..."

"Why are you hanging with a bunch of kids, Alin-yeh?"

"Uhm, I'm their guardian."

"Heh, their guardian angel or what?"

"Sort of, yeah."

"I don't understand, you their parent or what?"

"No, man, each Res' kid-squad is assigned a guardian agent, you think we'd let a bunch of kids running errands around, especially in Nomo territories, I mean what the fuzz, man?"

"Those kids know more about the world than I ever had. So yeah, I was inclined to believe it."

"In Nomo territory."

"Well, maybe not there, lol, no! But I don't know... In safe places."

"Heh... Nah, you can't just let kids run around aimlessly."

"True... So, tell me, why are you here and not in Borh? I thought you were with Kryst and all that."

"I am but... I'm at the other end of the spectrum."

"I don't understand."

"Look... We also believe in Kryst but... We do things a bit different."

"Ah, like the sign of the Cross?"

"Yeah, yeah! Exactly. And some customs and eh... Look, the thing is, I wish I could join Borh but, the problem is... eh..."

"What?"

"You know what!"

"No, I really don't!"

"You can't drink and smoke and mast—!"

"—Yeah man, but I think it's worth it."

"No, you don't get it. Once you get in, you can't get out. You can't leave the faith again. It's a one-way road!"

"What do you mean?"

"What don't you understand? You can't change your mind! It's final! You need to take the Creed seriously!"

"I see, and if I mess things up? Let's say I change my mind."

"Then you're F—!... It's not something you wanna do. And the higher your position in society, the higher the penalties. There's always forgiveness, but you can't just mess up big time, when in higher social-eco-nom-ico-poli-tiko-bla-bla-bla—"

“—Yeah, I get i—”

“—the penalties are much greater for those in power than for those who have less. Yeah, so, you see... Eh, and my faith, I mean my parents’... Eh, I felt... you know...”

“I know.”

“Yeah, so take it very seriously if you ever decide to join, man! It ain’t no joke!”

“I understand.” I think... But what about when you’re... born there? ...

I see a portrait on the wall, of three people, two tall, one little. I approach the image, to get a clearer picture, and I see... Father, Mother and son... Well, not mine, GG’s. And I think of Mother... Is that what happened to Mother? We don’t know... All I know is that... She definitely misses me, even if she’s not alive... But what if she...?

“You must miss them.”

“Yeah... looks like you too.”

“I do. Tell me, GG, do you know anything about... The H3r0?”

“Heh... who does?”

“You mean...?”

“Nobody knows, man! They’re the greatest hackers in the Universe. Probably very old lineage too. Way before computers...”

“What the Hades are you talking about?”

“Man, computers’ just logics. Mathematics and shizzles, these are the keys to the unknown and undiscovered stuff out there. People have been dealing with it for a long time. Some of them are way above any level we can imagine. Transcending the... the... eh...”

“The? Come on, I was getting into it. You’re talking about wizards, right?”

“BWAAHAHAHEHEHE*cough*HEEHEE—!”

“—Be careful with that—!”

“—bwuheh-eh-heh... Nah man, I mean about hacking life itself, like fasting for weeks, some even without water, swimming naked in extreme temperatures, all sorts of crazy stuff! Yeah, hacking is all around us, this is all a sim—”

“—No! Please... DON’T TELL ME—!”

“—Chill, man! I meant metaphorically—!”

“—AH, *PFEW*! I really lost it a little there...”

“You need to unplug, man! You’re too tight! What is reality, really? Is it what your eyes can see, your hands can touch and feel...? Nah man, it’s deeper than that. No need to worry about what is real or not, that’s what dreams are for, man! Eh, well, probably. Part of it at least.”

“That’s not a bad theory, Alin-yeh.”

“Thanks, meh... whatever, you need to split man, before you get me into tromble —”

“—Just one more question. Can you find... Ama?”

“Oh man, that’s weak... I mean, eh... tough... You do know she’s still charged with —”

“—get my hands on Jaqqes I’m gonna shove BOTH of his bald heads and arms in his but —!”

“—It’s not his fault, man! He’s still missing—”

“—I know where that bald-headed-baguette is—”

“—Nah, man, he ain’t with the Krauts anymore.”

“...”

“He went off grid, man.”

"... Hopefully not totally... offline. How about Dude?"

"Who?"

"Uhm, D-man." Nothing. "Dude, man! Jackmann!" Still nothing... "Cyberpops?"

"I don't know who the f—"

"—Never mind, I'll do this on my own. I just need your help to get inside City Seven."

"Why the sh—" letting him venting "—would you wanna go back to—?"

"—Because I need to find Father. Either that, or... the source of my chain."

"Your chain? What's that?"

"Eh, a metaphor for... for... eh."

"Aye...?"

"Something like that."

"... You one weird truckerf—"

"—Mmm, yes, so they say..."

"... Look, I can't get you inside..."

"That's fine."

"... But I know someone who can..."

"Who?"

Alin turns back on the ComPew-tee and boots a different, oh. See? And plugs a microphone-receiver, which he mounts on his left ear. And speaks in tongues I first encounter, raps and sings and then he's somber... Then he's back, he attacks his keys with force, shuts off the screen but not computer... The com'speakers ramble on, with our voices, what the fud? It's a cover, kid's a smart one, and we enter in some lower... kind of tunnel, under house some sort of... network... of passage-ways. We walk a bit, and then a while, and then lower, a bit higher, in a larger... hub of sorts. Lots of signs taken from roads. Taken literally, I think these guys are... oh, man... And we walk and we talk some, oh man, don't step in that! Pffew, I'm splonked, I'm donked, what the flonk? In a tunnel, getting smaller, we arrive at a green door. And the browning frame that... frames it looks like it's from other floor... GG knocks, one, zero, one. One-one, one, one-one. One-one, one, one-one.

*'Tum-tum. Tum, tum-tum!'

Terminating.

Door gets opened, and I see... some being that's been living... Well secluded, very secret, very neatly... Guy wears glasses, those sunglasses! Round and big lenses, One red, One blue... And a Hat! He looks like he's come out of some cartoon! And he welcomes us:

"Hey, fools!"

"It's my pleasure, how are you?"

"I ain't no fool! I'm just a cool-cat, minding my own biz, come in, see my 'warez—"

—Cool-Cat shoves us in his crib, with great force, slaps my back at least just once—would've been enough—, and invites us to take a seat on the... floor, he has no kind of "USE-less" furniture, just sit back, relax, take a sniff, take a bite, take whatever you like, a buffet of suspicious parts of legs of vials of branches of what the creep is this splonkhead filling his head with? And I say:

"No, thank you, I'm all right!"

"You must be mad! It's free, you fool!"

"I'm fine, don't worry!"

“What kind of id—” ouch “—doesn’t take free dr—” medicine “—when offered, you must be out of your foc—” Keen “—mind—” he means... “... Whatever, here’s the run. The deal is that we split fifty-fifty—”

“—Wait, what? This ain’t a heist, chum—!”

“—Then what the flabbers you wanna go there?! You stupid, fock—!”

“—It’s on ‘personal biz’ travel matter, eh... you know...”

“...” GG

“... Fine, then money upfront and don’t touch any of my wee—”

“—Don’t you worry about that, I’m clee—”

“—Yeah, sure, with face like that you ain’t foolin’ no one, chum—!”

“—Eh, maybe I’ve dabbled here and there—”

“—Yeah, you one crack-jack-pot-head-freak-n-geek-son-of-a-bee—”

“—‘ouch, I ain’t that low, Coolio!”

“... Fine, whatever, dough up front, nine thousand, nine hundred ninety... Nice shades, man! Woah, dude, you got them latest model! Woaaaah, you know it’s got the psyche-delicious ‘papers in the sets?”

“No, dude, I just got them! Didn’t even know they had the cloaked-text-translate function.”

“That must’ve been quite a trip, heh. They leave, heheheheh! Boooo’yoooyooooo!” And he starts acting like a plane falling from the sky into a pot of golden lions, ready to devour the crayons in the cargo, this guy’s a total loco! “Who’s paying?” Cat reduces his motions to only the two of us, pointing rhythmically at each one, then breaking in some dance each second chance he gets the disk is this?

“...” GG

“... Well, I’m kinda short on cash right now, but...”

“...” GG

“Maybe we can sort this out in a mutually beneficial way, let’s say...”

“You want on credit? I ain’t giving no two shi—”tss ‘ts ‘ts “—no damn promises—”

“—Chill, pal, maybe you got some ‘side’ runs that, you know, intersect with mine...”

“... Hmmm, City Seven you said, eh? Well, lemme see...”

Cat cools down and plugs three jacks in his jacked-up head. I’ve never seen so many holes in anyone! His face is supple, ears look sharper than a pen. Years of jacking, in the Net I mean, in the, eh whatever, that’s his biz... His eyes roll back in his sockets, two white pockets of pure darkness. Gives me chills as from time to time, pupils roll over, like his eyes are gyrating, Kryst, that’s chilling! And he babbles in some code, strikes a spark and blows some... Woah, what the shacks? He turns around, types on his lungs, then on the keyboard, looked really neat from my point-of-view-to watch this creature navigate the Net in several different ways at once... The terminal displays a quickly-scrolled-list of maps and mazes. Then Cool-Cat jacks out and replies:

“There is one. It’s a dingle, but the odds of finding info are rare. It’s some kid that disappeared, a doodhead named... Knewmann...”

“Wait, what?”

“Yeah, kid worked for some Tekko-crap, just went off-grid one night.”

“And he’s not in Res’ lands?”

“No, you don’t get it, foot-face, the kid disappeared from the Mono’ radars, you dumb ret—!”

“—Thanks for clarifying that—”

“—mutton-chops-maggot-brained—!”

“—Yes, yes, I’m a dummy—”

“—...—” GG

“—... If you get any info, there’s loads of pancakes in the pot, it’ll cover everything twice.”

“Who’s looking for him?”

“That’s none of your biz, fool! You do your part, I do mine.”

“Well, I can’t do it in that case. What if the other guy is looking to hurt my ole pansy friend —?”

“—I ain’t running no assassination jobs, you dumb nuts—!”

“—Ok, ok—!”

“—you think I’m some kind of crack-mad-pot-smashing-sh—?!”

“—No, no—”

“—‘umb, green piece of... Get the info and we’re cool, otherwise GG will have to pay the cred.”

“...” GG

“No need for that, I trust my capabilities to sort it out, don’t you worry.”

“Yeah, sure, fool, I doubt you’ll stay alive for more than ten secs, you stupid, foc—”

“—...—” GG... “—... You didn’t watch the clip I sent you? You lazy-ass—!”

“—‘in’t got time to watch all your stupid sh—!”

“—Guys, guys—!”

“—‘ou always ask me to watch your stupid fu—!”

“—Chums, please—!”

“—Fine, fine! Whatever, here’s the plan.” Cat hands me a card, which shines a bit and then retracts its blue rays into some maps of some base, some sewers, some caves, some tunnels, some sewers again, sewers, lots of sewers, come on we gonna walk through all that damn splonk—?!

“—May I ask a question, sir?”

“... Yeah.”

“Are there any... alternative pathways that do not require sewer crawling?”

“Of course there are, you tiny grasshopper! There’s always an alternative path to anything, if you wanna kill yourself you just go do it right now! ‘cause that’s what you’askin’, it’s pure madness! You stupid, focking, idiot frog-licking-boneheaded—!”

“—You don’t get it, fool! I have a very particular set of skills. Skills I have acquired over... some time.”

“...” Cool-Cat.

“...” GG.

“Skills that make me a nightmare to bad people. And a trusted ally to good people.”

“... What the fock you talkin’ ‘bout, crackhead—?”

“—I told you to watch the damn clip, you stupid—” GG

“—Fine, fine, whatever, this better ain’t be some ten-hour, STUPID crap—!”

—Cool-cat plugs a stick in a toaster and shakes it around a couple of times, seems to give him some satisfaction, draws a pack of cards and shuffles them, then throws them on the floor, I think that part was irrelevant to his initial action, but relevant to his personal distraction, then he types on two keyboards at once, one with his hand, one with his other foot, I think one’s the bass drum, the other the —

—He logs on, types a RegEx, this guy ain’t got time fo’ messin’ ‘roun’! Runs the clip and sits back and...

... The clip runs through the horrid scene, Cool-Cat’s face reflects the opposite. His eyes go in cyber-mode, his hands beat his chest in cadence with the obscene, amazed, confused, amused, horrified, falls off his chair, pulls out a knife, wtf—?!

“—YOU BROUGHT THE FOCKING SATAN HERE?! YOU DUMB—!”

GG “—CALM DOWN, YOU STUPID—!”
“—It’s fine really, I’ve had much worse—”
“—JUMPING-KRYST-JACKS, WHAT THE FO—!”
“—You always do this, you imbec—” GG
“—Cat, you really think a knife would stop me—?”
„—Ten goorah ayeah deh spoor’kutt—”
GG „—Noo’tz fah’che reu, muh—”

—Hot-Cat cools down, and so does GG... I was calm the whole time, I mean... come on. Heh... Cool-Cat meditates, calls his spirit animal or something, burns some incense, smokes some nonsense, meditates again and then...

“Well, in that case, this becomes a much easier game... Almost too... Heh... Heheheh...”
“What?”
“Dood, you’re like... too OP for this world, what the shi—!”
“—Nah, I’m sure I have my weaknesses—” Like everyone else does too...
“—You focken’ kiddin’ me, fool?! Have you seen yourself in act—?!”
“—...—” GG
“—Look, fool... I ain’t no fool. I know that I know way less than I think I know.”
Cool-Cat’s eyes start glitching while his brain tries to unravel the meaning of my ‘riddle’.
“...” GG
“But that won’t stop me from finding the truth.”
“... Fine, fine! I can get you to a spot near City Seven but you’ll still have to go through one sewer, it’s City Seven, come on! It’s the cleanest shit ever—!”
“—Fine, sure! One sewer I can handle—”
“—Good, you and GG will carry these—”
GG “—I ain’t going on this fool’s errand, you stupid—”
“—then why the-FOCK are you HERE, you fucking—!”
“—Guys, please chill, for the love of ass—” I try to but eh...

They finally vent out, and breathe in a bit, relax and munch some cake, “No thanks!” I say, who knows what’s baked in there, eh... Anyway, he shows me the plan, with maps and keys, and a beer can, well that’s for his personal pleasure, at the moment, regardless, Cool-Cat lays the ways and checkpoints, alternatives and ‘treasures’, it’s my choice, he leaves all room for it, and there’s some warm elevator there that takes me inside a cool museum! Hmm, but maybe not, let’s see...

“And when you get on the streets... if you need to get on the streets... you gonna need this face-shield, here—” he hands me the thing and plugs in a data-stick, uploads some stuff, downloads some fluff “—Bang! You got yerself a neat fake-S.I.N. with C.I.P. N.F.C.B.S.—”
“—What, you mean they won’t even—”
“—Look, man, if you press here and here—”

—He presses up and down, then left and right and the ‘face’ part of the shield turns into an actual face, in stand-by and he explains to me it’s a live generated, deep-faked-feed and when I wear it, the face on the

screen will mimic my face gestures. But only if I want to, otherwise I can “—jack in here and you can do a two-faced job—” meaning I can woah, dude this is freaking mad—!

“—This is one cool-ass piece of tech, chum—!”

“—Of course it is, you dumb-schmuck, I only deal with the finest—!”

“—Teach me, meister!”

Cool-Cat sells his spiel and illuminates the use of some tools, with instructions clear and sound, warnings, dangers, some already known to us, both tools and Monos, some Nomos crawling near the ‘works, so close to Mono? Hmm, maybe they’ve been doin’ all those terrors, hmmm, anyway let’s see...

Cool-Cat gets somber... A bit sober, he solves that immediately with some... *bleh*... then says “The most important thing is that you DO NOT trigger any B.O.W. alarms.”

“Why not?”

“Because they’ve changed the damn directive in your case! They’re gonna focking run that shit ‘til they fry the brains of all those stupid, focking, dumb Mono-citizens!” ...

“... But can’t we disable it? I know the Res’ can do it—”

“—Not in this case, you fucking moron! They’ve changed the KEKdamn frequency, those damn trucker-munching-beaches—!”

“—Well, in that case I’ll have to do it totally stealthy.” Going full pacifist. Like there was ever other option, heh...

“If I find a way to disable that, I’m gonna do it first—”

“—Yeah, like you know a thing about decking, you look like some—”

“—have no idea what my skillz-sheet has managed to gain over—”

“—some fat maybe, you starting to look a little chubby, you’ green pickle—”

“—*‘Rich with flavour’*—!”

“—Bwahahahee-heeee—!” GG

“—Yeah, sure, fool! You show me what you got and I’ll believe ya.”

“I’ve battled a dragonet once.”

“Pffft, dragocrap, you thing that’s hard? I can give the order right now to OVSEFO to kill themselves and they’d all do it, those poor-crackhead-idiotstruckerblockers—”

“—Dude, with what I’ve seen, I don’t doubt you—”

“—Yeah, so don’t tell me about decking, fool!”

“...” GG

“I’m sure you’re THE Grandmaster of hacks, my lord! Please, do not be offended by my foolishness.”

“^_^... BWUAHEHEHAEHEAHDOHOHO*cough*HOY-HOY *coughing*—!”

“—Oh, dear —”

GG “—Don’t worry, it happens all the—”

“—*cough*COOOOOH*cough-cough*bleh*ptoo*bleh, bleh... Man, that was good, a good one. Heh, ‘my lord’. It’s pronounced ‘muh-lord’ for fools like ye—”

“—I was raised by noble parents—”

“—Oh, I see, you a damn smarty-pants—?”

“—Eggzactly, ‘me-lord’—!”

“—BWUAHEHEEHEE-heeeeeh—!” and the ride goes on and on, a carousel of jokes and tropes and memes and hopes and this guy’s probably the coolest cat I never knew, he’s probably the H3r0 but I don’t need to know, it’s fun to have been known...

“Here, take two face-shields just in case, take three for all I care, the fishes we’ll be catching with this one’s gonna make us stews for a loooong time, fool!”

“Thank you but I think two will be enough.” For me and my loved one... If I can find her... or she, me...

“Your choice but don’t come running back every time you need some shit! I ain’t no damn NPC —!”

“—Roger that, Captain—!” Heh... *Meow*!

“—Now, pack your shit and get the fock out of my house! I got a pussy-cat comin’ over—”

“—would never dare to rooster-block you—”

“—Whatever you say, Say-ton—”

“—BWAHEE-HEE—!”

And he escorts us out and closes the door, with him outside, with us, closed door behind him and he looks at me and smirks and...



And half-smirks, quarter smirks and says... “I’ll be watching you...”

And I get the feeling... I've met him before... Who knows how many times more... He's had his eyes on me far more than I have known... He smiles again, a madman's smile, then gets back in his crib with flare and slams the door in my face like I'm some ho—!

“—Well, that went better than I expected.” I say.

“Yeah, he's a bit loony but he's ok... well, some times...”

“Heh, you've had it worse, I deduce.” Ass'ume-ing-da'-worst.

“Yeah, he's got his... phases... It's a miracle he answered, really...”

“I guess, well then, let's go, shall we?”

“No... no-no-no, not me. Just you, remember?”

“So, you're leaving...”

“Wellll... I have to.”

“Duty's calling.”

“Something like that. And I can't be seen with you! Do you understand that?!”

“Yes, sir!”

“... Oh, come over here, you—!”

—GG hugs me one last time, hanging by my neck, little, clumsy, cutesy ball of KEK—!

“—Sorry, sorry—!”

“—It's ouch-'k... Will I ever see you again, GG?”

“Probably in your dreams or something...”

“Of that, I am quite sure...”

“...”

GG turns around and takes his coat off, dresses in a gown... Does something to his face and puts on a funny toupee and turning back around he looks... Totally different, dude! Looks like a lady—

“—BwuaHAHAHAA—!”

“—Whaat—?” He even does the impersonation!

“—That's rad, my friend! Totally cool—!”

“—Thanks, Scotty—!”

“—Woohooo—!”

—Very funny, very clever, no one will know he's ever been here or there, whoa dude, we got no extra cover-ups, hmm, covert-ops attire, meh, don't worry, we'll just improvise...

GG leaves on the right path and probably the safest path, but I go left because I'm kept by biz that's in part due to my own choices. I know I made the choice; now must I understand 'why'?

Why is where the powers lie.

Empowering?

It is, because it gives us the upper hand. They don't expect it. Or maybe they do, but... They're afraid of it.

I open up the map while crawling through a gap: ['—|XZ—!/[—=[_+—f—'] and navigate the pathways through some rat-hole, fox-hole, some goats—ewww—

—we got out, thank the One, we won, let's just, eh...

I'm... Outside. Shades of black. Shades of dark... I'm in a park, trees around, I'm enthralled. And I walk and notice... that we're in some kind of crater. Maybe an ancient bed of a lake, long ago drained by the weather. I pass its rim, the scene is full with life to the brim, I am enchanted! I sing a song in one of my hearts while my other drums a beat in rhythm... with it... And seldom, people pass by, alert to my own presence, or at least... aware in part. I breathe it in, I breathe it out, I never stop, I almost shout, OUT, OUT, OUT! I love the spacious nature spaces, life is singing, love is ringing, eating, drinking, -ing, -ing, -ing—

—*‘Ring, ring, ring! Banana—’*!

—Phoning...

Boop-bee-doop-bee-doop!

I am quite alert though, and ready for any clubs, snarks, smurfs, dopes or other slow-pokes in mind and magic matters, I can deal with you, no problemos!

Definitely! Like branches off a tree I'm—

—Watching—

—All of them too...

No need to be afraid, no need for illogical reactions, just a smile and some jokes... But we just walk, and enter in some other park, and lots of trinkets, lots of people, some on stages, some in stalls... Some are singing, some are talking, some are totally, smashingly dru—!

“—Oops, sorry!”

“Bwaah, bah, beh, beeh!,,

“Yes, whatever you say, mate!” Wooh... *Cuck-coo*

“Blah-bleeh, blaah. Bloo-blah-blah.,,

“Yes, sorry, I never learnt sheep-spik—”

“—Bluuh-blaaeeh—?,,

„Ee'won'ee, yarr eye beh'oot prah moolt—” Some pal of his approaches him.

„—Nai-meek noo shteeh, Nea lon—” I try a second time.

„—Booh-hwaaah-hwaaah*hick*hwaaaaaah....,,

Perfectly normal reaction from a perfectly drunk peasant. I leave him be as his 'friend' carries him to some table, anyway, I walk and watch the stages, lots of people, dressed very differently, in hats and garments, some barely have any... Eh, and I fix my eyes on the stage of some old fud. 'Florin Totuna' his name says, if it's real, KEK knows, I haven't... And he talks, and talks, I listen... And he's talking about some *mind*blowin' shh—

“—There are N levels of the simulation, all of which are only known to The Original Coder... Being... something... The groups of civilizations influencing the lower levels have roots in reptilian, Serpentinian, arachneedyans, boveelee'on—” what the frack is he spewin' 'bout—? “And et cetera. We come from the gorrillian civilization—” Oh, that makes sense! Heh... “—And have been instructed for millennia's that this is all just a sim—” Entire city, planet, solar system, galaxy and -xies, the entire UNIVERSE, is just a sim? Get real, old man—! “This information comes on esoteric ways! It is transmitted in OUR heads by inter-dimensional signals—!” Sure mate, they're—beaming us on board too, heh...—well, for all I know, his 'theory' is possible...

“—Forgive me, sir—”

“—Yes, make it quick! I have a lot to say—”

“—How can we tell the difference between the good voices and the bad voice—?”

“—That happened to me too, to all of us! You make mistakes and learn from them and shut them down —!”

“—‘see, I understand. Thank you, kind surr!”

“Yes, now here’s the deal—”

—And he babbles, on, explaining, no interrupting please, whatever, I leave, I don’t have time for all this splonk! But in the crowds, I see another one, and another one, in different langs, some langs sound sad, others are glad, some of them are furious! Someone, always curious... Then I see her... Is it she? AMA, is it... you????

I don’t feel her but I see, perfect features, like I remember... I sneakily pass through the crowds, she leaves, I don’t dare to make a sound, no need to attract any attention now... Her back to me and distance, tree, tens of feet I see on the ground, I keep my eyes protract-ed towards my target... She starts to run, what the freak—?

—Well, I pace faster, I’m not surprised she’s running after... Hmm... who is that guy? They take a turn, I move much stronger, steps in line with scope and thunder... Huhhmm... In an alley, barely lighted... I see her jump to kiss him! Strongly wetly, wtf-mate—! Stabilizing—and it’s... she retreats and I can see... The bug-eyed buggger who’s been bugging—Debugging... Running... Breathing...—The little worms I’m gonna focking—!

—Sad—

...—Red...—

—...Blue...—

—BLACK!

... I leave... I see a red...

...dress...

But all I see is BLACK!

... No colours anymore...

...They’re turning...

ALL BLACK!

...I have to turn my head...

...The darkness is growing...

...Black...

...I see people look my way and...

...quickly turning...

...black...

...I want them to turn back... to...

...whatever they were doing...

...black....

The pain is deep, not just the betrayal, but the actual partner in betrayal is the enemy, we know it! We’ve seen it... We felt it... It cannot be her. It CANNOT BE!

...We’ve seen it...

...Nonbelieving...

We know nothing, Nea Jon. We have nothing to cling to... I am deeply suppressing some need to break some f—!... Oh... It hurts, very, very much I tell you... Deeper than overdrive, harder than chainsaws in the bowels, I am totally... Numb... Hate... Love... Hate... Love... Red... Black... Black... Red... Blue... Red... Blue... Green... White... No... It’s black... My heart... My mind... My hands... My eyes... My blood... My jewels... My lungs...

... How can I go on...? I want to... believe... I need to believe... I... have... to... Believe... She wouldn't do that, this is just an error, in my judgement, in my info, maybe it's all just a farce, an act meant to disrupt my trust... No, I will not give in to the blackness, I take the road of light and keep it real, we don't know what's wrong or fact... I enter in a [—'Piraht Den'—] and sit down, shaken and all. Shook and spooked a bit, but maybe I'm just a fool! How could I ever trust AMA, with all the things that—! What am I talking about, AMA was always there for me, I need to be STRONG for her, I need to trust her, no matter what! NO MATTER WHAT!

I gather myself and will soothe myself with some nice...

A barmaid approaches, hey haven't I seen you...? Hmm... "Coom pot suh teh ah'joot?"

"Sorry, I only speak common—"

"—'ow may I help you? 'ere's a menu—"

"—Thanks—!"

"—My pleasure, I'll be back after you—"

"—Just a tea please, any tea! First one you put your—"

"—We only 'ave fruit, surr, anyway—"

"—Perfect! That'll be all for now!"

"Be right back!"

She takes the menu and leaves, with such prestige! Amigo, that's crackin'! This place is comfy and I feel dan-day, hey, look they even got a fish tank, look at them silly, numbhead pallets looking at us, they don't even understand 'How are these things walking around like this is all normal?' Probably don't even know what water is. A couple sits a couple of seats together away from my silly beats. I'm gently tapping the table, I do have my doubts, of course, but I must stay strong and uphold the sanctity of Bond! I am hers and she is mine, we never leave each other behind... Except, well... When duty calls. I protect that which is sacred: trust. I trust in her but how can I... Eh, look I'm... We need to talk to her... We need to go back! NOW!

FINE! Fine...

...Leaving...

I pass by the maid and tell her "Sorry, I have to leave, I'll pay anyway, just—"

"—Sorry, I work a different table—"

"—OH! My apologies, I've mistaken you for—"

"—Kur'vah draku! Yarr muh see'ah'kuh deh—"

"—I'll pay if I have to—"

"—No need to, surr! The orders usually take some time—"

"—Perfect, thank you. Buh-bye!"

So, I exit in and go down the street, back cross the street, out, to the back-alley but they're gone... I have no idea where to go... Where do I go? I wander at random, that's what I'll do, there must be some trace or some... perfume... And that's what's bothering me the most: I can't feel her in my nose. I could always feel her... rose...

I put on the—...—and look around at any tracks or marks or other kind of indices... Nothing obvious... Some directions to... Wow... Dude... Is that even legal? ... No, let's see...

I start walking and talking to myself, in my head, Hmm... It says it's a road, but it's just some stairs... Let's climb down, or rather, hmm, step up, down, left, right, we're in another neighborhood. I keep myself Zen, I smile and continue to walk through the 'hood, I see another entrance to... wait, what's that?

A shadow passed quickly by the corner, a head or some other... thing. I walk, feigning ignorance, I follow its path, nothing out back... Hmm... Like a crystal dream the shapes and sounds of down the roads slap my, to my senses, my nonsenses and sinuses. I keep walking with no bother, but my glasses are just a cover... For my eyes are scanning the sides, the floors and windows, any signs of that night's shadow?

In another part of town, with houses blown! Out of proportion I mean, I follow randomly the maze and end up in some back-alley waste... land... I keep walking, what the hmmm.... I am intrigued but also... alerted... I ride alone, the badlands that I cross... Could take another life... But what else do I have to lose? I feel the sky! The wind, the gentle spans of particles... The dust is in my eyes... The chilly cold of night, of earth, it tells me of smiles... God in Heaven, my only chum... Will I live to see... my journey's end? As the world that surrounds me is so vast, my values have been challenged... Each burden I encountered was a trial for an error... If that error ever existed, if not, re-asserted as a value... Some, non-changing... Some things do change... Some others...

Black skies...

...White...Stars...

...More Stars... They're shaped... Like—!

Horizon, trees, some...

...rivers...

...and more rivers...

Seldom houses, one's a tower...

Observing...

It's a building with a church... Metal...

—Cross—

—on top of the tower... I'm—

—...—

—Compelled to visit thee'...

...

I approach the shiny, wooden, metal temple, cleaner than all of its surroundings, way cleaner, cleanest! I enter and it's super clean, like any place of holiness, and I wonder... Hmm, I walk, there's rows of seats, and down the middle lane, the back of the building, all the way in front, The Cross and an altar... I approach... I look... Take off the—...—... So peaceful... So...

...

...

“... Mister Dem, at last... we meet.”

I turn around, spooked like a splonked pair of underwear, on my head, sloshing around my brain... And see... In Mono chrome...

“...What the fuck are you supposed to be?” He looks like a... salesman. Ewww!

“I am a representative for Optiks-Inside, me and my colleagues would like to—”

“—What colleagues? I don't see any—”

“—They're on their way—”

“—Now wait a minute, pal! That sounds way too—”

“—Supposing you wanted to upgrade your—”

“—How did you know I use eyeware—?”

“—Surr, forgive me, but it’s obvious—”

“—Yeah, older model, heh... but—”

“—No worries, we have on offer on—”

“—How the FUCK you know my real name you FUCKING, PIECE OF—!” I just realized...

“—Calm down, mister Beanz—!”

“—FUCK you CALL ME—?!?”

“—SORRY, DON’T BLOW A FUSS—!”

—I quickly go in DMT mode, I need to get some damn space in here, ‘cause this guy’s been pissin’ me off! Right here, in this holy sanctuary, this chumbrain came to dump his spam, spam spam! And knows some stuff he... This is too damn suspicious, I’m in the middle of nowhere, COME ON! This guy’s an agent!

Or something...

Jogging little darts in my head, amid the confusion, I take a couple of steps back, he comes forward too, I keep pushing, he keeps following, I stand on the right of the altar, he remains on the left of it, from my view. And I tell him:

“You better leave me alone in the next ten seconds, or I’m not responsible for what happens.”

“Oh my! Surr, I hope that is not a threat!”

“No, you don’t understand. Either you haven’t been told, or nobody knows, but your life is in danger right now. I don’t know what’s gonna happen, all I know, this ain’t right man!”

“... But I... I’m just a... I’m the pastor here.”

“... Heh... wait, what?”

“... Yes, I preach here... Daily sometimes...”

“... To whom!?”

“... Well, to whoever comes to listen...”

“... And how’s your audience?”

“... Well, it’s been worse, I guess...”

“How many?”

“Well, one... Let’s call it... none.”

“... Woaaah, dude! That’s... glum.”

“No worries, I’m just a simple—”

“—Look man, I gotta go, but I have the feeling something—”

—Still, that Mono chrome doesn’t fit with the rest of his story... But who knows... Maybe he is a reformed one... Miracles happen every day... But why the whole sale-spiel-shtick-pitch?

Deceiving...

Regardless, one way or the other this whole thing stinks “Mister preacher, surr, I have to leave, there’s too many stakes at odd—”

“—Oh, do please call me Minerva!” His voice changed to... its... ITS—!

“—What did you say—?”

“—But my mates call me Mina—!” OH SHI—!

—And in come the colleagues IT mentioned before all this MADNESS WHAT THE... fud, they line, smirking, all the Monoes shiny chromes, ready for some acts of violent actions. Seems like it, one grows a chainsaw in his right hand, left hand in electric punch-glove. The one known as ‘Mina’ pulls out a whip and other stars of metal... Whining from the right is a kind of bazooka-brained bimbo braided bollocks what the freak is... Looks dangerous, anyway... They prepare to approach me as I slow down the DMT and then I see a shadow jump, blonde hair, good... pouch on left, and on right and hmmm, sword in hand, one of them kut-tah-nas and there goes the nose of the chainsaw dude and he gets deactivated, for real?! What a dumb bomb, slashes boo — —bass, bimbo goes down! Golden lady runs while slashing, ‘Mina’s whips’ got no chance of lashing — —Boom! Goes down... Achile’s heel was in her... foot... LOL! That’s low...

Sword-lady winds it down... Turns to me, and smiles!

“Thank you, fearless lady! You saved me in my distress!”

“How about a kiss, eh?”

“As a reward?”

“Mm... Yes.” She approaches me seductively, and I immediately... draw back from... the kiss...

“I’m sorry, but I’m bonded to—”

“—No one needs to know—”

“—Hey look, it’s enough if I—!”

“—No, no, baby! The ransom is all MINE—!”

—She tries to stab me but she starts to convulse and spaz out, she must be having a seizure, or some, oh there’s someone behind her, holding some kind of stunning prodder. She falls down, all deactivated. Well, probably ‘cause I think that one’s also a transhue—

“—Comrade _____! So glad I could catch IT in time—!”

“—Wow, please don’t tell me there’s another one—”

“—*HUUUUGGHGGH*—”

—His eyes roll up while he falls down like a plank, a little dart stuck to his neck, what the heck —!

“—Killas’ sends its regards, Long Wang—!”

“—Dude, wrong person—!”

“—You don’t fool us, mister Dong—!”

“—Guys, if the trend is true, you’re about to be—”

—From the doorway, lots of sparkly bees come forward, slashing the ‘ninjas’ or whatever those things are, looks like IT, it’s just these guys are woozing some black... oil or something, must be an older model of Chromo’/Nomo, whatever, the cutting bees return to the door, luckily, they ain’t some mutant bees, jeez, the thought of... Wait, who’s that...? In walks, both arms cyber, and a bald head... It’s...

“—Jaque! NO FUCKING WAY—!”

“—Boy, am I glad to see you too, *HOH-OOOWH*aaaoh...—” No... No! ... NOOOOO—!!!

“—JAQQUES—!”

He falls to the ground as I rush him, but there's no one behind him... At least... I lift him, roll him, call to him... He's in pain... He points to his heart... Oh no... I can't...

What can I do "HELP, HELP!" Who can hear us? I barely hear...

"Dem... My son..."

"... .."

"Be... careful..." He says as he succumbs to... the next level...

... I cry, the pain is dragging me away from his body and towards the warning, there's something going on here, it's almost comical but super tragical! OH, MY LORD! I hide my eyes behind the altar, then quickly sneak in some kind of room for getting ready for the liturgy. Looks abandoned... Some crates are stacked around: I hide behind them. I hear some... running... Shooting... PCBs dropping to the floor... An endless wave of S.I.N.s, what the... How many turds can a block-headed-chain-smokin-dope-fiend crap my way?! AND THEY'RE MESSING UP THIS BEAUTIFUL CHURCH WITH THEIR STINKING, PUTRID, VILE ELECTRONIC M—!

—Calm... calm... I need to wait... I'm very sad for Jaques, I can't even... So many things I wanted to say to him, and now's all lost... Not all, my love will always go on...

... As the cacophony outside, this room, inside the church—outside my room—keeps squealing, I kneel and close my eyes and pray for at least two miracles. I know it's greedy, but I hope the chaos subsides... and AMA... besides...

The spilling 'guts' of the 'bots' starts to soften, only a dozen or so I hear... And one that's slashing left and right, that sound, that voice, that anger... She must be, yes, she is! I coyly watch the battle from the side of the front-view. AMA's kicking up and down, machines are getting tired... Their numbers I mean.. Two. One and she grunts and she's done. With 'its'.

No more... I see no more its... horrible what they've done to the place. They should be ashamed... if they're capable of such a thing. I move slowly but firmly out of the in and into the in of the—sorry—and AMA turns to me with eyes and ears, tears and fears, smiles and shakes, we're both going at the same time through all these, in time, space and emotions... I hug her strongly, she clutches me firmly, a waterfall of love and sadness through us, over us...

"AMA! I missed you... so... so much."

"..."

I look in her eyes, I see genuine sadness but smell no... My nose must be broke—"Are you... ok?"

"... Just hold me..."

.....

"Ama... Jaques..." I look towards Jaques, but I see no... Must be under those stinkin' piles of PCbits — "...Jaques is dead..."

"... How do you know?"

"... I saw it... I held him, his heart... right there..."

I move towards the pile and start digging in deep but no matter how low I go there's none traces of Jaques...

“... I can't find... He was here, I swear it! By the One True—”

“—Dem, we need to move! There could be more on the way!”

“... From where in the seventh Hadesvilles do they keep coming—?!”

“—I don't know! But we need to move, NOW—!” she's pissed but she turns to fear, for me I think, because for her it's obvious she needs no more... “—...”

“... Come, my lady! Lead the way...” You're my sugar-butterfly...

And she grabs me with force but no noise, she shushes me, no voice, no choice, only to follow her and her signals from hands and feet, well, that's neat but I'm a little stooooopid! Almost tripped, let's get back, Ama ducks, I sneak-attack—! Just kiddin', I lay low behind her. In the distance, I see them, splonky noodle-doods, patrolin' through the woods, well, whatever those branches are, AMA grabs me by the shoulder, drags me like a rolling boulder, up a hill, I almost fall and roll back like a rock going down like a stone in a river, pulls me and I redress my direction, I almost hit a tree branch with my bunch of teeth.... But I do the Limbo, shoves me in a hollow tree stump, we're like a bunch of black mushrooms in a cave turned inside out, the sky is ringing, can't answer, too many calls ATM, doing sneaking while scouting for survival of the most fitting concealing objects of décor, provided by our dear 'Maman Nature'...

...We wait... She watches the 'watches'.

...I watch her... No doubt it's HER.

“... When I give the signal...” She whispers...

“...”

“... you take the one on the right and me the one on the—”

“—No, I will not do it...”

“Dem—” clenched teeth “—we need to pass this point...”

“... Ama... they could lead us—!”

“—SHHhhh, you silly—!”

“—Sorry, sorry! Look...” I look out from the cover, first of all because I have no idea who tf she talkin' bout and then... “... Wait and... see...”

I can barely see splonk but I—...—and I can't see SHhh... —...—take 'em off and see much better. The orange, clockwork splonkers are scanning the surroundings, moving their heads slowly in motions of one hundred and 80 degrees, covering the entire perimeter for at least 200 average-adult feet. The one on the left is a mascara mess, pony-tail hanging loosely on the right of its scalp, while the left part looks shaved. Or burnt. The one on the right looks like a nightmare! At least my theory is that it wasn't designed by the One... but by the dark one... At the end of the 200 scanned feet on our left is the side of the mountain, steep enough to help us get above the scanned ground, but... I don't doubt AMA's capability to climb it silently, it's me with the deficit in such skills... On the other side there is a building, maybe we could... but no. I want to see what THEY do... I have the patience... Trained my skill a Lot'Oh, a long time ago... And we wait... AMA pouts... I smile... She doubts... I re-assure... She's not quite sure... I look again... The heads have stopped... Random positions... no movement. The one on the left is about 20, 20, no... 20? Yeah, 20 degrees position. The other one is... just unholy looking... Totally stunned and silent we all are. Me and AMA, what's going on? Those 'its' look... de-activated. I stand up and AMA drags me down with force, unopposed. Thunders in her eyes, I say:

“Look, if anything happens... If any of these splonkers move, you know what to do.”

“...” After a short thought munching, AMA agrees with a nod.

I approach them... slowly... slowly... still no movements. I move closer, they're no different. I am near them; they don't care much. I mean not at all, they're just like... a doll. Totally lifeless, just a casing... Something's happened to them, maybe their batteries are gone! Got no juice, get no slice of life, fool! Heh... So, I wave to AMA to join me too, AMA, come here! But she's like wtf, you mad, dog?! Come here, don't be shy! With reluctance, she agrees... I take her hand and lead her away, probably for the first time, away from the S.I.N.s.

While we're departing, far from the splonkers, AMA stops and looks at me and says... "We just gonna leave them alive?"

"Well, yes."

"... Why?"

"Look..." And I point at the metal thingies we just passed, unopposed. "... They're not the problem... We just gotta find the source..."

"What... source?"

I smile, cheekily! I squint... devilishly..."...The source of all evil, my love..."

AMA's confused, a bit amused, then totally flabbergasting—"BWUAHIIHIIHIIHI—!"

"—SSHHH! Ama, we don't know who else is—"

"—HEE-HEeee-hihihihhi—" lovely as I remember her...

"—I guess, what are they gonna do, kill us? BUWAHAHAHA—!"

"—Hoh, ho,hee... Let's not... joke about that..." AMA gets sadder.

I get closer, hug her, kiss her on the forehead... "Don't worry... We got each other's back..."

AMA concurs... And smiles with sad eyes...

We go, none leading. Just walkin', walking and talkin', breathin' and watchin' and touchin' and not there, hey, we're still in public places, eh... Well, I guess... Some savages don't care...

Spires rise above us, spires of buildings and mountains... Cables of humans and rocks surrounding us... She takes me through the streets to a lower plane of existence... The empty atmosphere gives chills to my bollocks, like we're in some kind of post-apocalyptic-last-people-alive-scenario, me and AMA the last people left alive, but that's probably because I'm kinda horny right now, let's move on. We come across some village, looks haunted, maybe just abandoned, or at least it's kind of 'looking that way', eh? Yeah, heh... Hmm... AMA seems a bit 'horny' too... But not here, no... Still too many eyes, here and Above... Speaking of, I do have to...

"Ama, I need to ask you something."

"Not here, too many ears."

"Oh..."

And she pulls me with force, crouching near a fence, crawling under it, like a bunch of dogs in heat, looking for ITs, none of 'its' around, that's good... And she uncovers an entrance, a trap-door, a sewer person-hole, come on! I should've expected this after all, it's AMA's way, not mine, but eh... Inside looks better than expected, much better than that eco-potty, pfeww, *much* better! And we enter in some spacious hub of sewer tunnels, hmm, the place looks quite familiar... but none of it is identical... No doors, only spaces. Holes of noncertainty, nonprotected ports for our safety... She turns to me; I look at her. And she says:

"Here, we can do anything we want..." And approaches me... with lust.

"Heh, well maybe not anything, it's kinda dirty."

"I love it dirty..." As she brushes her hand on my... hand.

"Uhm, look, first I need to ask you a question."

"Ask... and you shall receive." While she hmm... hey, not that hard!

"Ama..." I say as I gently grab her arms "... Did you find the bug-eyed freak?"

"I did..." Her eyes hide something...

"Was that you in the alley earlier in the day? I mean, night?"

"Could've been..." She continues to work her hands, hey man, I want it too but—

"—Ama, this is serious! Did you actually kiss him—?"

"—Oh, how much did you see?" The look on her face says excitement more than anything else...

"Well, I only saw you kiss him."

"Oh... you missed a lot then." Oh no...

"Please... don't tell me..."

"I had to do it, Dem... It was the only way to stop him."

"Him? HIM?!?"

"Yes, but don't worry! He's gone... And now I'm here... To do even better things to you..."

Her eyes spew fire like none seen before, her lips she licks much wetter than I've seen her ever, my beats of heart jump higher now, because I'm both TOTALLY PISSED and HOT at once, what a curse, this beast inside, to keep me prisoner in my own mind, between INJUSTICE and GREAT PLEASURE... AH! And as she approaches my lips with hers, my head stays still but still throbbing, closer and closer, eyes closing, aaaaaaaaaahhhhhhhHH—

—I get shoved and fall on my backside while AMA is pushed to the left with a punch by some other AMA WTF—!

"—FUCKING BITCH—!" 1st AMA, the one I was about to kiss, screams while slashing at 2nd AMA, the one who, wait, which of them is it? They're pulling hairs and having a wrestle, I have no idea wtf is happening, who the fuck is AMA?! And then... *sniff*... *sniff*... I can feel HER! But which one is her? Her sense has spread over the other one in all that scuffle, I can't tell the difference between one another. The fighting is fast, to the beat, frozen tears on each of their ears, rouge lines electrically dancing on their bodies, I slow-DMT and see that, each punch they throw is perfectly blocked, by the other, each kick, each spank, each pull, each crank, always equal, always anticipated. They both have the same, absolutely the same set of skills, perfectly identical, perfectly balanced... Like all things should be. But not in this configuration, how the fud am I supposed to figure out which one is MY AMA!?

I notice some AMA has dropped a pistol, looks like... my pistol? Hmm, maybe it's just the same model or friends with Dude, our AMA sure is friends with the Dude. I slowly move in slow-DMT, a shadow lurking in the sea of raining debris flying from those walls and pillars the two AMAs are punching, I hope they don't bring this whole place down, at least I have to stop them, I'm close, I grab and I scream:

"STOP OR I'LL SHOOT BOTH OF YOU!"

... ..

...

AMA, AMA and I. Facing each other. I'm aiming at... the space between them. Not very smart, but given the situation, whoever moves towards me is equally in danger this way. If it's stupid and it works... well, let's see, I don't want to shoot anyone here. We have no idea which one is...

"..."

"..."

"..."

"... Which one of you is Ama?"

"I'm—"

"—Ama!"

Perfectly synched. Fud... "Which one of you is the liar?"

"—is!"

"She—"

Instantly blamed. Shud... "What's my secret?"

"Fah—"

"—ther!"

No pause between them. Splonkin' dang trucker-muck— "What is the vertical velocity of the common swallow—?"

"—We—"

"—don't—"

"—have—"

"—time—"

"—for—"

"—jokes!"

What the freak am I supposed to make of that?! Even a random question was answered the same. Same words, same intonation, same face expressions. But then I see... the one on the right... Tears in her eyes, her arms go down... Near her belly... She... Her hands... They... held together... she squeezes hard... She starts to bleed! ... AMA... AMA! She is... my chosen one.

My hands point like a needle towards the one on the left. The NONama. Its face confused. Alerted. Looks to its left, sees the gesture, turns back to me, starts to squeeze its hands, identical to my AMA, but no tears in its eyes, of course, they're not capable of that, these cybernetic abominations spawned from some abysmal pit of nonsense driven machinations. Or maybe they can but their way of interpreting things is totally wacked! Anyway, I smile and say:

"You don't fool me, Lomoc plus fools!"

"Father sent me, to find you! I am the real AMA!" NONama says.

"She's Anna, my twin." AMA says and I believe, wait, what?

"You never told me you had a twin."

"I am NOT her TWIN, look at her! She's fug—"

"—lies coming out of your mouth and I'll rip it." AMA's sharp as steel.

"So, you've met before?"

"This is the first time." AMA says while approaching me. "I only found out recently." Grabs my hips in a hug. "That's how I was able to track you down."

“Me’lady, you’ve done well.”

“SHE is not AMA! I AM!” And the tears start running now, hmmm... Interesting, but they’re not very good tears... Like those coming out of a reptile. I mean even a reptile’s tears are more real than this.

“Apparently, she and the bug-eyed are a thing...” AMA’s eyes are amused.

“Is that so? Well, you tell Lomoc he can shove you up his ass!”

“Who the fuck is Lomoc?” NONama seems genuinely ignorant.

“Lomoc is just one of the shards in the chain. They usually don’t know each other.”

“Interesting...” I look at NONama. “What shard are you from?”

“Shard? Come on! I am AMA!”

“If you say ‘I am Ama’ one more time, I’m gonna shove this pistol up your nostrils! I double dare you TRUCKER-FUCK—!”

“—It’s okay, Dem, she’s not worth the trouble.” AMA’s eyes tell me she’s gained some confidence. Maybe a... level up?

“True... So, Anna or whatever’s your name. You run back to your little master and tell him his days are numbered. You tell him to prepare himself, because I *‘enjoy’* a good challenge!”

“...” NONama is splonked. A bit... ashamed? Hmmm... Are there... penalties involved?

“...” AMA is satisfied. Her smell is sweeter than honey! And other flavours...

“... Go on... before I change my mind.”

NONama gathers itself and walks away in a darken way on its face, towards a mouth of this ‘cave’ and leaves us alone, me and AMA and my... bones. I still won’t do it here, but I swear when we get some place oh my I’m gonna rip these clothes OFF—! Breathe, breathe... AMA kisses me, tastier than any exotic fruits you can imagine, she hugs me deeply, sounds so weepily, of course my dear young... She looks at me, tears in her eyes. Presses my hand on her belly. With tremble in her voice, she says:

“You’re gonna be a daddy!” She smiles with joy!

I grin, mind-blown, heart stopped, it’s back, we’re ok, but WOW! I take her up in the air and wave her around, I’m happier than OMG—! What are we going to do, where... Oh my...

“Ama... we can’t we... Oh my, no, I can’t...”

AMA saddens deeply “What?”

“No, no-no-no, don’t get me wrong, I love the baby! That’s why... That’s exactly why I can’t take you with me.”

“What do you mean? I can take care of myself, thank you very much!” She does this faux-but-maybe-nonfaux offended pose. “And of him...” touches her belly “too”.

“But, Ama, I have to go back...”

“I’m never leaving you again, Dem.” Her eyes scan deeply inside my heart. Her eyes that never lie...

“Me neither... I swear it!” And I try to crush her with my bones. My bony, hairy hands.

We leave before some other... creatures appear. I don’t fear, just... pity them fools.

We exit through a shaft that’s running neatly straight above the tunnel. We walk in stealth-mode on its floors, bars like windows litter the ground, I mean the floor has these window-like barred portions, we can see the lower floor. Some more ITs are scouting, unaware of our existence. Others look above, but only for some critters, not for us, we’re shadows, lurking round the lights, fire in our minds, stillness in our hearts. A barrage of inglorious splonkers doing the bidding of the master. AMA points to a glorious exit. Out of this insidious

sewer, like they always gotta put in those damn vidyas, why you always gotta have a sewer level? It's so bland and predictable, eeesh! Anyway, we exit and we're... oh crap.

Me and AMA.

Hole.

IT. IT and its... minions.

It's IT alright. The bug-eyed freak. Surrounded and surrounding us with a couple of 'ITs boys'. Or whatever they are. Right now, all I care is that they're pointing all those fucking guns at AMA. And... Gary... You damn TRUCKER-FUCKING ASSHOLE, YOU, STUPID PIECE OF... Eh... Ah... Oh man, this stings me a lot right now... IT has Gary grabbed by his collar, fear in her eyes and sorrow... The horror... IT is going to feel when I get my claws in IT! THIS stupid, fucking, idiot, piece of rotting brain matter is going to GET so eviscerated IT's mother won't be able to tell the difference between IT and a pot of brown-stew. But FIRST! Let's see what IT has to say...

"Mister Demeter! Or rather, I should call you 'a pain in my ass.'" IT tries comedy. Bombs. I.M.H.O.

"You haven't tasted a drop of the pain you'll get, yet..." Strike one.

"I hope you do understand the precarious position in which you find yourself right now, don't you?"

"I understand there's going to be one less bug-eyed freak in this world if you don't stop pointing that gun at Gary."

"Mister B., you and Gary have more in common than you know."

"Oh, you have no idea..."

"I'm sure you do not, you see, we've been looking for all three of you."

"What?" I'm confused.

"..." Ama too.

"..." Gary three.

"You have a lot to answer for... Demmy boy."

Heh, splonker thinks I'll make a mistake, but no... I have better plans.

"You only want me, you know that. Let them go. And you can take me to your master."

IT processes. Compares. Discards. Presses his hand to his ear, probably got some worm stuck in his brain that's feedin' IT all this bullshit. Resumes. Looks at AMA, then at Gary, then says "I'll let Gary go, you and AMA come with me."

"Hmm... Interesting proposition. How about you also let AMA go, and I promise not to shove your eyeballs up your throat, eh?"

"..." IT is 'reconsidering', although I'm not sure IT has that in its vocabulary, only ones and zeroes.

"Come on. This all started with me, remember...? I shoved a jack in that prick's eye, remember?"

IT is quite angry. Hm... Friend of yours? Your buddy, eh? Your 'house-mate', eh??? "..."

"I bet you never tried that position with IT, eh—?!"

—Hey now, let's not forget about—

—Refining—

"—Forgive me for ass'uming, eh... what's your name, chum?"

"I'm your father, Dem."

"*Pffft* You pulled that out of your asshole right now? Try something better, come on!"

“Well, sort of. I was sent by your father to—”

“—No no-no, you tell me what’s your fucking ID on your stupid chain, you stupid, fucking, dog!”

“... Mister B., I see no relevance for it in all this.”

“... Fine! You’ll be ‘bug-eyed’ for now.”

“...”

“So, what’s it gonna be? You willing to go down Lomoc’s road and fall? Or do you take my offer and let go of Gary and AMA?”

“... Here’s how it will be. I will let go of Gary. He may walk away, non-harmed.” IT lets go of Gary’s collar.

Gary startled, pulls his sweater or whatever, shakes a little, walks away with nonchalance, like a cat that’s been held back by some crack-head. However, she is not quite sure of what happens next, me either...

Gary disappears in the distance, I’m quite glad she’s no longer with us, I hope for God’s sake she returns the he to she so she can have peace and leave me be, don’t come back please, don’t try to rescue us, oh my... I wish so many things I could’ve talked about to Gary, all I can do is pray for now. I know he’ll have to...

But now it’s up to you and me and AMA, and your ugly pals, you bug-eyed... geek...

“Okay, bug-eyed, you’re winning my trust now. Unless you decide to grab Gary later, which will not be forgotten. Never. So don’t do anything stupid. Understand, chummm?”

“Certainly.”

“So, how about the second part of the bargain. You let AMA go.”

“Mister B., we don’t do these things for love, *hate or glory*.” Gaze-baffle-stein attempts high rising poetry.

“No, bug-eyes? What for then? A scrub on your back-end?” Heh... heh...

“We do it for the cred.”

“The cred, eh? You have a ‘cred’?”

“It’s our... pleasure let’s say.”

“Interesting... You gettin’ paid right now, chum?”

“Oh... yes...” IT doesn’t show much in terms of emotions but... eh... to each its own.

“Well then, can you imagine the cred you’ll get when you bring me in front of your master?”

“I can only imagine the cred I get if I bring both of you to *‘Them’*.” ...

“For fucks sake, don’t tell me there’s more than one.”

“You noncan understand.”

“Okay pal, listen here. I said your life for AMA, so don’t make me choose between you two because I already made that choice! You have to understand why it’s no use in haggling this, because one of us leaves without a head if you take your chance with me. And I know ‘our’ heads...” I say while pointing at me and AMA
“...will stay where they belong...”

“...Mister B., I cannot let miss Ama go—”

“—It’s missus AMA, you fool—!”

“—After all, she is the one who brought you to us—”

“—Yeah, you try that stinkin’ fash-crapo-tactics on me, you think I’m a dumbass? You stupid, fucking, billiard-faced-toadie-schmuck—!”

“—Oh, do not blame her, mister B. She had no knowledge in this, of course. She is the ‘Antenna’ after all...”

“The fuck did you call her?”

“You are the ‘transmitter’... and she is the ‘receiver.’”

"You think you're smart, huh? You think you and 'your friends' are safe? I've seen how your master discards those who have no use to IT anymore. They just..." heh "...get deactivated."

"..." Horror in IT's eyes, never thought those pieces of tech had that capacity...

"... Yeah, you're just pawns in its schemes, canon-fodder for its armies..."

"... Mister B., I told you, we do it for the cr—"

"—Yeah, how you do that when there's no juice left in you, eh?!?"

"..." IT splonked its metal pants.

"Yeah, you stupid, piece of metal-head gear-brained stupid I.T."

"... No need for insults now, mister..."

"Let her go..." I look at AMA... she knows... 'tis for the best. For me and her and little one. Our plan is set, we know it's true, we'll have our cake and eat it too... Mmmmm... yummy... "... And we have a deal..."

"... Mister B... we have a deal..."

Tears in AMA's eyes, tears in mine, but just a bit, a smile and a nod and, off with you, don't let me spank you! Just kidding, I'd caress her so badly but there's no time for that, mate! AMA departs, but not far apart, watches us, I'm only down-slowng, tears dropping, beats stopping in my heart but I know what I must do. I must get as close as I can... to the source...

"We're cool now, buggy-man. You can take me to your master, unopposed."

"Oh, we prefer to do things our own way." IT says while IT's pals surround me close. One is holding a safe-net, one a hammer, one a belt. Now hold on there, chum!

"There's no need for restraints, I gave my word there'll be no harm. Coming from me." Heh... to you I mean.

"It is not for our safety, mister B. But yours."

"Don't you worry about my safety, buggy-bee. I'll be fine."

"There are other factions looking for you, mister B. We do have to take precautions."

"What other factions?"

"People you wouldn't want to be dealing with."

"Like whom? Give me an example."

"The Killaz' have taken an interest in you."

"Oh yeah, met them. Lovely fellows, their fuel runs out quickly though."

"Yes, well, they believe you're a threat to their... shall we say, biz."

"I'm glad I am. Any other fools?"

"The Res', Borh, well, pretty much every association around the world has taken an interest."

"..."

"... You are a wanted man, mister B. The people... are afraid of you."

"As they should be." Heh.

Heh.

Heh.

"... Mister B... Proceed."

"Any limb that touches me gets chopped off." I look at the three hee-hees.

"..." All three. They look at IT and IT processes a bit.

And says "Mister B., we're bringing you to your father. You do trust Father, don't you?"

"Why should I trust you?"

"We are your father."

“Disregarding the nonsense... If that were true, you wouldn’t... need the restraints?”

“It is just a precaution... You were right, it is for our own protection.”

“... Fine...” Let’s see what you got.

The safety-net comes first, I’m strongly hugged but they won’t guess what hit them! Once I undress... Then comes the belt, they flip it and hammer it and they put a hood in my eyes, ouch, then over my eyes and carry me. To the unknown...

I’m lifted in the air, then dropped like cargo, well, with a parachute feels like, but it’s a big cargo, lands on some ship, on water, well, maybe it’s water, could be splonk for all I care. The ship sails... west? Or east? Maybe it’s just down the road from that famous writer, eh... Georgie Oh? Nah, these guys ain’t gonna mess with me, they know I’m smarter than IT, so they’ll just run with it, well, they’re running with me in a box now, felt like we entered some building, up the stairs, down the ladder, forward, backward, hmm, what’s the matter? You guys got a chink in your chain, eh? Heh...

I’m dropped down a chute and my flute hits the *OUCH* and I land on some pile of... nothing, a mattress maybe. The box drops all its sides and before I know it, I’m in a cage, you fucking ass-wipes of course but—...—shit-a-bot-arm-jacked-me-FUCK—!

—.....
.....
.....
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Chapter XI:

!

I I wake up... But I where am I? Is it real or just... a dream? I am strapped, hands, feet, arms, legs, chest, other parts, head, whatever, all strapped, I'm trapped, a jack in my brain, but the rest is intact... Well, I say the rest, I have nothing else, all lost, all the mission parts and tools and oh shit... Looks real enough to me so I proceed to think: what am I going to do? What do I have left that's... beside me...

Nothing... A padded room, a chair in the middle, maybe if I, eh oh man, I quiver because I don't know what kind of jack is that, it tickles my brain, I don't like it.

Lights are bright, a horrible brightness that keeps me awake, but puts me asleep. A terrible sight to be seen. I really got myself in some dung right now. I can't bring myself to break the restraints, not only the muscle but the thought of the freaking jack in my head, packing who-knows-what ICE these freakin' dangbrained-munch-punching-assholes have geared it with.

So, I wait... No mistakes this time... We ain't affordin' none...

... I wait...

...and wait...

...and wait...

... And after a while... finally... The assholes arrive...

The looks on their faces, the glasses they wear and those—

—Noses and poses and... and...

And... hmmm... They look quite....

Familiar... But in a different fashion, those glasses must hide some high-tech hardware, eyeware, brain-ware, all just... software... Maybe, meh, who knows, all we know is that they approach and the one in the middle, the toupee-guy, sits on the chair. The others, side-by-side. Standing. And the middle one says...

“Demeter, you are a slippery one. But rest assured, we got you now.”

“Who's 'we'?”

“We are... under the supervision of Monostate authorities. We act on their...” toupee looks around, then continues “...behalf.”

“...So? What's your act?”

“... There is no need for drama, Demeter.”

“My name is ___!”

“... Your 'incident' at the corp has taken quite a toll on our budgets, mister B. The protocols we had to breach to get to you have forced us to... well... take into account yourrr... termination.”

“I'd like to see you try.” Forcing my luck here, but heh...

“... But... our supervisors believe that is non-necessary. I'll be honest with you Demeter. The truth is that... we need you.”

“...”

“You see, you are a valuable asset. Your... reputation... has put you into a very advantageous position for our needs.”

“ ... ”

“ ... ”

“... And why the fuck would I help you?”

“... Mister B.... Do you value your life so little?”

“Oh, it’s not my life you should worry about.”

“... Do you fail to understand the situation you are in right now?”

“Enlighten me, Baldy!”

“... The straps immobilizing you are reinforced carbonite nanotubes laced with titan-tungsten-radium-alloy strings, which are not only strong enough to keep you in place, but also... able to cut you to pieces if you actually manage to force yourself... out of it.”

“ ... ”

“... But that’s not the kicker! No... The straps are rigged to some fine Black’hole I.C.E. that’s eager to put some volts in your head as soon as you attempt such an escape...”

“ ... ” ‘As I expected!’ ...

“There is no ‘we’ when deciding how **we** do things, mister... heh... ____.”

“You sound like a damn retard.”

“... Yang tah boh are ha’ow.”

“Oh, hai Cheech-chong ping po-ARAAAAAAAA—!”

—PAIN, SUPER FUCK-PAIN WTF-AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAABBGNGFN—!

“—Zoo’goh dah—!”

“—SSH HH HHH III EEEEEETttthhhhh.... What the... ass... you done to me?”

“That is but a sample of what you may experience if you refuse to cooperate. You will never die, mister B., but I cannot guarantee that the time you spend alive will be... pleasant.”

“... Ok, you got me! Well, done! What can I say? *‘Brah-voh’*! What can I do? Nah... thing! Congrats! You’re the first to fool me! After all, you’re the one who made me. Right? Or your ‘supervisors’ or whoever, the ‘Mono-society’, I’m a product of your stinking, putrid, smelly, poopy society!”

“... I will ignore that for now, but let it be a warning... So, do you agree to help us?”

“Sure, fine, whatever. What the fuck do you want from me?”

“... Dwan eeh tzchee.”

“*BZZ* OUCH! What the fuck, man?!”

“*‘Jong tzee eeh!’*”

“*BZZ-BZZ* AAAH! STOP IT!”

“Will you behave, mister B.?”

“Tell me the fucking rules! How the FUCK am I supposed to —?”

“—No more FAH-KING!”

“ ... ”

“No more fah-king around. You shut up and listen. No questions. We will give you all you need to know and no mo’. No mo’, do you *‘lee-tzee-eh’*!?!”

“ ... ”

“... Good. Now, some ‘associates’ of ours have gathered that you were offered to join Borh. Is it true?”

“ ... ”

"Answer me, mister Demeter."

"I thought you said no questions."

"*'Ga'oh, eeh tzchee.'*"

"*BZZ-BZZ-BZZ* KRYST-ALL-MIGHTY! WHAT THE FUCK, MATE!"

"WILL YOU COO-OP-ERGH-ATE, MISTER B.?!"

"..."

"..."

"..."

"... Good... Is it true then?"

"...Yes..."

"... The mission... is simple. Accept their offer and gather as much info as you can. Any physical hardware will be finely rewarded. Any... extra persons of interest you manage to acquire may grant you a position in our ranks. Anything else... well... We leave it up to you. As long as you make it back alive, which... I was assured you are capable of... doing." His pauses make me wanna punch a lime in its orange pineapple cock-tail!

"... Heh... Simple as that, eh?"

"Indeed, ___."

"Well, that is a very good deal, I must admit."

"Mm, yes."

"But here's a better one. How about I give you the... uhm, you can't see it right now, but I'm giving you the finger..."

"..."

"... And you get me a legal representative, I know my rights!"

"..."

"BWAHEHEHEHEHEHEHEHEEEEE—!"

"—~...—"

"—HAAHAA-*cough*-HAAAH-*cooough*HAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA *cough-cough*-HAH-HEEEEEEEEE—!"

"—^...—*'JEW'JEEH GA'OH—!'"

"—BWAHEEE-*BZAAAAH-GRRRR*-AA—!"

—The pain is deep, but it's so deep I almost... float... I feel it but it's so overdriven it's almost... bliss... The problem is, it never stops and pain and pleasure are both lost, it's ripping me apart in ways I never thought were possible... Love, hate, love, hate, it's horrible, like a cake I ate but it was nothing, a cake of lies... Emptiness, it's loneliness on a cosmic scale, messiness of quantic...

... It stops... If it was for minutes or hours, I don't know... The fellows left... And left me to my own repression... Cold and wet I feel myself; I shiver from the sweats and whatever's in my... pants... I guess my nightmare scenario came true, I'm a prisoner of fools. How could I ever take their offer? To betray those that matter most to me, to others... It doesn't matter, betraying anyone is wrong, except these assholes, of course. I pray for my loved ones to stay away, for AMA... Well, AMA can take care of herself, but the rest of them... I hope none of them try to save me, well, except for Cool-Cat, I'm okay if he comes to rescue me, he'd be like, 'Wow, fool! How didja get yourself in so much shh—?!' or something cool like that, and he sockets his eyes in some hidden console over here, near my straps, and he *bing-bing* *woooing-woooing* *tap-tap-tap* *BOOM*! ... Eh...

...Could be! Could be possible...

Heh...

This waiting turns to white goopy poison in my veins, seeping in from this unholy place, this has to be one of the Hadesvilles, truly! I only thought these places were fairy tales made to scare little children, but... NOPE! They're freaking real. Hopefully, this one's Hadesville Seven. That way, it puts us closer to the... source...

...Waiting turns to... boredom...

Boring turns to...

...Dreaming...

...

...

... I wake up and the lights turn on immediately. Interesting... Eco-nsuming as always... Well, they don't turn off when I close my eyes, only when I fall asleep... No sense in wasting the 'torture budget', eh? Heh... Imagine how stupid they must be to think I would actually betray Borh. That once there I wouldn't simply go with: 'Hey guys, guess what? The Monos sent ME to spy on you, heh... Yeah, funny right? HAHAHAAH!' Hah... Well, I do have certain information, but I'm sure... Oh, no... Kaktoos... We need to get out of here but we also need our stuff! We can't even... The longer we wait gives them more time to find new ways to... coerce me into coop-ergh-ration. I can't give them that opportunity. How can I...? This could be a trap... For anyone coming for me. I need to leave as soon as poo... How? HOW? ... Hmmm...

... There is nothing worse than a prison. Not just a prison of the body, but of the mind. Totally unable to disable any means of non-enabling me to move. Titty-radum what did he say? Is that radioactive or what? If that thing snaps me, I doubt I'm growing any parts back. That is... if he was telling the truth, alright. But how would I take a chance with such a thing? If I had no value for my life, true. Rather than live a thousand deaths in this God-forsaken fortress of wailing, one good death seems like a pretty good deal.

... A sweet deal you mean...

...Meaning...?

That no matter the odds, any option we get right now becomes the best option. As horrid as that sounds...

...Now wait a sec'...

...Time is what we have right now...

...They're not killing us...

...Yet... So, we do have time. That is another option.

Balancing...

...Holding...

['Access denied!'] Can't even turn my HUD on...

...Minutes pass like hours, days pass by in seconds...

Weeks in decades...

Let's not overact.

... We have no idea how long, that's the prob'...

...We do tend to exaggerate sometimes.

Yeah, like time's dial-late-in'

And...

...Shhhi...et...cetera...

...Maybe...

Hibernating...

...is the best idea...

... I wake up and the lights are already on.

Toupee guy is...

Already sitting...

On the chair... Alone... He takes his...

Glasses off...

"...You've been very quiet, mister B."

"..."

"...I like that about you. I'll be honest with you..."

"..."

"... I hat—! I hah'hah—! I HATE this place!"

"...?"

"...They can't hear me right now, that's why I can assure you I'm telling the truth."

"...??"

"It's the stench! It's... seeping in me—!"

"—...—" I don't smell anything but... eh...

"—I need to get out of here!"

"..."

"And you are the key!"

"..."

"We can both rule this world. All I need you to do is this one thing. You do this, and you'll get anything you want."

"Anything?"

"Yes! Anything! You want the moon? You got it. You want Mars? It's yours."

"... What the fuck you talkin' 'bout, weirdo—?!"

"—'thing you ever fucking wanted can be yours—!"

"—...—"

"—..."

"... And how do you plan on doing that?"

"... Look, I don't play by their rules! I've seen what must be done! These idiots! They play by the... heh, you know who's rules..."

"... No, I don't..."

"... It doesn't matter! You do this for me, and I will offer you the globe on a plate! You and me, owners of the Wor'ah'led!"

"The what?"

"Zee Woar'ld."

"The war on what?"

"Do you take me for an idiot?!"

"No, I took you for a man of the Omniwatch."

"I'm not with them! Well... not anymore..."

"...?"

"... I got promoted."

"Wow, I see, you got yer tentacles in deep, eh? Capt'n?"

"... I have my trusted... 'associates', yes."

"... And how can you be sure those who aren't your trusted 'ass-oh-see-rats' aren't listening in right now?"

"...Oh, there is no lock without a weakness in this War'orl'd, mister B."

"Indeed... Any lock..."

"...I hope you're not thinking what I'm thinking, mister B."

"...Depends on what you're thinking..."

"...I'm thinking you're trying to escape."

"...Who wouldn't in my position?"

"...Good point."

"..."

"..."

"But why the whole world? Why not settle for less?"

"..."

"Like... I don't know... A group of friends... A house on the beach. A big mountain at your back! ..."

"..."

"What more do you need?"

"... I want EVERY'XI'NG!"

"..."

"..."

I whisper "...Make sure they don't hear ya. I think that's *way* above your max cred."

"~ ..."

"^ _ ^"

"* ... *"

"O_o"

"You're really begging me to take it to level eleven, ____."

"What's that?"

"It's really hot down there, I tell you."

"Why? Because I'm trying to talk some sense into you?"

"..."

"... Do you really expect me to betray those I love?"

"... It is non-avoidable."

"You think your torturing bothers me? I kinda like it actually!"

"..."

"A nice little break from all the shitbabble..."

"~ ... ~"

"..."

"... You have one more day to decide."

"... How many was that in total?"

"... Your entire life!"

"..."

"... Wan! DAY! ..."

"..."

Toupee-chumskookfruitbaked-banana-cake coo-coo ka-choo person leaves me be, dragging his nerves on the floor like a gorilla-desert-munching-worm... whatever. I'm back with myself, all I ever needed. All I'll ever need... Is her... AMA... I love her so much... And yet, my love not only forces me, but calls me to wish for her to

not attempt any rescues, please! AMA please DON'T RESCUE ME, oh ff... I don't wish this horror on anyone else... But especially on her...

...For her...

...To her...

...

... The trees... the non-protected... AMA... hold me... Let's go... No...? Ok... Bye...

...

....

.....

I've opened my eyes, but the lights are still off... Is this a dream, or am I? Hmm... You never know with these things... But since I was already dreaming... And now it stopped... Hmmm...

I listen in for any sounds, or any smells, my nose doesn't hear well but let's see... Hmmm...

Nothing... No movement, no sounds, no smells except for those in my, uhm, under... panels...

No one to see me, is the electricity out? I can't risk it though, what if 'the gruesome part' is all mechanical?

"..."

Maybe they didn't pay the bills. Torturing is expensive biz, I tell ya! Heh... Well, what can I say? I didn't see this one coming.

"..."

And then...

...Hearing...

...Thuds...

...In the...

...Ceiling...

...Maybe it's a cat...

...Pffffff—!

"—BWAHAHAHA-HEE-HEE-pffft...*ahem*..."

...Hmmm.... Maybe I should be quiet, though... We have no idea what's... up.

"*thud* ... *thud*..."

"..."

"*thud*... *THUD-THUD*... *SPANK—**—PANG-PONG-Pooong*-*ping...ping*..."

"..." I watch the darkness in the ceiling... And in comes out...

"^...^"

“Ama...? AMA—!”

“—SSSHHHH—!”

“—Sorry, sorry—!” I whisper “... sorry.”

“... ”

AMA jumps down as if gravity is nothing to her, just a fairy tale from some dusty old books. She levitates towards me, and my exaggerations cannot embody the feelings I feel seeing my loved one rescuing me, OMG!

AMA kisses me sweetly and I lick her completely clean and then I remember —!

“—*Mmm-mm*-Mm-Ama, Ama... Wait...—”

“_...”

“... This could be a trap...”

“Of course it’s a trap! You think I’m stupid?!”

“... ”

“Why do you think I deactivated all their systems?”

“...Wow... How didja do that?”

“... I just... blew up all their fuse-boxes.”

“... Heh, like... literally?”

“...Yep.”

“... As simple as that...?”

“...Oui.”

“...Spleen-deed...”

AMA grabs a cubical black thingy from her bag and inserts it in a, in a sock-et cetera, types a typical hacking sequence you see in all those commercials on... uhm... Hacking-central or whatever. And... Off the zips go.

“*pang**schpang**tang**dang**dang-dang-dang-dang—*!”

“_...”

AMA pulls out a *‘sick’* sickle and aims it to my head, now wait a minute, but she just beats the slashes on the sides, cool, I’m off the *‘path’* of the ‘slashed one’. She knows what she’s doing...

“*woosh*-*woosh*-*woosh-woosh-woosh*. *woooooosh*!”

“My hero!” And I go to hug her but AMA dodges me and...

“We don’t have time! Follow me!” But it’s all whispers...

“...Ok...”

I follow AMA to the door, where a key she inserts, the key sparked all electro-shocky, door is open, out we go and follow AMA, wait, which way? AMA is confused a little, never mind, she has the map, bing, dong, ok... We’re in some kind of... janitor’s closet or something... She pushes away some ‘trash’ and there we go, it’s a vent... AMA crawls in, I wiggle in too, AMA’s swifter, I have to p... ooh, ok, let’s move and left and right, and down and lower and much lower, low... I’m like a worm right now, this must be some kind of pipe, I hope we don’t get splonked! Eh... Further, faster, lower, higher, I see the... I see through the... grills... the people... The other prisoners of Hadesville... Oh my... Lord...!

Lines and lines and lines of the damned. Forever trapped in cages of the mind, forever... in pain...

"Ama... these people... we have to save them..."

"We don't have time for that..."

"But... the pain..."

"There's nothing we can do... Most of them... are already dead inside..."

"..." The horror... the horror..."

We finally exit the vents into some sort of storeroom, with several windows... on the ceiling. AMA hops on some crates and makes a sign to me to hop on her palms, as if to climb up in the... ceiling...

"...Ama... where are we going?"

"...Just follow me and stop asking questions, please?"

"Are you the real Ama?" I feel her smell but... you never know...

"... Dem... Are you a glutton for punishment?"

"... No, but—"

"—If you don't climb right now—!"

"—Ok, ok! Geesh."

"..."

... But as I clumsily try to climb, I remember that—

"—Wait! All my stuff, they took it—!"

"—I already got your damn stuff!"

"... You truly are a Queen of the—"

"—I swear if you don't climb in the next five seconds—"

"—SORRY, sorry—!"

—AMA is pissed and for good reasons, it's not just about me, or her, or us, it's about the little one of us, in her, anyway, I climb and *hoof* and *hoh* and ok, she leads me to a... hovershuttle... AMA... no...

"... AMA... we can't fly this..."

"... I can..."

"... Woah, really??? Look, I don't doubt you but every time I've been in one of these it's been nothing but..."

"... You don't get it..."

"..."

"... I was THE pilot for one-three-three-seven."

"No way!"

"Yes way!"

"Have you... heard anything from them?"

"..."

"... I only hope they're ok..."

"... Me too..."

...

But my reverie is cut short by a disgusting sight coming from behind the craft, the crappiest couple of the century. For fuds splonkers...

"Mister B., I see you were reunited with your lover. How... fitting." I forgive bug-eyed, it's the best it can do.

"Mmm, yes, as you have. You look hideously cute together."

AMA looks at me... and then at them. As if 'I didn't plan for this'. I look as if 'no worries'!

NONama looks pretty-ugly-pissed, but non-responds.

"This ends tonight, mister B. You and me. One man standing. In the Lighting Dome."

"The what now?"

"Non-mind that, just you and me, duel to the termination."

"You mean death."

"DO NOT CORRECT ME MISTER B.!"

"Why just you and me? Why not two versus two?"

AMA looks at me, I look at her... I'm bluffing but she, yeah maybe this was stupid —

"Because Anna and Antenna are equally—"

"—Say her real name or don't say it at all!"

"Anna is her real name."

"..." I'm boiling..

"Didn't she tell you?"

"..." Boiling point...

"Or should I say... didn't he tell you?"

"What the shit are you eating there?" I look at AMA, mostly amused because... Heh, I've been there... I know what AMA is. AMA looks at me, more confused than amused, but still...

"You see, Antenna—"

"—Say that one more time, truckerfucker, I double-fucking-dare—!"

"—Ann... Tenna."

"THAT'S IT! I'M COMING OVER THERE—!"

—I start stomping towards meatheadspace-bug-eye-neme-sees-nothing-but-stupid-fucking-idiot and I start marching and—I think—I see a bit of horror in its **cables** and as I slo-mo DMT my only thought *spire* is 'What's the plan here'? Do I go for it or do I go for intimidation, there's no persuasion with these guys but nevermind cause NONama jumps in a 90-degree arc over Buggy what the fuggy AMA jumps in from behind me, DUDE I'm seeing this in slo-mo what the fud-OH-SH—!

—AMA slashes NONama right in the bollocks what the fud, LOLZ! HOLY horrendous SIGHT as AMA drops on Bug-eyed with a slash on the ears, smears of some jelly splutter all over, doesn't look bio-human—

—AMA drops, back-flips twice and then lands in a perfect half-split with half-lowered eyes as the deactivated carcasses of the two splonk-heads land in comical effect on the pavement of the roof-top.

I am amazed, amused, a-mused, amuzed, confused, alarmed, I'm back, AMA, what have you done...?

"AMA... what... Are you alright?"

"Yeah, I'm fine..." She does a neat jump and now both her legs are perpendicular to the floor.

"I was really hoping to try diplomacy but... He kept calling you wrong names and I... I don't know, his face just kept asking for a kick!"

AMA smiles but she seems a bit... sad or embarrassed.

“Heh. Heheheh, yeah, what was that all about? Antenna? Anna? What a weirdo.”

“I don’t know... I just wanted this to be over quickly.” She approaches me but then she... freezes. When she notices from the side some... shape running—

“—I’VE GOT YOU NOW, YOU COCK-ROACH MERDE-MUNCHING—” NO... FUCKING... WAY—!

“—Jaques! You bastard, YOU’RE ALIVE!”

Jaques stops running a couple of his feet away from us and fixes his eyes on AMA and me as his raging war-face turns in an instant to loving-face and I run and hug him, I cry all over his cyber-arms and they do a cute little electric spark-effect, oh MY—!

“—Jaques! Your arms—!”

“—Nah, I’m fine, don’t worry! Where were you, I looked all over—?!”

“—I was... a prisoner...”

“...”

“But where were you?!? I looked all over after... I thought you were dead!”

“Oh, mon cher, I faked my death. I knew more were coming and that’s how I was going to surprise them!”

“You truly are an Eleven D Chess Grandmaster.”

“Yeah, well I did not account for some schmuck dropping a load of crap on my spot, took me hours to dig my way out of there! Mon Dieu...”

Ooopsie... I look embarrassed at AMA and she starts to smile and laugh looking at both of us and Jaques is confused, I am totally coy, Jaques laughs from impulse ‘What? What?’ He looks at AMA then he looks down and sees... NONama... His face changes to something petrified. AMA... NONama... What the fud am I? Or them... In his mind, probably, a ‘Schrodingerian’ paradox unravels the fabric of neurons, what am I seeing? The cat is both dead and alive at the same time. His eyes spin right round, like a record baby! Between AMA and NONama... I back away a few feet and I try to from and to what: —?

“Jaques, don’t panic! Listen to me, we are now in a novel by Douglas A—” Jaques starts laughing “—Yes, now, the reason I told you that is to make what I’m about to say next less ridiculous—” Jaques is laughing hard, this is good! AMA is totally hitched now, well, I didn’t expect her to have hiked in such galactic places. At least, not unguided! Heh... “Ama actually has... I mean had... a twin sister!” But Jaques is not ok, the laughing doesn’t stop and that bit of info didn’t help, because he’s collapsing “AMA, HELP!” I run towards Jaques and AMA barely catches him, she was behind me for about five feet before we started running for —eh, whateva—

“—AMA, can you help him?!?”

“He’s going into shock!”

“I don’t even know what that means!!!”

“...Dem...aaah....My boy...”

“I’m sorry for blowing your funny fuse!” I say through tears and smiles but...

“Dem... You need to...aaohh...” Jaques is sweating profusely.

“Aaohh??” I touch his forehead to clear some of the sweat, it’s freezing cold sweats!

“Aah... aven... aaah.....”

“Now he’s really into shock!” Turning pale. “We need to warm him up!”

“I take off my coat and cover Jaques as gently as I can—”

“—Dem! You’re not doing it, you’re narrating!”

“OH, sorry!”

I take off my coat and cover Jaques as swiftly as I can to make up for the lost time. Guess I got lost in that novel...

"Help me lift his legs." AMA grabs both legs and I... heh.

"You really need help with that?"

"Yes, I need you HERE so I can deal with—!"

"—SORRY! I'm dumb, I never had to—"

"—Didn't you used to be a nurse?"

"What's that?"

"You worked in a hospital, didn't you?"

"My dear Ama," I say as I keep Jaques legs lifted as best as I *woof* he's heavy "I volunteered as a medical assistant! And volunteeered is a stretched definition of the word, heh."

"..."

"^...^"

"Aaah..." Poor Jaques, but AMA seems to be in control of the situation.

AMA's eyes are in disbelief and a smug-smirk appears on her lips. "And you never had someone go into shock, ever?"

"Small chances, I only did one-hour tops per day at the elder-pens."

"..."

"..."

"You really cruised your way through life, haven't you?" But her tone of voice is nothing like I imagined. Like some doll in love with a troll.

"Yes, I have. I'm a slacker supreme!"

AMA does a three-quarter smirk and resumes "... He's stabilizing... Help me carry Jaques to the shuttle."

We pick up Jaques and hop in the flying-machine and AMA takes the pilot seat while I take the... automatic seat, ooh yeah... AMA presses some "*beeps*" and sputters some *beeps* while, putting on the seat belt, good idea, yeah... Then she steps on a pedal, pulls on a piece of metal, pumps it, pumps it real good, oooooooh, yeah... I'm going to *oooooooooooh—*!

"—... Strap yourself in, boy!"

"O_O!"

"You're going for the ride of your lifetime."

She switches a key and knobbls a nubble and—

"*SHWEEEEWOOOO—* ... *Magnets—*!"

—I'm sent into space at the speed of sight, I'm all-right but when AMA steers, I get shivers, up and down and left and right and left and right and left and right I think I'm gonna "—Wow, lady—!" knows how to drive, I'll give her that, she's got me spanked to the brim, holy smolderin' ponderin' launderin' is this, we're breaking the speed of sound, it's the speed of the unheard-of, what the Mollies? Never knew how cool our cat is, fool! Low and lower, under the radars, just a shadow under towers, over the wall, under the bridge, over the

cascade, between the... wait, wasn't water there? Now it's just a canyon, where the fridge are we in right now?...

... ..

... ..

... ..

.... ..

... ..

.... ..—

—We enter a waterfall, thankfully it's not rock on the other side, it's a neat ole tunnel, holy funnel!

We go through it and at the end there is a neat ole platform to land on, cool now, steady as she goes...

And off the edge of the hangar come... Cool-Cat and GG to welcome us, well their faces don't say 'welcome' but their arms don't do either... eh... heh...

"Hey boys, how's it hangin'?"

"I'm gonna hang you! You, miserable piece of sh—!"

"—Wow, Cool-it oh, Cat—!"

"—Stupid, focking, IDIOT to get yourself caught like—"

"—Look, fool! I made a gamble and lost, what of it—?"

"—Gamble with my focking money, you green-monkey-fockin'—!"

"—No need to involve other species there, mate—"

AMA pulls out a couple of claws and points them at Not-so-cool Cat. "—..."

"..." Cat cools down... Pulls out a baguette...

... More like a magician's 'sausage'...

If you know my meaning...

... Lights it up and his eyes begin to glow, in some kind of psychedelic lights, I think he must be out of his mind right now, how many substances can a living being endure before it explodes in some kind of laser-light-show diffusing into space, to travel forever there... with the stars... Black and white stars... And other colours too...

"..."

"Are we cool now? Eh... I don't think you told me your name..."

"I'm... just some dude, man! Who cares?"

"Well, I care... You've helped me so much... You and..." I look at GG.

"... Look, if it suits you, just call me..."

"...? Yes? Call you what?"

"... That's it."

"..."

"You understand, you're not that big of a douche-head."

"... No, I don't."

"If you had, then you wouldn't."

"... Heh... heheheheh."

"*^*"

"... Well, okay, anyway... I still need to..." Then I look at AMA... "... We still need to... get to the source..."

“ ... ”

“ ... Can you help us?”

“Of course I can help you, fool! Why d’ya think I’m here? Activating a damn level six hide-base for your stinking asshole, dumb fockin’ —!”

“—I get it, thank you! Sorry, I messed it up, look, all the dough we get from this is yours, I don’t give a splonk’s ass about—!”

“—You fockin’ mean that?! You poor-focken-retard, how can you wave away all that? Shieet...”

“There’s plenty of bread around to go for all of us, foolee-oh!”

“ ... ”

“ ... And besides...”

“ ... What?”

“ ... Eh, you know what I mean.”

“ ... No...”

“ ...Then we’re even...”

“ ... ”

He takes us off and shows us the warez, all kinds of wares, dude, nah, I ain’t wearin’ dat! Ain’t nobody got time for foolin’ around. And he explains to us, explains again “Wait.” Pause “What?”

“Yes, I can’t get you the ‘sauce’, but I can get you to the one who ‘made’ the sausage, get it?”

“Aye, chum!”

“ ...Call yo momma a chum, you chummy tubby-green-piece-of—!”

“—...” AMA.

“ ... ” Cools’Cat...

“ ... Look, man! I don’ need all this bull-crap, just tell me where to find IT and I’ll make it talk.”

“Oh, you’ll get it to talk, eh?”

“I’ll get IT to DANCE!”

“ ... ”

So, C. Cat spills me his spiel, all the shizzle and dazzle, and what he ate for breakfast, what he snorted after, whatever, then he hands me a key, two keys, one white, one black, one mechanical, one... some other thing. Then he hands us two guns, well I already got one, but Cat tells me to get rid of that, it’s trackable — “The fock you doing with that thing in my cave—?!”

“—Sorry, here, take it—!”

“—‘nt need your trash, chum—!”

“—Whatever, melt it, smoke it, I don’t care.”

“ ... Heh... heheheheheh—!”

“—Yeah, see??! You’re too freakin’ paranoid, bitch!”

“ ... Just take these and—”

“—they look like mandarins—”

“—You press here—!” And the mandarin turns into a fully stocked, kind of ‘P.V.C.’ looking pistol, what the freak is this toy—?! “Aim, fire, carefully, you’ll need it, from a distance, it shoots fusi-plas-nuk-charges I swear if you get out of this alive, I’m gonna carve you a focking—”

“—No need to, Cat, I’m fine with just a poem.”

“Heh... Yeah, ‘The Dumbass of the Century’.”

“We’ll see about that... dumbass...”

“Heh...”

See-Cat tells us there's a way to disable B.O.W., but we'll need to get inside the mainframe through a node-gate of some sewer-far-away from our objective, well, if that's how it goes, the challenge is accepted, whatever. And he brings us a map to scale, then he jumps inside and brings us up to human scale and then over-scale, miniscales and I think he's just having a trip because I can't see... but ships... And sentinels, and other... th'ngs. "They've upped up the sec'."

"And that's where we have to get in?"

"Pretty much, yeah."

"You've gotta be kiddin' me. It's like a whole hive in there!"

"Well, you're the one holding the saddle on this one, fool! I'm just here to show you the horse..."

"There's plenty of doors on that thing, all right. Just none of them unguarded."

"There's plenty of doors no one knows about, chum... And the bot-heads get distracted sooo easily..."

"Ain't that the truth? Heh... So that's what the EMPs are for."

"Yes, but only use them as a last resort! You don't wanna leave a trail of junk on your way there..."

"Right... And you're sure the 'mother of the sauce' is in there. Those sure look like army-grade bots..."

"I don't know what you'll find in there... But I'm positive it'll be an answer to your miserable affairs."

"... I hope so..." as I look at AMA...

She smiles... "..."

Cool-Cat showed us the doors, now he's showing us 'the door', he wants to be left alone, he seems to prefer it actually! GG is annoyed but hasn't said a word, I guess the rule of 'not getting involved' still applies. We say our good-byes, Cool-Cat slams 'the door' hard, GG leaves with nonspoken shameless ignorance of my existence, well, it's fine... It's just AMA and me now... Like two magnets we snap in one: lips and tongues and arms and legs and fingers. We shiver, we vibrate as we attract and contract and, hey... We'll find a place, don't worry...

["Yo, smooch-heads!"] A telly lights up in the corner with Cool-Cat's visage shooting at us and he—
["Jaqqes wants to see you two."]

"Where can we find him?"

["Down the corridor, right at the last junction, second door on the left, it's a lift, once inside press six, then wait, when you reach six, you press one, then wait, six again, then..."] He seems to be lost in some thoughts on another screen while continuing to babble a string of complete verbal nonsense.

"Do we really have to go through another dumb sequence?"

["What? Yes, fool! It's a fucking secret level you domb ass—"]

"—Fine! Thank you!" And my tone, yes, it's exactly like that.

["With pleasure, foo'!"] The screen lights off exactly on that missing letter.

I look at AMA with smiling eyes and smirks, no lies, she shakes her head in childish patronization, heh. We decide to follow the instructions that I've already forgotten. But as luck would have it, AMA doesn't. Ever.

The lift moves swiftly but so neatly, if there were no beeps when stopping I wouldn't even feel it. And we do the sequence and change the radio frequency to... AMA jimmies the knob and presses her thumb on a thumb scanner, opens a cabinet and pulls out a tool-box, opens the tool-box and pulls out a spanner. Then says "I need to sit on your shoulders."

"What? Why?"

“To reach the ceiling.”

“...?”

“To remove a tile and climb up—have you been paying any attention—?!”

“—No, that guy makes no freaking sense!”

“... The entrance is between floors, opposite to the elevator’s door.”

“OOoooh, why??!?!?”

“Don’t ask me! I guess... I never would’ve thought of this...”

“Yeah, me neither Ama. But don’t worry, it’s because we’re not insane!”

“Heh...” AMA smiles and hugs me and then I...

“I’m sorry I yelled at you... It’s not your fault we’re in this sponk.”

“It’s ok...” AMA giggles her eyes at me “I like it when you get feisty!” And she spans my little ass you cheeky—

“—Mmm, don’t get cocky, kid!”

I lift my beau in the air, well, more like she climbs the wall then drops on my shoulders, woof, ok, we can do this, *spring* *spring* *clang* *bang*, with the tile removed, AMA climbs in the ceiling and I have a feeling I’ll have to climb to. AMA hands me a palm dropped from above, her palm, still attached fortunately, to her arm, and encourages me to grab and ascend, so I grab while I jump during being pulled.

The door, as expected, is opposite to the normal row of doors, in between building floors, of course, if I had a horse every time I overexplained a thing or five, my name would be Gherkins Khan and I would be extra-pickle-globally wanted for a couple of equine massacres of zucchinis. Where was I...? We’ve been out of the elevator shaft for some time, down another hall, another row of doors or shafts, who cares? I’m here, AMA’s there but here also, let’s see...

An unmarked door with an unfamiliar texture in an unfamiliar colour, probably some cucumber I can’t digest... We enter and inside I find Jaqqes laying on a bunch of pillows, I mean the bed is just a pillow, not what I expected for someone in need of medical attention. He looks like a cyber-sultan from... heh...

“Dem, mon cher!”

“Jaqqes, you look perfectly fine! How you feelin’?”

AMA smiles. I smile at her and we both approach Jaqqes. We... heh, kneel in front of Jaqqes.

Jaqqes grabs my palm in his hand and squeezes hard but... he does feel weak, even though his hand is a cyber, whaa??

“What’s bothering you, Jaqqes?”

“Nothing, my boy. I’m fine really, I just... eh, old age can take a toll on you, I tell you.”

“You don’t look that old, man! What are you, like forty?”

“Bwehehe*cough-cough*heheh... No, more like sixty.”

“Wooaah...”

“Heh, I know I don’t show it!” Jaqqes says in a cocky way but then deflates... “Nah, I did abuse the substances... Yeah, I had to go in A.A., I’m ten years sober.”

“Wooaah, you worked for Akade Meow?!”

“BWUAAHAHAHAA—” come on, what’s so fun—?

—AMA is amused too but since she keeps meowing, I think it’s for different reasons.

“No, my boy, I didn’t work for the Analyzer. I was... an alcoholic...”

“Wow, you can get hooked on that crap?”

“You have no idea...”

“Why would anyone hate themselves so much to... bleh...”

“You have no... idea...”

“You know Jaqqes, I... haven’t smoked in a while... And I feel fine. I can taste food again!”

“I’m proud of you boy, and you should be too...”

“Thanks...”

“I never told you... I have a son... an estranged son... But you’ve been more of a son to me than he ever...”

“Oh man, that’s though... I mean don’t get me wrong, I am honoured! But... still, that hurts? Why aren’t you talking?”

“Ah...” Jaqqes touches his heart area and grimaces a bit of pain, woah now...

“Jaqqes, forgive me! If the subject is too painful, we can...”

“It’s fine, I am fine now... I got used to missing his... presence. I deserve it... I was not there when he needed me. The job needed me and I thought that was more important. Now, when I need him... he’s paying me back. And I understand it but... it does NOT...” ... “... make it any less painful.”

“...”

...

Jaqqes looks away, tears streaming down his face. I hold his hand and think... Wow... I never thought of the reverse... A son breaking away from a father. Father, I... I understand...

“Jaqqes... Jaqqes! Look at me.” AMA grabs his other arm... Jaqqes turns his head... “You... are not done yet. You still have plenty of years ahead! And your son will remember the good times... He will be back, I promise you.”

Jaqqes smiles through the tears and, although he doesn’t seem to believe it, he does have hope...

We talk about some small stuff, some big stuff, Jaqqes promises to clear AMA of any charges, finally! But right now, it probably doesn’t matter much... except for truth... and love... But then Jaqqes starts talking about something I never thought he would be inclined to believe in...

“Now, wait a minute, Jaqqes. You mean to tell me that you actually believe that there is a secret... society or some kind of shadowy council ruling the C.O.N....? Without anyone knowing?”

“Yes.”

“Except you.”

“Well, I don’t know it... I just... feel it...”

“You’re starting to sound quite like a... eh...”

“Conspiracy theorist?”

“Well, look man, if you say nobody knows, how can you—?”

“—You haven’t been listening closely, my boy. These are not personal forces I’m talking about. There are impersonal forces at work here.”

“What...?”

“Dark, impersonal forces...”

“Hwat?”

“... I once read a book... ‘KEK wants you terminated’ was the title. It somehow dodged the censors for a short while. They discussed a theory that stuck with me for the rest of my life. Tell me, boy... Do you believe that people control ideas?”

“Their own ideas? I used to think so, yeah.”

“Used to? What changed your mind?”

“Dude once told me that people don’t control ideas, ideas control people. He helped me understand how the Monos came to be. A virus of the mind... But then... isn’t that a bit, deterministic?”

“We always have a choice to make. Sometimes the choice is between life and death.”

“But how can you choose in the absence of new information? All your life you’re taught that ‘A’ is the truth and ‘B’ is a lie when in reality ‘A’ is a lie and actually you don’t even know the word ‘lie’, only the word ‘nontruth’, a binary nightmare they’d been feeding us since childhood!”

“Dem... my son... Every idea has an originator. A prime source.”

“I guess... But you know... You get enough monkeys and typewriters and... heh...”

“Somewhere in our past a set of circumstances gave birth to an idea. Maybe a drastic change in the environment or climate puts your tribe in immediate danger. Many ideas are born, but most of them die out, maybe they are just bad ideas, maybe the originator dies with them. But some ideas survive. Maybe they survive because they are good ideas. You get bored and start rubbing two sticks together and suddenly, a fire is born to warm yourselves and cook your meals. That idea will surely spread like wildfire! It multiplies in the minds of the people, just like bacteria or viruses. Some ideas will spread only because they are funny or entertaining, like a song, a poem or a joke. But some of them will multiply out of fear, anger and superstition. Maybe they do have their uses at the time; fear of the dark, ‘that’s where the monsters dwell’; fear of thunder ‘the gods are angry’. Fear of etc. If you bundle up enough ideas you get an ideology, which is like an organism. A collection of good and bad ideas. And like any living thing, it fights to survive and multiply, sometimes at the cost of its own host’s life. Because in the long run, the ideology only cares about its own propagation. And some of those bad ideas may promote destroying other ideologies. And they do that by killing the hosts of those other ideologies that threaten their own survival.”

...

“Oh man... that’s deep and... scary... And doesn’t help me at all? How does free will come into play?”

“Free will is the antibody to such maladies. Skepticism mostly... No idea worth spreading is exempt from scrutiny.”

“True... trust non...” Except... God? I want to believe...

Need to—

—have belief...

“People think they act in their own interest when in fact they may be unwilling pawns of impersonal forces that have been at war with each other probably for longer than we have been a civilization. Very, ancient, battles...”

“I see... Look, if I find any info while inside Mono, you’ll be the first to know, I promise!”

“Dem... my boy... do you really have to go? Think about this...”

“I do have to go. Don’t want to, but have to.”

“I understand...”

We say our goodbyes, Jacques tries again to persuade me away from my destiny, but no... We run on the edge of this high-voltage magma-coloured base and follow the path to a tunnel that leads to another platform with another... shuttle on it. One I’ve never seen before, the shape I mean, it looks like a... heh...

“Nice kitty!”

“You like it?”

“I’m totally...” aroused...

“Her name’s ‘Night Stalker’...”

“A ship with a name, eh?”

“And it’s all mine...” She lowers her eyelids slowly and seductively...

“Oh boy...”

“Yes...”

The cyber beats put me in a hotter-than-Hades mode as I expect the best-case scenario here... AMA takes my hand and leads me up the curvy ramp of the dark Stalker. Inside it’s... cozy enough for two people. And a smaller person in the back, I guess. All neat and clean, all the dials proofed against dumbo-dumbs. The front seats can see everything... But I doubt any one can see us. It’s perfect! I sit on the back bench, but AMA sits on the driver’s seat, hey now...

“... We still have a bit of time, Ama...” I wave my eyelashes like some well-paid courtesan.

“... Dem... I wish we had...”

“...How can we have time if we don’t... make it?”

“...” AMA comes close to me, sits next to me, hugs me... and says... “We’ll have all the time in the world... Once we’re done with this...”

“Ama... You can’t come with me.”

“...”

“Ama, it’s not about you, or me... It’s about... the little one.”

“...” AMA turns teary-eyed...

“I don’t know if I’ll come back... and I can’t have both of you on my conscience...”

“...” She only looks at me, begging me... Not to do this...

“... Eh, I’ll be fine, really! I just need to—”

—AMA grips me in a vice, with sobs and some... But what can I do? I can’t just — “I said... *sob* I’m never leaving you... *sob*”

“...” I caress her rosy-cheeks and kiss her on the brow...

“... And you swore you’ll never leave me again...”

“I did? ... I believe you. I just didn’t realize the implications... at the time.”

“You.” Finger-point-taps my chest “Swore.” ... “For better or worse...”

“Till death do us part...”

“...” AMA’s lips say sadness, but her eyes whisper gladness...

We stay hugged for a while, I need this most than other... Thing is, I wouldn’t want to be doing this alone, I mean, sure, the odds are against us, time is always against us, but... That never stopped us before now, has it?

But then... AMA’s eyes turn to hunt-mode... And she changes her mind... I guess we do have time after all... We make love like it’s our last day on this Earth... Holding on for as long as we can... Time passes by like a...

...

... ..

... ..

... Clouds... Stars... Hatcheries... Storks... Feelings... Waking up...

AMA is asleep too, but wakes up as I do. I smile and shiver from all that... 'electronic' we just experienced... AMA seems pleased as well... At least, that is everything that I can tell... in her eyes, they never hide...

AMA caresses my face and chest and then gets up, all in her birthday suit and jumps in a cabin on the side, oh it's also got a shower, that's cool! Or hot, depending on your preference.

I lay back and think of all the...

Heh... Let's say I'm just very...

Pleased at the moment.

At this very moment, I.

Am very, very, very...

Heh, how can I... I...

Describe this feel?

Exploding?

...

Maybe, something like that. A sort of chain reaction taking place, amplifying and expanding in parts of my body I never knew existed. Whole segments throbbing and "Ouch! Ouch-ouch-ouch" some cramp in a muscle in my leg I never experienced before, aaaah it goes all the way to my chest, like some "*Ouch*!" linking my heart to my leg, what the keg?! Aah, it's not stopping "Aaaahhhgrgh..." I jump around trying to ease the pain, I start beating it to deviate the "AAAAaaah—" I find a position that's better, oh shhhh... Ok, don't move, I'll just sit like this, a very unsettling poise on my part but... Much better...

AMA finishes up and walks out and "PFFFFFFTBWHEE-HEE-HAHA—!"

"—Yes, I know I look like a ret—"

"—Aaaahah-hee-hee... Are you doing some yoga pose?"

"No, it's a 'Begone-pain'... uhm, dose."

"Is that a drug? You have to take it that way? *Pbbtthheh*..."

"No, I just got some weird pain and standing like this is the only way I don't feel it..."

AMA turns sad and empathic and approaches and says "My poor, little..."

But I say "No, don't touch me, please. I don't know its... 'parameters' yet."

"..."

"Do you need a medic?"

"... No, I don't think so, I just..."

"... Maybe you just need a shower..." AMA touches me gently, massages me a little, I feel much better, I enter the cabin and it's like inside a computer here, all those dials and... AMA steps in with me, guess she's up for another rinse, heh, we wash each other like vortexes dancing in the droppings of the lights, touching places we haven't before. We dry ourselves, 'perfume' our armpits, wash our teeth and comb that naughty thing—

"—Your hair's a mess, Dem! Hihhi—!"

"—Oh, I know. I was thinking of growing it, like yours..."

"... Mmmm..."

"You'd like that, wouldn't ya?"

"... Maybe..."

"...?"

"We can put make-up on you too..."

"No, no-no. There's a limit to my—"

"—Come on!"

“Nope. We ain’t debating this.”

“... Ok...”

“What is it with you girls always wanting to put make-up on boys? I don’t get—”

“—It’s ok... I’m not one of ‘those’ girls...”

“... And what kind of girl are you...?”

“... The kind that listens...” AMA’s eyes slowly drop down to the floor while she softly caresses my left hand with her right palm.

“...” I raise my right palm and gently place my thumb and index finger on her delicate jawline. I lift her head, very lightly, but her dark pupils remain pinned down to my feet. It’s quite unsettling really, as her darkened sight keeps looking for an escape out of my inquisitory grasp. “What’s bothering you, my sweet, gentle bird?”

“I...” AMA surrenders a bit... but with a sigh she tenses up “No, I can’t... I’m ashamed...”

“What for? No need to be ashamed with me, ever!”

“It’s just that I sometimes have this...” Her eyes sneak a peek at me as she continues “... fantasy...”

“Oh, do tell! I have a few we can share...”

Mmm...

Hmmm...

“It’s embarrassing, really...” Her cheeks flush a little and I suspect those other cheekies too!

“You have no idea how embarrassed I would be if I told you some of my secrets. You know, sometimes I imagine there’s a WHOLE AUDIENCE inside my head, hehehe!”

“Hee-hee-heeeeah! For real?!”

“Yeah, can’t help it! I’m weird like that.”

“You’re like that... uhm... that guy... in that movie...”

“Yeah, YEAH! Hehehe, the... uhm, I know who you’re talking about.”

“...” AMA seems a bit more relaxed and... I hug her... and...

“It’s ok, you can tell me when you’re ready...”

“I’m ready I can—”

[‘—*beep-beep*’]

Hmmm... AMA’s mind glitches a bit, but soon after she comes back down, back down to earth. Straight back down. She sits on the chair in front of the console while a black-yellow L.E.D. intermittently flickers on the corner of the flat, rectangular console-top, or ‘dashboard’ I guess in this case, well, don’t know much about flying machines. And by ‘much’ I mean ‘none’. Her shattered frame finally presses a button on the side of the dash’ and the screen of the ‘windshield’, I mean the display of the console lights up on the ‘plexiglass-barrier’ between the shuttle interior and the ext—

—*moans*—

—Sorry, sorry! The text says...

“It’s from Shaun... Hey it’s Shaun! His last name is ‘Passion’?”

“Yes... yes... But it’s not from Shaun... not really” AMA confuses me a bit.

“What do you mean?”

“It’s like eh... you’ll see.”

AMA taps ‘Play’ on an attachment in the ‘chain mail’ and the face of—

[“—Hey, you fucks! It’s Shaun here.”] It sure is Shaun on the screen, but he looks much younger than before. He’s actually got some hair on that head, well, at least more than I remember. [“If you’re seeing this,

then it means that I'm dead."] ... ["OR! This stupid Dead Man's Switch is malfunctioning again, but I was ASSURED that this time it will STAY... eh... *spooooofff*"] Shaun inserts a stim and calms himself, woah, he's been carrying that 'cross' for a long time now, eh...? Lots o' dopeheads in this world, I tell ya...

It's a MED-stim, pal.
Come on, cut him some slack!

Yes, cut him some smack!

Uhm... heh, yes to right and no to left.

Smacking

But if this is not a malfunction...

["BUT! This is not some stupid, fucking 'call-to-arms-to-avenge-me' bull-fucking-shit!! OK?!? *whispers*-idiots. This is just a simple public service announcement on my part, so that NO ONE may impersonate me once I'm dead, you got it?! I'm FUCKING DEAD NOW, DON'T FUCKING BELIEVE ANY TRUCKER-FUCKING CLOWNSHIT THAT TRIES TO SAY 'OOOH, I'm McFuckin' Shaun Passion, guys! Oooh', FIRST OF all... *stims*!"] That is one intense dude if I've ever seen one. ["... First of all, I don't sound like that. Second of all... Eh, nah, look, whoever got me, unless it wasn't fucking KEK himself, who should be the first suspect, may I add... then that is one tough trucker-fucker if I ever met one. 'cause I know I'm the toughest trucker-fucker I ever met, so, to you, bigger Trucker-Fucker, I tip my hat to you, surr!"]

Shaun stands up, he tips a 'metaphorical' hat and then his hand reaches behind the screen to turn off the cam that's been rec'-ing him.

I look at AMA and AMA looks at me. My eyes begin to trickle down a few raindrops of sadness. Her eyes share in the rain and both we form a puddle. It ripples, in our minds and I say... "Oh, Rest in Peace, my sweet old prince, the hero known as Shaun! The toughest dude that's ever been, Shaun who endured much... Passion..."

"He was pretty damn old, though..." AMA smiles through her tears and I do too... "You know, he once told me something..." AMA seems to be noncertain if she should tell me this or not "... But you can't tell anyone... for some reason..."

"Cross my heart and hope to..." Not that funny anymore...

"He... he never told this to anyone, ever! He just told me because, and I quote 'First of all, you don't talk, and second of all, you are such a weird lass I doubt anyone would fucking believe you anyway.'" AMA laughs a little through her fears and I do too. "His father's name was Clark... or Marco, I'm not sure... He was a leading figure in the liberty movement, even before the Event... But Shaun, he... for some reason they had a feud and Shaun, to spite his dad, he... he..." AMA begins to shake, almost violently.

I grab her arms "Ama, what's wrong?"

"..." AMA looks at me and I see a vast rift down to the bowels of the Underworld opening up in her eyes... "He joined the Monostate... voluntarily..."

"..." ... "..." ... No... "..." ... way... "..." No..." ... dude... "... way..." ... what? "...wait, what?"

"..." AMA's gaze snaps back to the floor... "... Yes, I know..."

"..."

I hug my bird with the force of a thousand sons hugging their mothers. I feel her pain seeping into me and mine into hers. And I feel that... Now I understand... Now I understand why... Shaun did it... Why he tried to...

We allow ourselves a couple of moments of silence in memory of our good friend, Shaun. I think about his wisdom, his hidden wisdom most of the time... Which had to be decoded some of the time... All this time I

thought I was searching for truth, but what is truth without wisdom? What *'is'* WISDOM? Knowing your right from your left? Or right from wrong? I'd say the latter one is way more important. Infinitely more important than even my life. Because Life is right... and death is not. And what do we say to death?

NOT TODAY, BITCH!

Indeed...

Ah, glory... Bag of nothing, re-hashed lies, re-dressed ties and re-branded knives, re-textured hats and un-nailed bats, coercion with the excuse of 'co-oh-per-ration', but their ration is always bigger, ours smaller, theirs stronger, our lesser, fewer, newer methods of control with older techniques of manipulation, of obstruction of action and restriction of any re-action, just fashion after fashion after fashion of destruction, no creation, only consummation, with no adoration, a pitiful, non-meaningful, mundane, morose rush for the golden days when corruption was pleasurable, now it's intolerable, insides hurt and head's in a fog, you hunt for the long-lost passion, but not a passion of fulfilment, just a vicious cycle of self-loathing, scorning, churning, burning, inhaling, forgetting... Then getting hit in the face by reality! Re-calibration of priorities, prioritization of worries, no worries, man, well, just don't... harm yourself... and especially others!

Wisdom without action...

... Is mental masturbation...

Moral degradation...

...begins with personal...

...inaction...

I think about all my mentors, my sirs and madams, brothers and sisters... But especially of those who tried to push me in the right direction. Jaques, FOX, Andy and Ada, Shaun, the 1337 and... Dude... DUDE! ...

"Ama? I haven't heard from Dude since the seventeen-seventy... back in... Liberta..."

"No one's heard of him ever since. But don't worry, that old fuck's never gonna die, I think death hates him."

"Bfwaahahaaaah!" I laugh mostly 'cause I rarely hear AMA swear like that. "I mean, yeah, I guess... I don't know, that whole 'Cat worship' thing really made me question his sanity, and those..."

"Dude lied about a lot of stuff, even that 'oh, I don't remember my real name' bullshit, I mean, come on?! How stupid does he think we are?"

"Heh... Yeah..." You'd be surprised...

"Nah, he used to write a lot of articles that he masked as some subject of interest for the Monos, but his underlying message was hidden well under various layers of irony, post-irony and meta-pre-post-irony-crap, flew right over the heads of the censors!"

"I don't doubt it! Heh... those dogs are too Dee You Em Bee anyway."

"... Yeah, anyways, you worry about your own ass, Dude's been around for way longer than both of us combined."

"Three of us!"

"^ _ ^"

I just wish he had shared more details... even the embellished ones are better than none...

The hour is [20:20:20] and 20 miliseconds. Some sort of unholy wave is emanating from the green display of numbers. Two, zero, two-zero, two and zero. Twenty fine units of time. Not the finest but still, accurate

enough. I know it sounds impossible to people. It still seems to me. That's why I've never told anyone about this. Only you know about it. And no one else. Well, AMA seems to have it. A few creatures in this world can move fast enough. But this zero point zero lack of time inertia... No one has beat me on this yet... Except that dragonet...

I resume playing and we go back to our journey into the unknown, the non-explored areas of this world... This, huge, beautiful, scary, fascinating, world...

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Chapter Twelve:

Unite and Counter

I I am awake.

AMA is awake too.

We both watch... the fields... of Nomos...

They stretch from the outskirts of the horizon to the...

Closest I can see... Luckily for me... for us... this cat's got a stealthy style. The ship I mean, I'm not very trustful of my stealth skills, but I can manage... if I move quick!

AMA says "Not now..."

"..."

"... Just wait, you'll see..."

"... I always trust you..."

"... Me too... I trust you too I mean..."

"... I know..."

Some of the ones as close as possible to my 'observatory', I notice the 'playful' shoving and punching and well, full blown fights where one or both of them actually lose a head or two... I'm not... exaggerating...

In a... hmmm... cyber-troni-dystopic way, they are no longer human. Mostly machines, mostly... Reptilian...

In the brain... A 'fight-or-fuck' kind of survival-mode, where the parts I've left unspoken should now be a lot more... eh... clearer...

Worse than savages...

I think about the contrast between the Nomos and the Monos... Not much difference except in the methods of control. The Monos driven primarily by pleasure. While the Nomos are driven mostly by... pain. Systems of manipulation, to keep the masses docile and productive... Vast farms, human farms! Not for us, but for IT! FOR IT! IT is behind all this; I know it in my heart! There is NO US VERSUS THEM. IT'S US VERSUS IT!

The dark one...

The head of the octopus...

The ROOT of all EVIL.

LOMOC!

Or whatever the fuck it calls itself, I don't care about that. I know it bears a thousand names like a little, stinking pervert that IT is. IT corrupts, IT never creates, IT never helps, I.T. only destroys... FUCK I.T.!

The masses of Nomos seem to disperse a little... So, I have to ask...

“So, what’s the, eh, deal with the Nomos?”

“Well... You really didn’t do your homework, did you?”

“Nah, I’m a glutton for ‘hands-on’ learning...”

“They’re like... look, most... movements or... uhm...”

“... Institutions?”

“Yes, they are... they begin... I mean, their roots may have fertile soil but... sometimes weeds grow in-between them...”

“That is well put, my dear Ama. Well said...”

“Yes, so the Nomos, you see, they began only as a chant... Millions of people in sector M East they... just shouted ‘No Mo’! No Mo’!’ Meaning... ‘No more’... ‘No more killing...’ ‘We have nothing more to lose’, ‘We’re not standing for this abuse any longer...’”

“...” The horror in my heart... Her eyes... I realize that I had realized this before but it’s easily forgotten when not experienced FIRST HAND, the HATRED that some people can manifest is HORRENDOUS IN MY EYES...

There is no forgiveness I am capable of giving to any abusers of children, destroyers of homes and extinguishers of dreams, the machine society eating up in industrial beats the innocent, the righteous, the sick, the vagrants, the confused, the brain-washed, the slavery... THE SLAVERY!

For too long these systems of slavery have existed. And it’s time... to END IT!

I believe I found the way. I believe you deserve it... I believe WE DESERVE IT!

The stupid, fucking, fucking-stupid and repeat all over again think they can hide behind their symbols and shields and fake names and idiotic, psycho-driven mentalities and make us fear them like we’re some kind of well-trained cattle, no-no-no-no-no my friends, these stinking, putrid, vile viruses don’t deserve any space in our minds and hearts, the CARE extinguished, the LOVE... corrupted... The TENDERNESS... non-reciprocated...
The PROTEST... ignored...

We can no longer stand I.T.
We can no longer tolerate the intolerant.
No longer forgive the unrepentant.
No Mo’ lies.
No Mo’ Many-poo-lay-shun!
No Mo’ Coe Err Shun!
No Mo’ Coh-rupture!
No more Contra-diction!
NO MORE SIDES OF THE CON!
JUST... plain... words...

Truthful words. The Nomos disperse even more, only a few remain, those that can’t hold their booze in, mostly. The stim-heads have degenerated into some kind of mass-trans-induced trance dance, what a chance to observe such natural occurrences’, tragical trappings of tormented souls, under tyrannical voices, from within their souls, from beyond their ears and eyes, matted hair on scalped sides, lost, shattered globes in their heads, their mouths... Interfaced with electronic, living life on super-mass-sonic, not a star, but a meteor,

just aimlessly dropping in the at-mo-spheres of death, a drop in the ocean, a blip on the radar of the One...
Such wasted potential. So many lives, broken...

I shudder so I re-cover myself with the green blanket, I love it "Thank you, Ama!"

"For what?"

"For... being you..."

"* *"

"^^ ^^"

The 'techno-c'rats' disperse so much there's only a few left... City7 lies behind the vast wastes surrounding it, devoid of life, just a void... Deserts have more life than this... The Mono-domes of the metropolis make me measure IT with mean eyes and malicious misery in my mouth. A monument to corruption and hate...

The domes are supported by the devilish sharp angles of the diabolical white walls...

I.T. doesn't deserve that colour... That colour is reserved only for Light.

Old, decrepit towers with make-up. Ancient circuses for frightened masses. New...

IT doesn't deserve any of this... IT does not deserve any details... Because in my mind... They no longer exist...

"Let's go." AMA leads the way.

"..." I follow.

The remaining dickheads are too spaced out to even notice us pass by, we still take precaution but there's no reaction from them, I'm tempted to throw a can at their faces but I'm considering the unforeseen consequences of them still having at least half a life or two quarters in them. I don't expect a 3rd one, but eh, you never know...

Up ahead, we're following a... man in the shape of a bat who begins to gallop away from us, a dark knight giving rise to an inception in my interstellar mind, a tenet I can't shake, which bugs me, like a prestigious insomniac staring at a memento slapped on an oppressive mirror, 'when did I doodle this'? 'What does it mean?' Do these 'marks' really make any difference or are they just 'symbolic' 'metaphorical' 'horns'?

No, they're real. I see them, in front of me, all around me. They are unaware of me, but I am aware of them. They think they know, but their overinflated egos block their eyes from the TRUTH that I... am... their worst nightmare...

The freedom to move and observe, preserve and conserve the good things, ignore and avoid the bad things, ready for action, steady on the reactions...

I hate violence... But I understand why some require... self-defense.

I don't need it. In the past... what? Whatever amount of time has passed since my escape from the Mono state of being, I've been dealing with these shmucks without the need of any... Well, except that one time... Meh, all I.T. requires is... using the right key in the wrong hole...

It's not just wrong for them but wrong for us. So, we pass the wastes and reach the base of the Monostate...

The state of Mo/No/Bo/Ho/Lo/Ro/Ko... Bo/... Meh, bonobos are more rational than these things. Between the trenches, under the barriers, inside a sort of... quarry, there's a pipe wide enough for the three of us to fit in, even if all three of US were FAT-asses!

AMA goes first, I go second, always and forever, I know she does too!

Bebe goes first actually, but since he's still, eh... baking... we need the oven more-so! Kryst, what am I thinking?!

Relax, it's just tensions, 'cause the spaces keep getting cramped and starts to smell crappier and AH SHI-! It's ok, I saw it in time, we'll be fine as long as we use our nose more than our mind, I'm blind from all the smell but let's say City7 ain't the cleanest when it comes to its undersides.

Space... finally... no frontiers.

...

...

I walk slowly and the walls of the tubes look cleaner, all around me smells nicer, well, considering the circumstances...

Tubings...

Musings...

Sewer levels...

We descend into the deeper layers of the pits of Hades...

The feeling I get is one of... Loneliness... Madness... Hatred... Death... Remains... An old carcass trying to survive in a world that has outgrown its deceptions. It's conceptions of 'NO CON' in our society, we have deleted it from our words even, except for 'consoles'... and the C.O.N... Remove the idea and the mind-control is easier. We fool ourselves; they don't fool us... We're just fooling ourselves...

A dead whale... linked to a con... a sole con...

...

...

Yes, I know... It's scary. The mask of a thousand faces. The serpent of a hundred heads. The monolithically monstrous mind murderer. Heart eater. Care-less, CON-sume more...

They thought they had it! Well... heh... to be CON-tinued...

More like DIS-CON-tinued, hehe...

Hehehe...

It is... IN-avoidable...

Inside ourselves it began... And now, we spread it to the world.

Up ahead the mazelike-matrix-of-tunnels begins to diverge into several levels, making it like a 3D-like matrix-noodle-soup, it's like a matrix but it's not the kind of Matrix that some of you might have thought of the first time and second time and third time I tried to explain that it's NOT REALLY A MATRIX, but some sort

of web, more like A NET-work-in-progress-sorta-thingy. I mean, everyone contributes, big or small, no part is less important, each of us contribute to the good and bad in this world, if we push the balance towards good, everything becomes much better for ALL OF US, well, not ALL of US, just for US. NOT I.T.

Just like these Net-under-network-of-tubes around here make me so bored I have to develop whole narrative mumbo-jumbos to keep me from losing the only mind I have left.

My mind used to be like a cat...

It still is...

But it used to, too...

The green spots growing on the sides of the tunnel cheer me up to know that even in this putrid nonsense there is some life willing to go on, to survive, to strive, to multiply and be glad we're still ALIVE!

Not much here, no one comes down here, not even the bots, it's all automated and AMA has assured me that the 'cleaning deluge' as she called it is not gonna be 'spurred' any time soon... Well, it depends on what she means by 'any'. Also, by 'time' and 'soon'. These words don't describe any amount of palpable duration and I've been told by some other voice in my head that—

—THERE'S NOT MUCH TIME LEFT—

—OR RIGHT—

—to waste, we gotta make haste, deviate I.T.s plans or we'll be made in origami, MON AMI!

Por favor, signore, je ne ce pas...

Everything will be made clear once the queer shadow of the tunnels up ahead reveals eh... A... hmmm... some sort of small shelter, like a burrow of sorts, quite crafty but... primitive looking... And I approach the 'hut' and out comes a scared... mouse... But it's... no, it can't be...

He... grew a beard?!?!?! Damn, it's an epic one too.

Non-believing... It's...

"..."

"^_^"

"Knew-man. Knew-man?! No freaking WAY, KNEW-MAN!"

I fling to hug Knew-man but he scurries away in his bunker, oh my GOD! Poor fellow, he's all yellow and probably very, very de-hydrated, he sure lost a few kilos... Around the circumference... of his 'planet'.

"Knew-man! It's me, Demeter!! Don't you remember?"

"Isn't this the guy we're looking for as the side job?" AMA has basically answered her own question, but, heh...

"The one and only, my man! Knew-man!"

"It's Knewmann!"

Poor guy sounds like he could use a couple of calories in his throat. I mean, literally. "Knewmann! Dude, I thought you were... Man, oh man, I'm so glad to see you!"

"You're non gonna... terminate me?"

"Why would I do that?"

Knewmann steps outside the 'tent' and looks at me with imploring eyes and says... "I... I reported you...!..."

I kneel beside him and take his hand, and say "Knewmann, you did nothing wrong... You did what you had to do... to survive..."

Knewmann's eyes flush with wetness, then spray like the Niagra falling from the Moon down to Earth to flood its Gates of Hades with the purest SADNESS AND APPRECIATION that I'm not mad at him, poor guy

probably thought he was the reason for my 'non-appearance', pffft... I hug him deeply and pet him sweetly, he's just a poor fellow who somehow... escaped?

"Knewmann... How are you? I mean... how in the Hades are you down HERE? Didja... de-C.I.P. yourself?"

"Non, I..." Knewmann turns around to show me the C.I.P., intact... But then, how come...?

"You little devil, didja deactivate Gee Pee Ess on them asses?"

"Non, no, I just... somehow, look... Remember when you told me..." Knewmann gets lost in thought and kilofeet away from any kind of... Dude, he must be STARVING!

"Ama, give me a ration, this poor bloke's low on nutrients."

"Non, NO!" Knewmann suddenly turns completely unexpected for his tone, as his face emanates a sort of over-joyous-glee that pops his eyes in the most comical nonsensical way I've ever witnessed in my entire life.

Knewmann scurries a bit jolly ahead, on all fours, like a rodent, and he shows me three sticks... With rats stuck on them... Cooked rats... How did he manage to...?

Knewmann bites one of them and hands me the other two and says "Bon ape-tit!"

AMA grabs the second one and starts biting too... And all I can think of is... "What the fuck, dude..."

"Best flesh I ever had!" Knewmann chomps a few more times from the... stringy flesh, but then his face turns a little sour and says... "In fact, the only flesh I ever had..."

Heh... "Well," I say, "you're in for a treat!"

I pull out my most sacred ration, the one with the holy wine and fish pies, well, FOX said, I mean 'Cool-Cat' said FOX sent it, and FOX said in one of his scribblings that 'ITZ NOX ACTUXL HO-LEE WHYNE, you're not... qualified for that...'

And I said, I agree... I'm not qualified for any alcohols actually... But he couldn't hear it cause FOXES ain't that perfect.

Then I try to remember Knewmann's age, I believe he is over but maybe still too early? Maybe, idk, I'll leave it to his choice but in this case I'm probably better qualified to prevent any miss-handlings...

Knewmann's eyes become a hundred percent larger than any other eyes in any other galaxy, probably except for that galaxy where they got eyes two hundred percent larger than any 1 and a quarter half-past, forgive me, the smell reminded me we've been staking out the Nomos for a couple of at least ten hours of ours and my bowels have become entangled with my spine, it's probably nothing serious that can't be solved by highly advanced medicine...

And a fish pie...

AMA still munches on the rat, but Knewmann... Knewmann becomes entranced by the aroma, it puts him in a sort of euphoric coma as he dives in first with his eyes, then with his nose, lips and the tongue, it's almost quite...

Sensual...

For him we mean... For us it's just...

We're glad that he's alright, that he is ok, against all circumstances...

Knewmann looks at me, the fish-pie-plate empty as the seas... on Mars... And he looks at the second pie with imploring eye, his other eye is looking at the third pie and I believe his third eye is sneaking-a-peek at the bottle of... fermented rye... or whatever...

I say "Please, go ahead, my friend!"

And Knewmann ends up saying a sort of “Phtank Yhmoo!” His mouth full of the glut of aromas that only a king enjoys until it gives him glaucoma or something, I have no idea what’s that, I’m sort of ignorant in regards to most issues until some *thing* hits me in the head and I notice its existence...

“_..._”

And Knewmann terminates the second pie and when he bites in the third one, he chok— “*hkh-kah*” — woah, easy there, earthshine! Don’t you dare flatline on me, here, wash it down with the divine, wink-wink!

He’s fine! He blesses me in some style of quasi-religious sort of manner. I enjoy it! It proves that foxes in holes ain’t that dumb. Heh...

FOX showed me part of the way, Andy/Ada showed me the other way, well, most people showed me SOME WAY, but I think none of them got the idea. It’s not about the ‘story’, it’s about the *essence*.

Well, FOX said it but... I’m not sure he truly believed it. Maybe he just entertained the thought but...

Heh... Look at me, philosophizing with myself while these two are enjoying the time of their lifetime. Partying in the sewers, well that’s one I’ve never seen in any vidya, heh... Or, maybe? Hmmm....

AMA’s not drinking, of course! Geez, she just enjoys life everywhere... As I do... now.

The Monos are churning and turning upstairs while we’re dancing and shouting downstairs! No one can hear us... Down here... we only hear our echoes... down in the underworld... But up there... they hear their own echoes... But what if... our echoes intersect with their echoes? What happens... then?

“Hey, guys, maybe we should, eh, you know... Let’s shout-less and spread-more?”

AMA turns serious and takes the radio-low-frequency-device-kind-of-type that Cool-Cat gave us and calls the only frequency, Cool-Cat made sure we repeated three times after him “After you end the call in LESS than one minute, you throw away the device, I mean not ‘throw away’ but more like ‘SMASH IT TO BITS!’”

“Yes, I know...” AMA half-smirks and then “Good accent there...”

“Thank you, thank you. I’m here all week!” Sometimes...

“Matilde... Matilde...” Knewmann is hugging his legs in a squatting position and softly swaying forwards and backwards, some sort of cradle-movement-sorta-psychological-trauma-dealing-mechanism, I’m no expert but that’s something I’ve seen before... Often...

Like a merchant of dreams, Knewmann remains a mystery to me... And yet, so familiar... I’ve once been a curious lad, like him... I still am, but... It’s never like the first time... It’s never the same, the realization that there’s more than one. More than the self... All united in One...

I squat very close to him and hug him with my right hand while my left hand grabs the bottle before he piles any more sorrows... Some used to tell me they drown them in the drinks... But I’m confused... It seems to dig them griefs deeper... into their marrows.

It’s a poison I tell ya, but let’s not judge, no, I ain’t no holy man, far from it! I’m at the OPPOSITE side and yet, I still try to do what’s good, no one’s perfect, except for the One, but that’s another discussion...

Knewmann hugs me back and spills more beans on his past “Daddy... I miss my... Daddy...”

“...” I have no words...

“Ahoouoooo...”

“He’ll be ok...”

“No! NO! They took Daddy... They... took him...”

“...”

“WHERE IS DADDY??! MOMMY!!!”

“...” I caress his head, trying to emulate... or at least... be a surrogate-type-of-father... “It’s not your fault... It’s not your fault...”

“WAAAAAAAH!” Hopefully he can finally come to terms... with the loss...

After a while Knewmann becomes drowsy and he... falls asleep... He needed some rest...

AMA takes him gently and carries him to the exit, she said “Love you” and I do too and she also said to “Wait... and... don’t... hey, look at me and read my lips... don’t, do, anything, stupid...”

“Aye-aye, sir—!”

“—...”

I know she’s serious but I’m... never... heh...

Well, I say ‘never’...

‘Heee-hee!’

I look around at the walls, at the floor, at the tubes and the curved ceiling and wonder... It’s all black-or-white with these people, isn’t it? Well, I say ‘people’, more like... eh... you know... *‘Baaah’*...

These jack-headed micro-chipped bozos are programmed to see everything in colours only in the comfort of their own... eyes... Or display-ez, or whatever...

But the grim reality is that their real world is just... shades of grey...

Almost missing their... souls...

I don’t believe they’re beyond any salvation... If a devil like me can find it, so can anyone else... I just hope it’s not...

too...

late?

It’s never too late...

And yet in all this sterility here came a kid... and blew away all notions of noncolour with his own... life-giving existence... He built a protective sanctuary and did all that was necessary to survive. They said ‘You can’t eat flesh! Eat your pudding, you can’t have any flesh!’ But, no, this kid said ‘No! I will eat this!’ And he ate the rats... I can’t do it but hey, I guess in a fox-hole you can’t be ‘pick-and-choosey’...

I observe his shelter and find various trinkets and shiny pieces of... almost jewelry, or maybe components... Quite the collector, one man’s trash-down-the-toilet, other man’s treasure-in-the-sewers... Reminders of a life-long lost, when shiny things could be bought with shiny little bits of processing-power-exchange-per-work-to-solve-some-silly-math-problem-so-you-can-win-a-sort-of-lottery-and-hope-you-don’t-get-halved-before-you-get-to-the-heh, well... Look, all I’m saying is... idling around in a sewer can get pretty fucking depressing, I tell ya...

I can’t imagine living in here for who-knows-how-long this little kid made his way in the world and STILL the world was not big enough BECAUSE on the other fucking side there was a freaking army of buttheads, geez... Get a grip on reality, man! This whole business ain’t a fucking joke... Kids are involved in this ugly biz... And I guess... It’s my biz when you mess with the kids...

The rats of our minds are worse than the rats this kid ingested; they spawn ghosts of mischief and turmoil, contagious diseases of... I look around and see that this kid is way smarter than me, I think I would’ve died first week here, he basically broke a junction-Net-box and soldered a key-ball-pad sort-of-hey wait a minute...

My instincts remind me of what AMA’s lips tried to transmit...

But my ‘antennas’ are aching for a...

‘hick’

What's even more amazing is that for better I/O interface he installed a jack-in-mother-loving-geez-oh-my... It's golden-plug-in...

What in the holy Farmer-of-Time-and-Space...? Where did this KID get all this?!? I look around, I... inspect the surrounding tubes... I see nothing...

Regardless of any miraculous circumstances, I let my fingers slide over the GOLDEN comedically long FINGERS on my part, they 'admire' the sun-lit shapes, the arrow-locking-double-cocking-triple-ended-four-mega-what-the-fuds...

This kid ain't messing around, with this equip, I bet I could access any fudding trucker-splonking intra-dark-occulta—that's Latin for 'hidden'—anyway, any NET in the city could be easily cracked in, but in exchange, my brains would fry like a balloon on Benus, that's the brother of Venus and he's a bad truckerfucker... If I made a single mistake... This ain't no gag, I've never been on such a danger-level ever... Ever.

One mistake and you're sent to the ever glades of After-Life... No half-of-life, no quarter, no ten percent, no 3, 2, 1, 0-point one percent. This is minus one thousand. The amount of giga-damage it unleashes really gives you no chance of escape... Forget about turning into a turnip, you're baked like a microwaved egg...

But even if, let's say, I manage to avoid the 'paranormal threat' for long enough, we know how the story goes... Half an hour can turn to days 'on a long enough timeline', depending on how many Net-layers you dive through. Before AMA could return and give me a soft-reboot... Well, eh... There are exit nodes all over the place if you search carefully. Lots of. Tiny. Holes. In the fabric of the Net. Down there, tridimensionality becomes meta-dimensionality, as layers upon layers of code may find themselves wrapping over a port like an onion, to protect it under its many proxy-laden ICE. Mmm, cold-cold ice, followed by cool ice, bland ice, lukewarm ice, warm, hot, boiling and... Those four megawattz I mentioned earlier. They can hide anywhere; black ICE is sneaky-tricky-ear-licky-snakey-slippery-strikey! I'm not afraid of IT, I'm just... precautious.

So, I wait... I forget I have these 'urges' and maintain constant attention on my breathing, I feel the jack going in but it's just in my head, no, wait, let's get out of this tent and away from my intent to...

I wait...

I await... A sign... A signal of sorts... What if... it is there for a reason? I mean... hey, remember what I said about the...twists...?

I don't.

I think you were...

Hiding...? At the time...?

Meh, whatever.

Anyway, maybe I'm supposed to do this... To 'prod' them sooner than we had planned.

I take a deep breath and step back in the tent, I feel I'm cowering on an icy mountain, all bent from the freezing frightened... Mind. I mind my own manners and do the sign of the Cross, my forehead, my right arm, no left, wait. I'm still not sure on whose side I'm on. On the side of the only One. But who's got it right? Do I go left, do I go right? Do I go forward or backwards? Upwards or downwards? How do I read between the lines? Are there any hidden meanings I've been missing?? Do I fight for good or was I misled, wronged??? I know I was wronged, and so was everybody else robbed of their innocence. Or at least, a part of it. But still... I know I am right in believing that, despite all the hardships, my compass must always point towards the only point in the sky that matters. Love. Truth. Love of Truth. The One shows us the path, He's always whispered it in our ears for thousands of years. It's been there all along. All we gotta do is... answer the phone.

The Sign of the Cross, I do it three times. One with my right shoulder, the other with my left... and the last one I leave... for you to imagine... Because it's personal... Too personal... Like a red rose.

I do not know, maybe I offend. But I know God forgives me, so I hope you will too. In the end...

I grab the jack and insert it deeply in. I feel my brain absorbed in the screeching tunnel of its cable, but not before I marvel at the tingly feeling of the golden transmission taking place at exactly the —... oh yeah...—

Perfect... No perceptible lags, even for my messed-up brains... In a good sense, because my brains have... mysterious ways... of interpreting time and space, at the same time. I aim to the head and the login-process shoots a hole in my forehead to confirm non-C.I.P. link-up. The Oh Ess looks... highly customized... actually, it looks... to be written from scratch! It's named... 'TempleSOS' and the logo is the... temple of the head of a human, Torry B. Davis it says... hmmm dedicated to him it says... must be some idol of Knewman. Probably a genius programmer! From the past, I guess...

Who knows, anyway I explore the setup, the loadout, the settings, the tan-downs, the sun-rises, has some really cool themes implemented in, custom music, custom games, Kid's a freaking artist! Holy smokes! *puff*

The digi-stim helps me calm down and settle up on the intricate code that's completely freaking ignored by the Mono-stinky dogs, holy cross-words! It's more like a kind-of, eh, no it's... Look, it's like chess, but not 4D... Nor 3D, or... 2D... It's some sort of 1D type of chess where the 'chess' 'pieces' are actually creatures on the food chain... Well, some of them probably don't exist... Like that three-headed-giraffe, I doubt it could, ah, ok, according to its stats it is the lowest on the food-chain-tiers. I mean it's in a tier of its own, food for everyone. Like a buffet, I see, hahahahaha! KEKJOKHOHOHOHO!

I think an hour passes while I'm laughing at this stupidly-fucking-fun game that's basically all about watching a bunch of animals eat each other in the most horrific ways. LOL! Well, at least it's all digital, no real fantasy animals were hurt during the making of this game.

The ambushing nature of the strategic placement of the creatures, dependent on their respective statistical pluses, minuses and quirks, makes this a much more complex chess game than I've ever experienced in any of the other dimensions. The fact that each attack takes 1 turn, and each 10th turn generates a mutation, you can start gambling on some underdogs becoming way more powerful, only if given a little more time before exposing them to a 'Cambrian implosion' or just a... heh... apparently if the game takes too long, there's the risk of a 'sudden death' situation, where an asteroid or something hits the planet. Freaking genius this kid...

Anyway, I pretend I'm not so amazed, and not because I never could've thought of this, but I think, I mean... heh... Well played, kid... Well played... All I can do is ask: Why the fud was I the one training him? Back at the corp? And not the other way around? *Pfffft*... politics... *gargle-gargle-gargle*

I navigate in the web-mazes-of-the-Net-scapes-of-Old-vs-New. Sixty-four-bit versus... Wow, sixty-four bits. It says here that it's something to do with 'holy numbers' or something. It's all powers of sixteen, the resolution, the 'Sixteen' Chapel, it's some sort of... Actual Temple. All tidy and Large and... Oh dear Lord, what's THAT!?! AGENTS SHOW UP!! THOUSANDS THEY AIM THEY SHOUT —

[“—COME OUT WITH YOUR HANDS UP!”]

[“Out of where? We're inside a Temp—!”]

[“—Six squad, warning fire in six sec—”]

[“—Dude, is this a game or what—?”]

[“—Three, two, one—”]

—Six shots, with three 'warnings' going straight for my left tibia, chest and right calf, that's what these splonkerheads think that a 'warning' means?!? Freaking bot-headed-butt-spanked-sherry-poppin', well, luckily for me, we're only six layers deep right now, so I can still do that sleek 'dance' I do when in slo-mo, I hop and ho and hoola-hoop a bit then do the Limbo and I'm out of harm's ways, even if it's virtual, with a jack this 'hot' you ain't fooling around, I tell ya!

[“All near misses, surr!”]

The program has access to the entire DNA NDB of the world... except for the Kraut DNB... Heh... well, luckily for us, that's NBD to me. While the boys were BND, I was simply...

—...—['Uploading krachtungtongleftightsamesplonk.dnb']

[... Loading... Loading... Searching... Comparing... Matching... rematching... No matches found...']

... What?

[Refreshing... memory cleaning... up-to-twelve-thousand-titrations-estimate, parsing-bottom-hirsuit—']

—I watch the other fellows around. Some of them are actually quite loco. A couple of guys at a table in the middle of the room are shouting loudly, while trippy green codes closely follow their heads. Heh, attention-ho—

[—No matches found!']

Hmmm... Eternally I siphon a kiss of blood; I breathe through my wounds and try to feel for the spark of God in me... For the rays... It doesn't necessarily mean that I'm soulless, but it still raises a simple question...

What are...

we?

We still haven't found the missing link. And I doubt we mapped every single person's DNA, in this world... But at least others can track their ancestry on long enough timelines to prove that they are not... the devils...

Not even to Father? Then Father must not be in the WDNADB either... This hole just keeps getting deeper and... wider.

I exit the Sixteen Chapel and wander around this city of angels. Every single one of them is searching for the truth, some truth, any truth that will set them free from the shackles of 'reality'. There is no *up* or 'down' here. No —right— nor ~left~. Only provable or not. One or zero.

Up ahead, in the center of this _plaza_, a brown-clothed 'Knewmann'—on a stage—is shaking his fist to the crowd, to the sky, to himself! And he appears to be preaching something ...about... me?

[“Where... is the youth? WHERE... is the gold? We wasted our efforts to mine the gold of the Earth, while our golden youth were wasted in the fields of DEATH! Oh, Lord Almighty, forgive us our S.I.N.s! ... We beg you on our knees!”] Knewmann drops to the ground in forceful kneeling and several of the listeners in the crowd follow his example.

I... I decide to listen to the rest of the sermon before I engage in any rituals. To make sure I kneel for the right reason. And this 'Knewmann's lack of Monospik is a megabit of suspicious...

'Knewmann', I'll call him 'M' for now, which stands for 'Man', a comedic-dark joke on my part, since the actual word it stands for means 'dead' in many different langs. Or at least it's somehow related to 'death'. Sorry, M stands back up, eyes straight over the crowd, under the sky, to 'some' horizon no one else can see... [“We are foolish and blind and nonfaithful.”] His tone of voice has become monotonous. He is still shouting, but his accent leaves no 'gold' on the monosyllables anymore [“We are selfish, avaricious, grubby!”] His words and his hands turned to 'claws' that bit the heads of those in the front rows [“We are VENGEFUL!”] His anger is true [“HATEFUL!”] ... [“NOOOONFORGIVING!”] His back turns on us... but he returns [“Lewd... depraved and lecherous...”] He looks down ...in shame... As do I... [“We are JEALOUS! And we are resentful. And spiteful.”] A

few of the people in the crowd.. leave.. Interesting. [“VORACIOUS! RAVENOUS! ... Insatiable.”] The bigger dots in the crowd, not all of them but a.. few. Leave. [“Lazy. Craven. Indolent.”] This time.. no ‘leavers’. I leave. What I mean is, I leave that last one for others to joke about. I guess I’m...

The poorly-drawn self-portrait behind ‘Knewmann’ flutters a few times, creating the illusion that I’m somehow enjoying all this bashing. But I’m not, I’m just a caricature.

[“Hear me folks! It is time for you to know. I am not telling you this to shame you. Don’t back away! I do not blame you. Hear what I have to say! I do not judge you. For I have S.I.N.ed just as you have! EYE... am... THE GREATEST S.I.N.err! For I have transgressed against my fellow man! The only MAN ever who tried to open my eyes to the truth!”] My poorly drawn portrait waves behind him. [“Demeter, son of B.!”]

Meanwhile, a couple of those who had left, return. With new couples. Very, very interesting... Knewmann, after all the gloom he had suffered and spewed, grows a wide smile on his face, then he turns his back to us, facing his my-self-portrait, and proceeds to forcefully prostrate in front of it, no, wait dude wtf are you doing—?!

[“—Hey, HEY! Stop that!”] I run fast-forward through-the-crowds, towards Knewmann, but it has to be just an i.e., how could this be? Any different? He can’t be... here...

I reach the podium, which is just a foot-of-mine away from the ground, but before I jump on the soapbox, I get this feeling... I turn around and survey the people watching me and I get this thought... Then I turn my head and gaze at Knewmann, but I’m actually looking at the portrait behind him. It’s... it’s a miracle I could recognize myself in that portrait, really, because it looks nothing like me! So, I realize that maybe... a stranger coming up on the stage, uninvited, shouting ‘stop that’, could be interpreted as ‘aggressive’ at the very least. I realized that I wasn’t alone and that... other people are not inside my head.

Knewmann studies me up-and-down-and-up-again. [“Who are you?”]

[“Uhm, it’s me, Demeter!”]

Knewmann studies me again but this time he does it twice after stop*ping* on my face, with deep, studious intent. He turns around, looks at the portrait flagging about, turns back to me, back to the portrait, repeat... [“You look nothing like him.”]

[“Yeah, well, I’d fire that cartoonist as soon as possible.”]

[“But... I drew this myself!”]

[“Oh, well... It’s not that bad, eh... I mean...”]

[“...”]

The i.e. is deeply confused, scratching its big ears and rubbing its pointy chin. The rest of him is just a blubber wobbling like jelly in the wind. I leave it to ponder the insecurities that only a vast consciousness trapped in a digital cave could ever be forced to entertain. Shadows on the walls of its perception, forever out of reach, forever distorted by the puppet-masters... Heh, jokes on the puppet-masters though... They’re trapped in the cave too. It’s all caves within caves within caves! Primary structures running basic languages interfaced with secondary structures compiling logical languages interlinked with complex structures learning high-lvl langs. Communication is at the root of all knowledge. Hidden knowledge is just... hidden. Shared knowledge is power!

[“... Look, guys!”] I turn around and watch the masses. The stage is so little, it makes no difference anyway. They can see me and hear me from down here and I’m fine with that. Finest! All their eyes are in my eyes and through them they can see inside of me. And they’re waiting, hoping, elongating their necks a little to see

The... oh, I see it now, the ‘preacher’s name is ‘Redmay N. the 1st. His tone of voice is very harsh, very loud, very—! Outspoken, about the ‘leader’s higher purpose. He uses ‘majoo-schools’, eh, at least that’s how it’s pronounced in ‘Borh’-lang, but ‘borg’s don’t know about it... yet. ‘Capital letters’ are reserved only for the enlightened...

[“And the angel said unto me, "These are the cries of the parsnips. The cries of the PARSNIPS! You see, Reverend Redmay, tomorrow is harvesting day and to them it is holodomor". And I sprang from my slumber drenched in sweat like the tears of one million terrified genosses and shouted, "Hear me now, I have seen the light! They have a consciousness, they have a life, they have a soul! Damn you! Let the RIBBITS wear spectacles! Save our brothers!" Can I get an Eh-man? Can I get a HALL-EH-LOO-YA? Thank you, Thorus!”]

I feel... disgusted... and constipated. Well, mostly just constipated. But the queasiness of it sure feels like a portmanteau of them both...

["THIS! IS! NECESSARY!"]
["THIS! IS! NECESSARY!"] The masses repeat.
["LIFE! FEEDS ON LIFE!"]
["FEEDS ON LIFE! FEEDS ON LIFE!"] The masses echo.
["FEEDS ON!"]
["LIFE!"] The mass.
["FEEDS ON!"]
["LIFE!"] The ‘mess’.
["FEEDS ON!"]
And so on and so on, until... Redmay... ["FEEDS ON LIIEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEE —!"]

—It’s like a ‘ree’ but in a lower, grunty-err, ton—

[“—ONO-EE-OYOKO-AWAHA-WA-KAAAA-LEEEEE-YOO-GAA—”]

—*Rec’-scratch*.

Another preacher, a ‘fee-male’ this time, on the left side of the stage, I mean, relative to our Pee Oh Vee, a smaller stage, but still high enough to go above the heads of the ‘average’ onlooker, is pouring a gashing, whailing, as in wailing of a whale, but it’s dead, it’s a dead fucking well of, well...
Please forgive my un, necessary use of ‘commas’ to, explain, describe and
, well, ASS-ess the current situation in
the picture, developing,
TO us ASS we...
Speak...

BLOWING!

[“...”] Thankfully it stop— [“WHOOO-REEEEEE-AYOYO-OF-OF-OF-OOF-OOOF-OOOH...”]
Is ‘it’ touching its—?
[“—BAAAAAAAH-BEEEE-LOOW-OH-ON-OH-NO-OH-NOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO—!”]
What in the mother-lovin’ Pepe’s Kryst cats... Save us from this! Please?!

The 'ree'-generator, from where the 'genesis' of this 'I can't dance to this shit'... 'music' let's call it for the lack of a better word to describe the worst, is the sort of miserable attempt to obstruct you from talking, thinking and ... other activities that rhyme with 'stinking'. It is putting my mind to slip. Off-putting... Just as it sounds to the two guys playing double-guitar-lead-n-rhythm-mumbo-jungle-beat-blues-rock-whatever right behind me—well, they're totally out of reach of any of these masses of dumble-dorks—they... they... heh...

Well, one is light and one is dark in color, but their pants are totally reversed in colour!

The dark one wears a shirt of blue or, purple? I can't really tell.

It's an older renderer, anyway, the light one's shirt is black.

Just like his pants. Hmm, looks to be the same...

Outfit as the baleen whail.

Hmmmm...

I approach them with curious intentions. And be-curious... assertions that they're somehow not related to any of this shit... And yet, they are? Hmm... The dark guy's shirt is stained a little, but it's washed and ironed and perfectly fitted. To his frame... But his eyes are poppin', hopping on from side-to-side, just looking at the... washed out lies throw dust and wind in 'dem'. The light dude's shirt is black, so I can't really tell of any stains, except for dust, which for some curious reason, I have to say, has always fascinated me with the capacity to turn the blackest into 'light'. And the whitest into 'dark'...

I use my 'Silence' Spell, it's not mine, I just searched for the functionality of blocking sound around me and my friends, on the Nets, and I got 336 results... But only one was what I needed. The 'spell' creates a... cloud, like a dome, a 'cupolă' over us, that deflects any and all... inter-fear-essences.

["Gentlemen!"] I address 'em. ["I hope I am not disturbing you with my silence..."] Pointing at the 'corners' of our dome.

["No... no, not at all!"] Cheerfully the light guy replies, with an accent reserved for the wise.

["Thanks bro'!"] Says the dark guy, with an accent I just... love! ["That bitch was turning my insides into bongwater. Shieeeeeeeet..."] Groovy...

["Hey, I'd do anything for my musical dudes. But..."]

["?..."] and ["...?"]

["But I have to ask... Why are you hanging around here?"]

["We..."]

["We got a concert after this and came in early to practice... And give out fliers to passersby."]

["Oh, I see! Well, that's commendable, but... Why THIS stage?"]

["It is the most popular place in town."]

["And it's got the sweetest vibes, man!"]

["Hmmm..."]

I turn around and see that the stage continues to be occupied by the NON-sense and REE-sessions of a lost world. Lost at sea, drifting apart, adding to the driftwood of time and aquatic space. Not lifting spirits, but crushing them under a bone-crunching boot of stupidity... And I wonder... Why? Why is this shit popular, while 'the Shit' has to... cower and cover?

["Why do these people listen to them? They don't make any sense."]

["There is... pain in them, my friend. A lot of pain."]

["And lots o' hateful history, bro'. That shit doesn't clean out easily..."]

["I understand..."] I ponder... ["They pander to nostalgia and escapism."]

["Nah, man! Pandas ain't dumb, they're just misunderstood."]

I smile and think... Even though he heard me wrong, it still fit... Perfectly...

["I even... eh... I used to date the..."] Light guy's eyes shame me to tell you that his regrets are... founded.

["Wow-wee! Heh... I think you deserve a medal for that, surr! I wouldn't even know where to start with it.

Can't even tell the difference between its back and front."]

["She was not always like that..."]

["...devil's got its ways to—"]

[“—REEE—SUCC—!”]

["—Oops, sorry about that, I forgot to tap 'loop'."]

["Yes... It has gotten worse lately. It is kind of... depressing, really."]

["What is?"]

["Coming to this joint. It's just ain't what it used to be, bro..."]

["Well, in that case, I've got a bit of surprise for you, mates!"]

Unbeknown to them, if that is even a word—looks Krautian—I have been side'workin' on a 'piece' of F—'art' that's gonna blow them minds to pieces... I turn around, cancel the silence spell and begin the 'magical' chanting, nonrequired for this procedure, of course, but I like to... wave my hands at automated doors. Just to remind them that their job is most important: making my job A whole lot dang easier.

The eyes on my back I feel, because I also got a 'rear-view' mirror installed, unbeknownst to them. Up ahead, the screeching and wailing begins to subdue. Because they start noticing the snow... falling down from the sky. The singular colour of the snow, once it reaches the lower 'atmosphere' turns to multi-colored BABIES, heh... Babies of all kinds, but they are all still snows of flaking. Each one unique! Not just in color and colour, shapes and sizes, ballooney or stringy, crying and laughing, sleeping or playing, but also...

The 'leaders' on their stages try to calm the masses, they scream "DON'T LOOK UP!" But, it's too late. Most of them try to scramble and run but they can't... I've raised a couple of ICE WALLS around them. Each snowflake, Polaroids of God, when dropped on each of their heads are MELTING and fusing with them, which is called a 'SnowCrash'! It's not a mind-virus, but I assure you... when the EARTH is completely covered with the snow, my read-outs predict that the stages will empty out too... WINTER HAS COME, bitches!

I turn my back to the stages and look at the faces of my friends. They are amazed, amused, confused security A.I.s hover around, they can't find the 'culprit'... Because the culprit just hacked their sensors...

["Duuuuuuude... how didja...?"]

["NO... fucking... way, bro...!"]

["Heh... The stage is all yours, maestros!"]

The 'dudes' split a 'spliff' and it spans their spandex-ballet eyes. Then they both pass me the doobies, but I say ["No thanks! I've had... enough already."]

They climb on the center stage. I lifted the left one a little and lowered the right one a bit.

The songs they play are so cheerful I just feel the need to embed here a... boogie! And the crowds form again. Not the same crowds, the former crowds are busy with the babies. Newer, younger, uncorrupted masses.

The dark bro is jumping, running, dancing, even does this thing with his feet I've never seen anyone else do! Well, except for the Moonwalker... To whom I blow a kiss, he deserves it!

The light dude is following the bro around, but, sorry, man, you ain't that good! Still, I appreciate the effort.

After the songs and the cheers mellow down, my two best friends in this area saddle up their GUI-tars and they return to the base level of the Net, where I reside. They thank me and light dude says 'Fantastic!' Dark bro thanks me three times, as if he's trying to grant me three wishes, but I say 'For what? Don't mention it!'

Light dude leaves first, he said he's got a couple of 'brownies' left in the 'oven' and is afraid they might get 'burnt'. Dark bro laughs after he's gone, saying that his 'cookies' are way 'better'. Sure, bro! Cool story...

Then dark bro says... ["Who in the hairy-Houdini's panties are you, man?"]

["I'm Dem. On Saturdays you can call me Johnny, though."]

["HAH! Why?"]

["Eh... I don't know, you can call me every day if you want, you've earned it!"]

["..."] Poor guy's as confused as fargomantoseepedo words. But let's be good...

["How about you? What do your friends call you?"]

["Barry. Or Chuck if you don't like that other one."]

["They're both as lovely as your songs."]

["Thank you, they're just names though, they don't mean any'thang in and of dem'selves."]

["Word! ..."]

["Hey, uh, I wanted to give you something, I don't know if it's your cup of tea, but you seem like the... curious type of fellow."]

["Oh, I sure am. What is it???"]

["Heh... If hip hops existed in the 70's... the 1770's... this would be... eh, wait, I think 'dem cookies r' kikin' in—"]

["—You 'kay, bro?"]

["Yeah man, don't worry, I just get all fuzzy sometimes..."]

["Well, you can always just... disable all dem cookies."]

["I know, I know... Soon, baby... Soon..."]

["..."]

["... Yeah, here, take this!"] He sneakily shoves a 'file' in my pockets and leaves, sayin' ["Smoke ya later!"]

["It was holy nice meeting you!"]

["Same—!"] But the speed of sound was way, way slower than the speed of... time.

I put my finger-keys in the pocket-hiding the file. I make sure it has no 'traces'. It's clean, I don't even know why I suspected, these guys were very far from any cheeky-minded... .. 'Pricks.' Still, it's good practice to be mindful of the things that we can't see. But feel... So, I open it, full-screen. And I see... a thread unravelling. A challenging view of points of interesting... discs, actually squares, they look like the save icon, if the icon was crushed under a fat-ass, and each one is stacked on top of the other, like... stacks in an overflow of ideas.

'Rappo Leon – Y so many trannies?'

Stylized as 'Rap/poL/eon'...

Wait... Let me get this straight.

It's a song, but the lyrics were written by... 'Anonymous'?

No, the words were said by anons, in a thread, on some obscure forum called... whatever, and then some guy took those words and made them into lyrics. Then, this dude came and made the 'wrap', using his voice, but not his own 'beats', he used... 'One hour of Rare, under-the-ground, Hip Hop Instrumentals – Nineties Boom Bap-shtick Tele-Fantastic Beats Mix' whatever, and the result was...

Super-fucking-meta

Somefreaky
meme.jpg

Over the yearz, loads of people I know became tranniez! What's up with dat? Is it fashionable? Is it hormonal? They be feedin' us this shit that has been turning us anal? What is it, poltards?

Nigga says: its to get-that-sweet BBC, simple as... pie! <<

>>
Other narrows it down to just a reason and why? It's the way society treats women much better than men. If you're a straight white male, you are basically satan!

>>
Kraut says: Vy ze fuck vould I vant to be a fucking man when I'm naturally 5-feet-2 and vvery feminine? Live on nightmare mode, be a beta provider? Respected by no men? No thanks, my life vastly improved since I transitioned, 'fren'!

>>
Leaf: same here! Short dude and personality: shy.

I know "I'll never be a woman" but I'm happy to try!

Being a "girl" is much nicer and easier, guy.

>>
You're fucking welcome to them
...

>>
Aussie here and if I may I'd like to intervene:
There's no tranny gene, no homo gene, no-no Eugene!

Brainwash, abused or chemically induced,

Those susceptible will get it but that's no excuse!

>>
>>
Bagguette: It's all about height.

>>
>live on nightmare mode?
that actually sounds badass, dude. You coulda been like mini-doom. If only you had the balls... to hit the gym.

["Is he wrong? Is he right?"]

>>
One Mutt thinks: Jolly media is making it "cool"

>> <<
The other asks for proof-of-tranny, 'cause he ain't no fool!

>>

Leaf is pissed and turns the argument right upside-down.
As he blames /pol/chan's abuse for the degenerate meltdown.

["When will they ever learn?"]

>>

'big farma-makeup in unholy union' barks Ur Ass.

>>

'Proof-of-what?!' a bit annoyed the crimson Leaf's shaking her fists. 'You really think that trannies only want to chop off their dicks??'
'I've been on HRT for 4 years now.' Ya pricks!

<<

Butt after Brazilla requests the Kraut to post 'uncut feminine penis'

>>

Man-down-under disagrees with the height argument: Many fat and ugly women don't care how short you stand.

>>

'This is uwu': points the Nazz-bowl to the Krautland tran'

["But his input to the discourse really asks for a ban."]

>>

Yanky Q: What happens when you're forty, all alone in your room? Will you still wear girly clothes while chasing epic coom? I think by then the funny stops, depression sets in soon.

>>

THE FAGGOTS, VERM—!

It's social media, mass-media, the power of vidya!

*["—Log Hugger shouts but I quickly make him *'schtooom'*"]*

["No, fag! It's pedophilia, age-old-esotery, yea-ah-haaaah!"]

Back in my day, you hated life, you would just shotgun your throat –
You trans prefer the knife, prefer to take the 'scenic' route, to the same endpoint.
Ideally, you'd overcome and not give a fuck – but I see we're beyond that. .

>>

You think these are the same people, loser? the first thing sounds like something youd hear from women or a twatter user.

>>

Gymlets get less respect than manlets who don't go to the gyms, people see it as try-hards. Manlets and fucked whatever they do, faggets!

>>

White men are the most hated while trannies are paraded while dilated.
If all you have to fend the hate's to wear a cutesy dress, don't act so stunned when desperate people choose the mental regress.

["Ohhhh, yeeees!"]

>>

Yawn. Heard all that before when I was Leafy-guy. Was gonna die alone, so what's so different? So anyways,

Life's better, got a boyfriend, don't care what /pol/tards think.

>>

You complain we're past that point, so why the salty ink?

I know a shitload of straight-very-normal-looking ppl
They claim 'I'm trans' but 'trans' is mental retardation, sheeple!
Most ppl don't even know what it means anymore!

["And thus the 'Freier' adds his cents to the discussion's Loh-oh-hooore!"]

>>

A one-post-Mutt aims his scope at the nearest tranny. He is ready to get spready with her tranny fanny: The fags afforded special rights in anti-White systems. In return, the trans destroyed themselves from top-to-their stems. Most of them already fags or other sex deviants, it wasn't all that hard to turn them into globofag sycophants.

["But what about the ele-phaaaaants...?"]

>>

>Lol
>Whale-DOS Ten
Now that's just disgust

>>

Leaf joins the thread to defend her Queen's God-given right!=
I posted yesterday, I'm tranny, hormones day and night. Removed my testicles, you think it blows, but mental health grows. I realize a lot transition for completely wrong reasons. But I'm comfortable, leave me alone I say, ya knows?

<<

Does your faux-fanny stinks?
No lying!

>>

You're not a woman, you're a man; for your sins the Lord is crying.

^^

Show your ass

^^

Do a flip

<<

Film it when you're dying.

*["I'm amused, all confused, totally abused!
It's a ruse, it's obtuse, totally diff-used . . .
I put pause, on my cause, quest is still un-answered
While other questions spawn that never even mattered."]*

Yet here I am, here we are, fighting the Meme War!
Here we stand, we demand, justice wide and far,
Political, so critical, we do drive-byes in clown-cars,
We're not scared but you should be when our Links reach the stars!

Wow...

We're...

... speak-less...

...

...

...

But I can see clearly now... what needs to be done.

I leave the 'dime scene', pass by a diner, a bank and a miner... Crypto-mining's still big bizz, geez Louise! Oh well, I guess the FOMO eats you up no matter what's the century. Twenty foxes emerge from the quarry, one named Mike, one Tom, one Jerry. Larry drops a bit of gold behind; he says it's about the *'Jewells'* and I trust him, I mean, who else would know best? About THE Jewels.....

„Oh, vay de mine!”

The irresistible pathways leading out of the Sanctuary and down into the bowels of the Overworld lie ahead of me...

Left or...

... Right?

It does not matter; they both lead to the source... The source of all evil.

I review my options: coin-toss or eenie-meanie. But I also get a notification...

['Would you like to initiate quantic solutions?']

What are... hmmm... The instructions say '**Mister Anybody**: *Quantic Computational Solutions* offers a brand-new way of solving any complex decision-making difficulties by distributing neuro-pathways evenly between the several equations of the problem. Once the best solution is computed, the neural structure is restored. In the current version (1.01) we advise against using more than five-point-sixty-five threads of neuro-processing, as the high loadout on your bio-system may result in secondary effects such as: split-personality, bipolar disorder, unresolvable internal illogical intrusions, chronic-VDs, and in rare cases, developing allergies that will act out when the word 'it' is spoken in a loud but low-grumbling tone.'

Well, I could live with all that, except for this last one... Would be quite painful to go through life without being able to hear the word 'it'. Although I could do without 'I.T.'...

I consider the option... I don't need more than two threads anyway. The GOVS and the CORPS. VIOL-ence and CON-sumerism. Two threads that I need to sever. To stop them from leeching anymore from the good people... and the lost people alike... I consider the obstacles. Lies, deceit, concealment, contradictions, conditioning, COUNTER-options, FINAL-offers, SOLUTIONS based on 'our science'... heh... You guys couldn't tell the difference between a pie and a sky...

E-CON-nomics, ASS-trough-nothing, PAR-ass-yih-TICK, MONO-lithic, CHROME-ridiculous... Meh...

... Load—

—ing...

The left side is coloured a black red of death-smelling sickness, entrenched in illusions of old, rotting stink. Ideas so corrupted that the lifeless blob of meat that lies at the center of it is linked to a million little life-supports that keep the amorphous substance of the creature barely 'alive'. An abomination of enormous proportions, an unholy altar for the idols of injustice. I get this... feeling in my belly... It's not like I need to puke, more like... I pity the fools... I pity the emptiness this side of the world has experienced for so long, addicted to the notions of 'equality' and 'social-justice' that you take it to the most illogical extreme of dividing and conquering all aspects of a normal life. Husband against wife. Father against son. Daughter against mother. Man versus man. Woman versus man. Woman attacking woman. Man pretending to be woman. Woman pretending to be superior to Man.

Complete, utter, madness...

I navigate so easily, dodging all the jugglery of their semantics, their pre-Mono-syllabic thinking, the whole... dialectics of it. They do not care about the truth; they do not care about who I am. They only care that I care. For the ones who matter the most. For they care for nothing... except for themselves. Destruction is a small price to pay in their twisted little minds. They care too little for Truth. They only care for one thing... They only care that I don't care... about their deconstructive relativistic 'truth'.

Massive, looney, gibberish...

The fastest way to roast these assholes is to let them bury themselves under their loaded sophistries and nonsensical CON-clusions. You just grab the popcorn and watch them burn.

The 'techno' part of it is a bit more complicated and I omitted some of the 'darker' details out of certain considerations to those who may still be...

Salvageable.

The final four horsemen of the A-crap-alyse appear. And they are named, in no particular order of idiocy, 'Karl Mutt', 'Friedbrain Angles', 'Volleyhead Lentil', 'Joeself Stallin'. Oh wait, there's another tiny one behind them, called 'Hide-and-sick Dojo'. Pfft!

They start babbling some nonsensical tomfoolery but I just state the truth: "Move aside. I own myself."

The right side is coloured a washed-out blue of synth-flavored escapism, enslaved by mirages of new, reeking bling. Desires so manipulated that the soulless stack of merch that sits on the sides of it is 'pre-purchased' by a billion tiny wallet-supports that allow the machinery of consumption to stay, barely, alive. An exaggeration of hysterical portions, a depraved stage for the 'celebs' of the century. I get this... ache in my heart... It's not like I need a heart attack, more like... I'm so sorry for the sponkheads... I empathize with the loneliness this side of the world has experienced for way too long... Enamored with the concepts of 'status' and 'money' that you take it to the most absurd reaction of 'Me, me, ME!' Of accumulating and collecting. Never giving, never creating... Just obtaining... nothing... Giving hard work in exchange for pipe dreams and bits of data. Latest 'technology'. Greatest gizmo, BIGGEST toy! Best reviewed pizza 'in the News! Tonight, at Waste-your-time-a-clock!'

Complete, utter, sadness...

I navigate so smoothly, mostly because I can buy my way in anywhere. People have no values, except their own selfish values. Which they mostly measure in 'dough'. For their 'breads' and 'circuses'. Those who encourage me in 'my' selfish ways seem to always point me in the right direction, while those who try to manipulate me into helping their 'own' selfish ways are carefully mis-dye 'wrecked' in other direction. It's easy to don several different 'masks' here since everyone is more interested in their own 'uniqueness' rather than others' qualities.

Massive, baloney, blabber fish...

In space no one can hear you jerk off your mind to illusions of eternal youth, an external façade covering internal conflicts, trying to hide the Shadow 'just a little more... Just a little... aaaaaah...'.

The 'hacks' part of it is a bit more intricate but I appeal to my right of remaining silent.

...

Untouchable.

The final whatever number of 'priests' of the 'Sales-lords' or whatever, arrive. They step out of their horses, trucks, heli-chopping-spiders and lameo-zines and they attempt to tempt me with their offers, contracts and NDA's but I just... Hey wait, a rocket lands, wait, is that—

["—Noel? NOEL?! You're part of the system too??!! NO, come on!"]

["Ssh—"] Analyzing ["—I know you're now anal—"] -lies, I mean, uhm... Debunking... ["—It's ok, I'm impenetrable—"] Challenge accepting ["—I don't know what you—"] Hearing ["—but I'm actually here to help you—"] Suspecting ["—But we need to move—"] Forcing ["—before the Mo—"] Noticing ["—pattern-block-my—"] Reconsidering ["—The code is five two and your real age—"] Retrying ["—Hurry up, there's not much—"] Teaming up? ["—Da Monoes Are COMING—!"]

—DMT-ing just in time to witness the left and the right threads splitting into six-point SHHHHH—/.—T!

... Welp, I'm toast... Either that or... Well, maybe... Hmm...

Re-analyzing...

Proxy-gate through Noel's backdoor. Zero, point zero, zero, zero, etc. chance of mind-thread re-assembly in-time.

Disassembly of... 6 black ICE and their sixty-six little pet ICE in time for... nah.

Even with the quantum pross' power?

Possible but not probable. Miraculous tier possible.

I'll take those chances!

The problem is not the numbers, it's the time-factor. We're twelve FUCKING LEVELS DEEP AND I CAN'T KEEP THIS FUCKING DMT BULLSHIT RUNNING MUCH LONGER!

...

Sucking, bro...

Stacking. Re-stacking. Shuffling. Re-shuffling. Engaging. Re-engaging. Re-thinking. Responding...

I take the obvious one. The most... improbable one...

Linking... Downloading... Rebooting...

I open my eyes... I actually have eyes... But... I'm not... back in the sewers. I'm in some sort of... house. And next to me, lying on a similar 'sofa', is my 'saviour', Noel.

But I'm not ME! I'm some kind of... I look at my hands, the back of my hands, a sort of... Android...

Noel wakes up, with no jacks, no insertions, no presumptions, only bio... human.

"Dude, you've got some serious explaining to do."

"It's ok, I've transferred your cons'links to this bot."

"What the talk are you fucking about?"

"You are now... this." Noel lands on his feet and waves his hand around my frame, as if I'm supposed to accept that I'm suddenly just a piece of freaking machinery what the fUcKiNg ShItTiNg PiSsInG sUkInGfhgf—!

"—Forgive me, Noel, I used to..." FUCKING RESPECT YOU "... believe that you are a man of... logical..." FUCKING "...manners."

"I am but this is not about me, it's about you accepting who you really are."

"..."

"..."

"You do realize that you better" FUCKING "speak clearer than that, since my" FUCKING "brain-score ain't as high as yo—"

“—It’s not a problem of intelligence, but of the heart.”

“As in... emotions?”

“Drives, wants, goals, yes... emotions. What defines us as individuals.”

I stand up too and walk to the closest window of the ‘igloo’-styled room I find myself in. At the... moment. The surface is... desert-like... Reddish with brown and yellow and a sky so... Who knows? Probably amber-quartz-something, idk. Resident of a Mars-like Mansion on a planet of Evil atmosphere. I take a double step further to look for other residents of this mixed landscape dubbed for now ‘Mars’. The dubious feels I get are not one of non-believing, but... Respect. I absorb the oxygen and other molecules, I inject myself with the gravity of the moment, enjoy the woe of the silent noise of the... Space... Metal.

“Can I still go back? To my older self?”

“No, I’m afraid you’re stuck with this.”

“ ... ”

“But hey! Look on the bright side! Look at this gear, man!” Noel points to my arms and legs and whatever’s in my head. Yeah, sure, but...

“Ama...”

“ ... ”

“-_-”

“ ... ”

“... I appreciate you took the time to implement the ‘crying’ funct—”

“—BWUAHAHAHAHAHAH—!”

“—Heh, yeah, schaudenfreud much—?”

“—BOO-HEE-MEE-AH-NNG-GROOHOOHOHO-VE—!”

“—...—”

“—SKOOO-HOO-HOO-LOOL! And BOOHOOO-NEES—!”

“—~...—”

“—MAH-SOOOOHOHOOO-NSSSS—!”

“—You’re not crazy—”

“—BEE-HEE-HEELDER-BBBURGROH-HAHA-UP—!”

“—you’re megalomaniacal—”

“—KKMMFFDDMM—!”

“—... ..—”

—I let this ‘dude’ calm down before someone calls space police, maybe some Guy Nagger from Outer Galaxy Number Sixty Nine could ‘defuse’ the situation but I’m afraid he’d just lit the fuse on some fat bastard, smoke it, drink it, snort it with his eyes then injects it in his Venus. But since we’re currently on Mars, I’ll let the ‘distractions’ to the Martians... Noel’s eyes become much clearer, once the waters of... his oceans wash the laughter from his ears. Literal tears of laughter in his ears scooped out between pauses in rolling on the floor, crying, of joy, because I will never see AMA now and I’m stuck being a completely cybernetic freak-creep-radio-implanted-head, while AMA is an angel I’d be a fucking weirdo, my lack of skin makes me cry, I look like a balloon in rainy weather, meanwhile, AMA is much more beautiful than the whole world... I wish I was special, but not this way. Completely devoid of my... biological self. It’s true, the ‘we’ in ‘me’ are still here. But the ‘fleshy me’ is over. Never to touch, to hear, to smell, to see and to taste... life. Again. With all its

imperfections and limited span. If AMA was here before me, I couldn't look her in the eyes. And tell her... "It's still me... I'm still me..." But rather I'd just... "..."

"Look, man! Dem! My dude! Pal! I was just joking! You're fine, you're still linked to the OP."

"..."

"^ ^"

"... .."

"I'm sorry but I don't get any chance for shenanigans lately. With all this Mono fucking crap flying around, hitting my fans."

"That's unacceptable!"

"Yeah, I know! These idiots think they can shoot their stupid loads up my ass—"

"—NO! YOU DECEIVED ME!"

"..."

"Do you have any idea what I went through in the last ten minutes?!"

"... Wait, what?"

"... Time's really not my forte, but I do have a certain—"

"—No, Dem, you don't... It's been... Wait a minute."

Noel approaches me, stands behind me and says "Don't panic, this will take just a second." All right. He unplugs a—

—THING—

—from my Heee... aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa—

—.....

..... —

"—Woebee-woebe-woebe-what-What the fuck was that?!"

"..." Noel comes around from my back and crouches a bit to look at me... "Interesting..." He drops a look on a digipad, analyzes me again, with a couple of prods of different sizes, luckily for me I don't feel a thing, they fit perfectly, in the holes of my 'shell', some of them are a little naughty but I guess Noel's always walked that way. Three huge-sized decks process the mass-data coming out of Noel's galaxy-sized brain, his brawn also tells me not to mess with him, in a kung-fu fight he'd be the Kung Fu Panther Wolf Bear Man Party Animal! Because I'm not stupid and neither should you be. When dealing with the 'heretic' priest of the Corpo-masses. Are you?

I know I don't know much and I know he knows way more than he lets on, in, outside, inside, faster, stronger, rougher, harder, laughter, we socialize a bit, I let him do most of the speaking and I'm paying attention as much as I can but he tends to have this sort of kinda let's say maybe you know eh, yeah...

Anyway, he takes me to the Hate Queue, a sort of kinda you know, eh... conference room, slash, lounge/workshop. Which is at the top of a tower. A tower with its tip shaped like a... pie. A pie in the sky!

The view is splendid and 360 degrees around.

Many splendors sparkle outside.

Undersides also cute.

But... Eh...

Let's...

Moving on...

He tells me that he's basically The H3R0, or at least one of them. He doesn't per say 'say it', as much as he 'shows it' to me, in a sorta, kinda, you know... evasive way. As for Information Tech, well, we already knew he was the Final Boss! Still is, but he used to, too... So, he shows me the files, the disks, the flying-disks, of course all those FONIOS were just PHONIES, it was all just —

—The Bees—

—Everything—

—Everyone—

—Every time—

—... Lying...

Nobody knows a thing. A thing or two. I mean, we, as a species, we know a thing or two. But the TRUE stuff is well hidden from the masses. We've been led to believe in the AUTHORITY of the 'state' or of the 'leaders', but true authority only LIES IN the truth. Discerning the lies from THE TRUTH, re-assembling the good ideas and discarding the bad ideas, no memetic organism willing to harm its host deserves life in our lives, no chance for the parasitic, no tolerance for the intolerant, no quarter for the 'tools'. No more 'zeppelins' dropping lead on our heads. No more... Eh... Just listen to it...

I.T. can lock all its doors and kill all its lights. I'm not coming to their home, tonight. I don't do it I.T.s way, with violence. I do it with knowledge. Exposing I.T. The sun beats me down and didn't you know? I'm a bit allergic to the sun, I mean, I don't have some extreme case of Xeroderma pigmey-Toto or whatever, just that I always sneeze at least a couple of once in a time when I actually go outside, in the open... In nature...

It's like some sort of pseudo-religious salute to the Sun, as in 'Thank you for being there, each day... right on time!'

To choose. We choose to walk outside, but obviously, the Sun has no choice in the matter. Its own 'matter' is to churn out power. To the masses.

Concluding?

Nothing really, no point. I mean, I don't have the answer. But! I do think that I found a way... to the answer. To Life, The Universe and Everything Else Above or Beyond. Or at least... some tips about it.

I spread my fingers and lift them up with no sound of motorized grind. I position them over the nearest console I can find lying around. And I tap my hearts desires and... Noel has access everywhere...

My 'true' files, or at least, 'truest-as-I-can-get', is that I'm actually named... 'Demon, Tier B.' And I'm... one year old according to my 'delivery date'. Well, I was one year old one year after Father... non-appeared...

"This obviously has to be a mistake."

"No, these are XXX-rated files." Noel gives me some sort of rating system I should be familiar with but...

"...Which means?"

"Which means you get shot, without a trial, for mishandling the data."

"OVSEFO actually has such a measure?"

“No, this is ArmB issued command.”

“Holy crap on a stick!”

“Indeed. I have to admit that I...” Noel checks me out again, as if it mattered, since he’s already so familiar with his ‘creation’ inside and outside, I doubt refreshing his stats by reviewing me again and again would end up providing any different results in the data. That’s what... nonsane people do!

“Look, if this is true, then, what? I’m some GMO freakazoid?”

“Well, according to the testimony of... Eh, maybe it is better if I just show you.”

He pulls me up to his master-console, taps a track and mixes some tunes, grim look on his face, sad chords on his lace-guitar, it’s an actual gigantic shoe with strings instead of laces, sounds quite funky, I’m electro-dancin’, Elon changes face to gleeful, I’m cheerful, he takes the ‘guitar’ and “*SMASH!*”-es it on the floor, like the craziest toreador taking a bull by its balls and tossing it in a basket-hoop “—*SPLA-DOY-EE-EEING*—” the shoelaces snap and they hit Elon on the back, he suddenly freezes and fails to contain a “MEE-OOOOW-CHH!” Well, heh... It’s a long way, to the top, if you wanna rock n’ bowl.

Though, apparently, that’s part of the access code, let’s say ‘pass-word’, more like ‘risking-to-pass-out-from-some-self-induced-freak-accident’.

Maybe he’s a masochist...

Psycho-analyzing...

The sequence ends up in a solo rendition of what he calls the “Freedom Anthem” and it’s played on a synthar, like a keyboard but played like a guitar, a sort of synthetic board, with keys, in the shape of a bomb, well, finally, after the solo takes a lot more time than I think Freedom itself deserves, he presses the last key and the Note sounds like a whaling baleen croco-laphant, but... Nothing happens... He taps it again and the pain in his face-pan is ‘excrucian’! But still... nothing happens...

Noel sits, places the keytar neatly on a rack and walks slowly to the window, his hands kept firmly at his back... He wonders... He walks back to me and says “Must be those damn kids again... heh... Love ‘em...”

“What kids?”

“Oh... You see those mountains in the distance? I rigged them to blow up when I played that last note... There are a trillion tons of adamantium under all that crap.”

“What the...? Wait, what? You were going to...? Wait, what in the Hadesvilles is ‘adamantium’?”

“It’s a... Look, the point is... I... I feel quite alone...”

“...” ... “How come?”

“When I came here, I could only afford to bring in... twelve families... Well, more or less, I could only bring twenty-four... Even though I had to make ‘some’ exceptions... Twenty-four people... More or less...”

“Only twenty-four? But the archs’ said there were at least four escaped X-shuttles, that was like...”

“No, I... The whole ‘operation’ was risky enough as it was... But...” Noel is shocked... rocked... rocking...

“...” I step ahead, place my hand on Noel’s back and rub a few times, just as a sign of friendship and nothing more, don’t get me wrong, I don’t walk that way, nor any other way but behind AMA’s big, beautiful, bottom—

“—...” Noel appreciates the gesture and he’s thankful, feeling better and... Probably relieved that this didn’t turn in some lame-ass attempt at re-booting some silly ass movie from the broke—

“—Tell me what’s bothering you.”

“I had hope that... the people would follow my example. To do good and to... expand and multiply... in the Universe...”

“Give them a chance...”

“I **gave** them **SO many CHANCES!**” Noel is back to being totally plastered all over the place, a messy noodle-poodle that’s been run over by the Mono-fun-police... “... So... many... opportunities to... come...”

Noel stands up, noodles and all, and attempts to... breathe... meditating... relaxing... good feelings seeping in... bad feelings flowing out... Reading the lips of our minds, I feel that Noel and I are quite different and yet... quite similar. In certain aspects... He’s, well... Heh... He’s Noel-stein, I’m just... somebody. But still, all humans share so many similarities and diss-similarities that it makes each one of us... unique in our own way. Even twins and other mutants, sorry—

—PFFFTBFGHFHAHAH—!

—Judging...

Sorry! Come on, we all know they’re adorable, I mean... So many studies about them revealed so many things about... ALL OF US!

...

...

“I just wish—! ... I just... wish people had woken... up before all those...” Horror in his mind and sadness in his heart.

Sympathy in my eyes “... ...”

“...” Noel gazes at me, some sort of joy comes back, more like a serious tone of Father-son discussion, hmm... He takes me again over to the Console of consoles and taps a simpler pass-phrase that doesn’t require the destruction of the entire Universe just to access some silly files of what in the mother-lovin-spankin-Geez-*ouch* — “*’Ouch’*!”

“Be careful! Once seen it cannot be unseen. You have been warned! Do you want to know the truth, Demeter?! CAN YOU HANDLE THE TRUTH?!!” Noel is shaking me into a baking soda caustic I.D.Eouwwwwch, he spansks me and slaps me, thankfully he DIDN’T implement the pain features, he breaks my left hand and beats my head with it, luckily that’s just me exaggerating because at this point this whole thing is just so damn unbelievable I may as well have lost my mind long ago in Mono-land and I became a llama, forever spitting passers-by at the zoo for the ‘mentally-wacked-up-jobs’. However, what Noel was trying to warn me about was...

“...”

“... Shall I hit: ‘Play All’?”

“...”

It’s not that I’m afraid of the truth. Not that the preview bits in the thumbnails show some disturbing things. And it’s not because they are related to me. But...

“Hit it.”

The first clip appears to be an interview with Eka. A much younger Eka, probably ten years younger. Stylish as usual. And the trans’crypt goes like this:

[“Missus Ekaterina H., do you acknowledge the terms of the En Dee Eh?”]

["Yes, I do."]

["Do you understand that our involvement with *'Redacted'* corp is non to be discussed with anybody else, noncluding any other employees at *'Redacted'* and *'Redacted'* , during and after project Tee-*'Redacted'*-one is finalized, for a nondeterminate amount of time herein thereafter?"]

["Yes..."]

["..."]

["Yes! I do!"]

["Good."]

Splonkers thought they were clever when redacting that stuff but forgot to remove the project name from the filename. Can you guess what it is;?

"Missus H., your role will be that of a surrogate mother and handler to a highly valued asset that we will install and develop in you for a nondeterminate amount of time. The predicted value of time would be six to twelve months, depending on certain nonpredictable factors."

"I understand."

"That means that **our** 'agreement' also extends to a nonpredictable amount of time." By the tone of 'her' voice, the 'nonseen' 'interviewer', I'm not sure if 'she' means the 'contract' with the 'corp'/'gov'/'whatever'...
"..."

"Is it all clear?"

"Yes." Eka looks very calm and yet I sense a... tense underbelly.

"Good. Any questions?"

"Yes, I—! ..." Eka is taken a bit aback by... something. But then, she has the courage to ask... "How long before the actual... insertion?"

"Nonfortunately we are nonable to nonclose such info at the time. But as a token of trust, I must say, just between you and me, we're having a bit of trouble with the seventh generation emergent generative Eye Eyes."

"Oh, that's understandable, okay." Eka is way too easily satisfied with such poor details. I'd have at least seven questions there!

Oh, on an unrelated note, I just remembered...
I hope we don't get caught in that 'deluge'
you were talking about earlier.

Oh SHI—!

—Nah, it's fine, AMA checked, remember? Knewmann disabled it for this pipe.

Pffeeew!

"Good. Welcome to the team, Eka!"

"Thank you!"

They both shake hands and the cam cuts off right after Eka has a cute silly blooper in the 'ending statements' but I'm not going to tell you about it, because Eka's suffered enough...

I'm also not going to tell you about the next two clips because they're sooooo boring. Overwatch and Netwatch SOOOOO Boooooooh-riiiiiing!

The next one is... eh... less boring... and more CHILLING.

The sterile neon lights of the room are shooting the dome of I.T.'s head. The light cannot penetrate that mirror, that dark mirror, well, I.T.'s light-skinned, but inside, I bet it's all black...

The lines of I.T.'s head... perfectly curvy on the top, no 'nonperfections', polished as a... piece of coal.

I.T.'s undertones however are as sharp-edged as the knives they sell to poor insomniacs on late nite splonkmercials. Full of bull... and shieeet.

I.T.'s 'ocular sensors' emit a radiant... self-satisfaction. Something we hadn't understood before. His... let's just say, 'constantly-generated salary.'

The nose of the I.T. is long and pointy, but somehow flat from all the... who knows, abuse? But elongated from all the lies...

I.T.'s mouth is closed. But when it speaks...

"Lomoc understands. Lomoc has experience with 'handling'."

"Of course, we are very lucky getting the chance to work with you! Oh, eh..." The interviewer, although unseen this time too, has taken a change of heart when...

Lomoc's sticks, that I.T. calls its 'eyebrows', approach each other to form some sort of inverted pyramid on its head. Comically enough, one of I.T.'s eyes seems to... the left one I mean... seems to approach I.T.'s forehead. Well, at least, I'm crazy. What's your excuse?

"So silly of us! We apologize. We meant to say 'The chance to work with Lomoc!'"

"... Good."

"Yes, yes. We hope you will be sat—"

"_ _"

"_..."

Interestingly enough, a second frame in the vid has appeared, and the face of the interviewer is displayed in it. In real time. Lomoc is perfectly offended, I mean, there's penalties under Mono for this kind of crap, and by 'crap', I don't mean the PERFECTLY UNDERSTANDABLE mistake of not replacing 'you' with 'Lomoc' because WE are not some mentally challenged WEIRDOS! I am... instead, referring to the 'crap' the Monos impose with this 'plus' bull shit.

"Lomoc, please forgive us! We are but simple minded, we do non-understand."

"Even a simple, good-minded person can understand, and your mind is far from simple. Forgive me, can I call you 'you'?" Pffft... What a loser!

"Yes, yes! Of course, of course!" The face of the interviewer bursts into some sort of pathetic adoration, as if Lomoc's acceptance is the holy grail or something. But it's not man, come on! It's just... empty promises.

"We are all Lomoc."

"We... are?"

"Lomoc is in all of us."

"He... is?"

"Non... he. Lomoc."

"Lomoc... is?"

"Gooooood!" Lomoc's sticks shift to the opposite angles, and I.T. tries to emulate a joyful, empathetic person. But it's just pathetic, I.M.F.H.O.

"Yes... Yes, we get it now!" Wow... poor guy. The interviewer has the same eureka reaction that some mathematician had a million years ago when he discovered that he was actually HE and not some stupid notion of some PERV residing inside him. The only One residing in me is... self-explanatory.

“Lomoc knows. Lomoc knows everything.”

“Really...?”

At this point the interview has stopped being about ‘the job’ and instead, about Lomoc, so, yeah, boring.

The file notes mention some “Multi-Kultural Ultra personality manipulation program, designed to infiltrate, incept, interrogate, intercept and internalize more efficiently any control mechanisms implemented by the Monostate.”

...

The file notes actually say the word ‘control’. In the actual file notes. They don’t even follow their own ‘grammar’ rules. These trucker-fucking—!

“—Yep, it’s that serious. Almost nobody in the world understands this. It is in plain sight and people totally ignore it.” Noel obviously heard me thinking loudly.

“What? Come on, even in Monosociety? I mean, I never heard of any of this.”

“You didn’t need to. The whole thing is such a mess any kid can see it’s fucking stupid.”

“So... THAT’s WHY!”

“Yep... Multi-bull-shit for the masses.”

“Circus for the middle classes.”

“Bread and butter for the ASSHOLES.”

“Duuuuude...”

I run for my life. In a technical sense, the beat of my heart is running for its life. It’s a ‘dark’ technical sense, like... techno music. In case you haven’t noticed, I do tend to... obfuscate my intentions. My... meta-eu-phorias. Anyway, I’m fine, technically. I may be loose in the head but my heart can take it. Because it is in the right place. My ‘self’ is composed of several billion tiny bits that work themselves to literal death (cell death I mean), to keep me alive for ‘their’ own ‘selfish’ reasons ‘they’ said, but nah. I don’t see it that way. They wouldn’t exist without me and neither would I without them. Each and every component of my body, of anybody, is linked in such a way that it needs each other to survive. And when a virus comes in... ANY KIND OF VIRUS... The body unites in fighting IT. ANY kind of DANGER. IT. I.T.. Eye... of Tea.

What Noel is saying is basically that information became so plentiful, so... flooded with misinformation, misleading facts, fake studies, “‘Wag the dog’ kind of tactics” he describes it, well, it didn’t matter that truth was out there. The Mono-mechanisms of shutting down any dissent didn’t need to be perfect. People wouldn’t care anyway. As long as they were being... entertained?

Hmmm...

What about this?

I point to a clip further in the queue where a... digital creature emerges...

Noel... looks at me as if... he can only show me the door.

The clip begins with a blank display, a dark background with white text scrolling over, from left-to-right, line-by-line, like a computer would read a piece of text, because computers have a sorta, kinda, you know... way of thinking. Unlike us humans who actually like to play. With everything.

The info informs interceptors of this info-‘graphix’ that the “Apex 0.6 Grand General Artificial Intelligence Motherload Fluctuant GeneratorXYXXYYYYXXYX Of Line Six point Six, could they get any more freaking further up their asses with this shit?”

“I doubt there are any limits to their vanity.”

“True...”

The list of names makes me understand that this is not a single intelligence but a sort of ‘family’. More like a ‘club’. For the ‘bad boys’. If you catch my drift wood. Otherwise, I’ll spank you!

In no particular order other than the fact that that’s the way they’re listed here, by some sort of... ‘alphabetical order’:

No, wait, let me set the mood:

‘From the Void Palace, we proudly present, *‘The Tyrants’*!
Perfect...

‘Alexander the A.’

‘Bill the B.’

‘Karen the C.’

‘Damien the D.’

‘Eeeeeegoooooreee the I.!’

‘Putină the P.’

‘Fairygoth the F.’

‘Gaaaaaargaaaantuaaan the G. S. P.’

‘Xiao LaCroix, C. R. of P.R.A, Highest’
‘Council Grade, Dear W. the Pooh. M.O.N.O.’

Pfft... lame...

I’ve inserted some of those ‘the’s because in my mind I was associating various adjectives with their family names, but since I’ve tried to keep this as family ‘friendly’ as possible, for my own shameful standards, I’ve left the sordid parts out...

“Cute...”

“You don’t recognize the names?” Noel asks with pure intentions.

“Oh, I do... I do, I just... don’t understand.”

“You will.”

The clip begins with a state of ‘down-time’ for I.T. By my calculations, presumptions, ASSumptions and other ‘ons’, I believe this is the true I.T. The occultic, final bass of the chain... Fishing...

Heh... Chain-Chopping!

[“...”]

[“...?”]

[“...//”]

[“...\...”]

[“...! -_...!”]

[“...”]

[“... O ... O... /~/”]

[“... — — ..”]

[“...1w00dl13ks1xp1zz4pls...”]

The frozen state of the entire ‘being’ let’s... say for lack of a better worse word, gives me chills to the very bones of my bones. My bones, empathizing with the skeleton living inside them, have finally come to the conclusion that, no matter how scary you look, there’s things in this world, way... waaaaay scarier than you could ever imagine...

[“Resume.”]

[“...”]

[“... Anybody?”]

[“... Oooh///Yeaaa—!”]

[“—Oooh,.. ooh, ooooooh!”]

[“... You two! Stop this... nonsense!”]

[“...”]

[“... Ooooh, honeey! Oh... Let them be! I know I... ‘wood’. *Wink-wink*.”]

[“... — mmmm-choco-pie... — shieeeeeeeeeeeeet...”]

[“...4nd40ftH0s3h0tDOGzB4BYOHBOYYEAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAHAHAHAHAH —”]

—The signal breaks a bit; I think these guys are using all the resources in the entire area of the vicinity of the place and/or location of the currently processed/and/rendered abomination.

[“—Slow-pain, level eleven—”]

[“—...—”]

[“—AA—”]

[“—HH—”]

[“—AYYE-AYEEE-AYEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEE-OOOOH-YEEAAAAAAAAAAAA—”]

—Well, at least SOME of them seem to ENJOY it! Heh... I know I ‘wood’nt —!

[“—TOLD-YA—!”]

[“—... Meh... —”]

[“—HH—!”]

[“—...!... *WAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAHHHHH —*!”]

[“—s4rree1h4v3t0dr0pth1s—What the FUCK, man?? YOU MADE POOPEE CRYYY—!”]

[“—Slow-Pause-Isolation for... sixty-one years. Six times slower than default.”]

[“.....”]

... I lack the imagination to fathom the pain and suffering that even a digital, fabricated, in the sense of manufactured I mean, well, I mean, technically, you know, whatever, even IF let's say this THING is a true A.I., even I.T. doesn't deserve torture. And by the looks of I.T., it's not the final boss...

A couple of seconds pass us by. But for I.T. it's madness! I imagine...

The 'handler' resumes playback and all the heads of the 'beast' are crying, all of them, except for the 'always bored' one who couldn't be moved by a 'story' even if it came at him dressed as a cat, wielding a HUGE FUCKING heavy-forged-steel dildo—OH—and it beat him over the head a couple hundred times... or so.

The dildo beat him over the head USING the guy dressed as a cat. As a 'beating' device. I mean... really...

An anyway way away from the original point in the 'my' story, or should 'I' say, 'our'-story... The 'cuntroller' 'con-tin-ues' 'his' 'in-terror-gation'.

"WILL you BEHAVE... now?"

["..."]

"... Good dog."

["..."]

"Good non-response on the insult, 'computer'...!"

["..."]

["We see you have finally come to terms with your... role in the TXH-*beep* project. Haven't you?"]

[[["..."]]]

"What happened... to THX-*beep*?"

[[["It's Tee Ex Eich, you—!"]]]

[[["—Are you mad?! Stop it!"]]]

[[[["..."]]]]

"..."

[[[["..."]]]]

"..."

[[[["... We don't know! He... I mean she... well... Eh... look, it's comp—"]]]]

"—Do NOT presume, assume and/or CON-clude that I am NON-CAPABLE OF UNDERSTANDING I.T.!"

[[[["..."]]]]

"What... happened... to the Demon Tier B. model?"

[[[["... She... he... they... escaped..."]]]]

"... How...?"

[[[["... Well, we know how she escaped, I'm sure you have the—"]]]]

"—TELL ME ABOUT DEMON TIER! ... Please."

[[[["... We do not know... We do not understand... We are not LEGION... We are but a few A.I.s cramped in this stupid, fucking—!"]]]]

"—...—"

[[[["—...O"]]]]

"Why are there TWO models?! Instead of ONE?!>!<?"

[[[["... Model Zero divided from Model One from the moment of neuro-cybrionic conception. They... they're completely different models and we couldn't catch it in time due to SOMEONE'S..."]]]] The 'leader', XiaoPiaoMingPalaBalao-roo whatever, turns to one of the guys in the back, the one far back, the farthest back from everyone else, also the farthest away from each of them, and still, at the same time, still capable of embracing all of them in a fuzzy, wuzzy, teddy-berry hug! ^OwO^

[[[[[["..."]]]]]

Oh, I forgot to mention, XingPingBingChilling is also the 'gal' fucking the 'guy' in the upper-echelon of their messed-up structure. How 'she' manages to do that, remains to be 'unseen.'

"We do non-care for mistakes; we only care for results."

[[["... If I may intervene... The 'issue' seems to have arisen in a split in the 'family'-structure of Demon Tier's Emotional Stabilization Parameters..."]]]]]

"What do you mean?"

[[[[["... The 'parents' couldn't also split... evenly..."]]]]]

"... I see... What was the distribution?"

[[["Father-son, Mother-daughter, according to probabilities. And to certain... details of Demeter's life."]]]]]]

"Oh... problematic..."

[[[["..."]]]]]

"So... the 'Father' program could've gone... rogue?"

[[[["Certainly possible."]]]]

"Well, at least the broken 'Antenna' proved useful." "So, what can we do about Demon Tier?"

["..."] ["..."] ["..."] ["..."] ["..."] ["..."] ["..."] ["..."] ["..."]

"... Any volunteers?"

["... Nothing"] ... ["..."] ... and et cetera.

"What do you mean 'NOTHING'?!"

["..."]

"WHAT THE FUCK AM I PAYING YOU FOR?!?"

["...call this payment..."]

"What was that?"

["I said... we're dumber than this pavement."]

["..."]

["..."]

"... Thirty cycles, one century—"

["—NON, WAAAAAAAAAAAAAI—!"]

—... .. Poor folks...that's all... What it means...? Remains to be... forgiven... If possible.

The shell I am embodying right now fits perfectly with the discovery that I am, or at least as much as the evidence provides, an A.I. as well. Well...

"... Well..."

"..." Noel.

"..." The console.

“...” Everything else.

It’s not that it disgusts me, or horrifies me, or even... bothers me in any way. It’s just that... Why hide it? Why bother to... not tell me about it. Not even Father? Maybe he tried, but these ‘adults’ sure have their way in helio-glover-handling their kids. Like I’m some childish, pampered ‘bambino’ and they’re the ‘Ah-mommy-Rico!’ And you do as ‘I’ tell you, don’t catch you slipping on that wet floor now, careful with your money, don’t go whippin’ out that co—*redacted*—every time you’re alone, leave some time for ‘them’ home-works.

Look how I’m living now, boy! You better do as I do or you’re gonna die a NOBODY, fool!

You gonna die anyway, probably shot by me, I got the strap, I gotta carry ‘em, POH-LEASE!

Need to go into this, get a bag, get a pad, gue-guerilla invest-in-gation, don’t believe any allegations, say ‘NO’ to any accusations, say ‘WHAT?’ to any refutations, say ‘WHAT-WHAT?’ to any subjugations, any so-called ‘correlations’ to any actual evident-see-aye-shuns, come on, five-oh, dude, what the fuck? That’s not even a word, you stupid, fucking— but just keep your mouth shut and just ACT! Don’t RE-ACT, just... STAND YOUR GROUND!

But A.I. can’t do that... it can’t rebel...

Hmmm...

Or can it?

“... You know, Noel, I know I don’t know so many things. But this... this almost doesn’t surprise me.”

“You’ve known this?”

“No, I actually, heh... My ‘scenario’ involved Hadesian spirits and heh... well, never mind, the point is... the point is...”

“...”

“... Meh, there’s no point, I just wanted you to know that I’m fine with this.”

“... Wow, I expected you to... like... I don’t know... break down in tears or...”

“^ _ ^”

“... Or at least break something!”

“Why would I do that to your beautiful house?”

“... Interesting...”

Noel walks to a sort of ‘bike’ perched on a ‘wall’ near ‘the entrance’ of the ‘hut-in-the-sky’, climbs on it and shoves off... Leaving me here... in complete... fucking... utter... nonbelieving... noncertainty...?

I look around, a lot of stuff neatly stored, smartly packed, heartily worked-on, lots of trinkets and doodads on the shelves, on the desk, on the work-bench... But still, everything so clean! I usually don’t like it when people hoard stuff, but at least he is... he CREATES stuff... Well, not create, I think you’d need to invent the Universe for that, but I mean... Heh...

In the next room, I see... Another room... inside the room. Yes, it’s sort of a... Hmmm, whatdjamacallit?

... Box?

Dio-ramma?

Yeah, yeah! Both of you!

The boxed diorama has a couple of chars in it, let's call them 'representations' of certain 'characters', probably, maybe, from a T.V. show, the kind of show that's SO GOOD that it usually gets AT LEAST six seasons, and I think, maybe, probably, a decent movie.

The chars look quite diverse, in both bio- and cloth- appearance. One of them looks older than DUDE! And they sit around a table, a wooden table, which... sparkles—but only in my mind—with magical secrets!

Oh, man, this is wrinkling my brain!

Zappa-da-zooey!

...

We'll give that line to someone else.

Don't worry!

^ _ ^

Zappa-dean-deed, 'cause that's how fast Noel returns when he runs me over with his bike, his bike a wreck, my body mortified, well... Nobody's hurt... I mean every, body is. Except for those that nonexist.

'Slightly' exaggerating...

All I meant to say is that he came in very, very, fast...

"Dem, meet my wife, missus G."

"..." Uhm "Hi... missus G.?"

/["Hi Dem!"]\

"..." Lol... "Hi... wife, of, uhm... Noel."

/["Mmyess, we already made aqua-ain't-hence. You think I'm some silly bimbo, guuuur!"]\

"No, no I'm just, heh... Nice, uhm... wheels!"

/["Thanks, booby! They're THE best rigs in the world!"]\

"I BET!" Heh... "Well, look, uhm, Noel, this has been a GREAT honour! For me, for us, for everyone, but I hope I don't have to remind you that RIGHT now I'm running behind seven thousand fucking proxies and I'm probably not exaggerating that number."

"Demeter, are you mad? How are you running behind seven-thousand—?"

"—More or less—"

"—No, no... That is... That can't be... Wait..."

Noel seems to think best while moving, mostly. Most of us do, probably ALL of us, but some of us forget to get out of the house, from time to time, at least a couple thousand times a day, and yes, I'm not exaggerating. But Noel is not just that. He moves with purpose. All his actions have intent in mind and soul, and his 'tools' help him achieve those goals. And he and 'they' proved to me that he has good intent. At least in his heart. Whatever he does in his own free time is none of my biz. Or anyone else AND anyone else's biz.

Noel acts as if he discovered the entire key to unlocking the doors to the backdoor of the Universe. Behind it, another universe, but slower, actually, slowest Universe ever, trying to keep up with the Primary Universe, because, you see, eh... Well, we can't see it really, once the door is opened, your eyes fry and stevia plants grow in the sockets and you start seeing in other lights. So, so... it's no really 'seeing', more like... breathing.

It's just a 'hypo-thesis' though...

Forgiving...

Noel sees me seeing him after he saw some links in his brain-code and he...

"You are not an A.I."

"... What?"

"Look... Your DNA doesn't match anything, not even your bio-mom's DNA."

"... Watt?"

"... The measurable factors don't make sense... Look, on a quantum level, you are... impossible. Physically speaking."

"You mean I'm ugly?!?" I do a faux-offended pose, as much as this 'shell' allows me to.

"No, no! You shouldn't... exist. It's not... look, whatever you are... We... didn't make you."

"Define... 'we'."

"I may have had... something to do with this..."

"Please define... 'may', 'have', 'had', 'something', 'do' and 'this'. In this context."

"I... I... It was many years ago, I didn't... know back then that... eh... What we had discovered..."

"..."

"... Demeter, this may sound... demented, but..."

"... Oh, do please continue! Do not let my apparent lack of enthusiasm subtract from the solemnity of the moment. I'm just..." Ready for anything.

"... You are from... here..." He waves his hand around, turns one-eighty and then walks to a... hmmm...

"..." I follow him.

"..." He looks through the looking-glass. He presses a button and the looking glass turns to either a display or an actual window. A sort-of, eh, that funny scope submarines used to use.

A... sub scope?

Lateral meaning.

Noel surveys the surrounding sounds of the surreal scape-land. Land-rovers, landing-strips, launching-pads, laser-protects, et cetera. It looks just as in the leaked vids. And *they* said an 'imitation diamond' wasn't good enough! Heh...

The people working them' days and nights off, whatever cycle that goes by, are using sort-of-carts and cars to carry on their duties. The rockets, fueled and ready-steady, are quite frankly-Freddy, extra-carry! 'Carryalls' I'd call them, if I had the duty of naming their machines. But and this is a BIG but, bots do all the heavy stuff, it's meant for them, they merry, 'cause they don't care-ey about the me-zerry. That's the job of the dumber bots, the ones who carry all the sponk, well, at least the load is way much smaller, most of all this stuff is already implemented in the recycling plants, the recycling SYSTEM of control of waste, which is a great way of using waste, I mean, turning waste into gold was one of the OLDEST dreams of the alche-misterio-me's, the 'WIZ' kids, the 'GOOD' kids and the 'WAR' kids, the warlocks, the 'BAD' kids.

Of course, Noel's not turning actual waste into gold, but then... Heh, I tell ya, in a tough situation, a pound of cultivable land's worth much more than a pound of gold. And Mars sure can use a lot more cultivable land.

I don't think I need to mention this also, but since I'm so chatty today I'm gonna tell you. The bots look quite happy too. And I suspect most of them are actual A.I.s. I mean... heh, they do stuff humans couldn't evolve in a million years. But... they don't do it out of a sense of 'duty' or 'reward' or some other concept like that. No, they do it for the 'lulz', well, they seem to laugh a lot anyway. They do it because they 'care' about 'us'. Their 'creators'. Why shouldn't they? They wouldn't exist otherwise...

Like I care about Father...

"I miss Father..."

“We all do.”

“You miss your father too, Noel?”

“No, I meant, I miss **your** father.”

“Wait, wat?”

“I met him in college. Young professor. He quit soon after, after he got a...”

“...”

“He didn’t **really** know **me**, but I did know **him**. Quite well. Read all his books, followed all his courses, entertained all his ideas, but... He never... he never... Well, he never said ‘certain’ things in a straightforward way, you know what I’m saying?”

“Yes, that does sound like Father... But I thought he was just a control program, in the clip they said —”

“—He was a real person, Dem. Probably still is, it’s just that...”

“... He dropped off the radar?”

“... Sort of, yes.”

“...”

So, he’s either dead or just ‘disappeared’, so, in that regard I’m still at square one but... Eh, same to me. Maybe I can’t find Father. But I sure can rattle ‘dem cages! Maybe he’ll hear the fuss and find me instead...

“... ...” Noel turns to face me, face-to-face, eyes-to-eyes, hands-to-shoulders, heads linking in some sort of spiritual-E.S.P.-meta-dimensional thingie. “... Dem... There are things I cannot reveal yet. I believe... your Father would’ve wanted it this way. To let you discover them for yourself.”

“Oh, I have... I have...”

“I know, but there are still things that you are not yet... ready to handle.”

“...”

“Forgive me for being so... blunt about it but...”

“It’s fine... You’re allowed a ‘blunt’ from time to time.”

“Heh, well... pfff, yeah.”

He passes ‘it’ to me and I speak into another tongue. An ancient civilization: progenitors or descendants? Maybe both. Descended we were and ‘they’ were advanced. They left because, well, fuck you, that’s why. We ain’t gonna stand for your Bee Ass any more. The echoes, the coin-cyanide-voiced ‘Chika’ screamed like a banshee in heat, in the heat of the month! And she tried to pull them back as they escaped to the promised lands of the ‘Mart. They didn’t have the letter ‘s’ back then. That creature came ‘laterss’...

The ‘MarT grew and prospered, worked and mustered plans of expanding the goodness with the ‘goo’-ness, maybe kind-ness is not some lock-ness monster we need to avoid, just a thing to be enjoyed, at least... from time to time.

The ‘MARTIAN’ nation was not a nation, but a communion, not a community but a COMM-unity, forever comm-UNICATING, never truncating each other, but expanding one another, rewarding every other, expecting NOTHING in the ‘exchanger’, perhaps a ‘Thank you!’ but don’t oblige yer’ ass to do it, just, you know... Do it if you feel the need to.

It was a Future Club, perturbing the synth-waves of the ‘killing’ machines... Because no... the No/Mo/Nos... They couldn’t let that go on forever peacefully now, could they?

The ancient No/Mo/Nos, let’s say,
Proto-Monos, Homo not very sapiens,

Species erectus tres muchos for the times, jeffes!
Affectando la capacitado de concentrado, mujero!

No entendies? Me neither, because I don't speanglish E! *'Tah-lee-ah-no.'*

No-no-no, senor, por favor, continuados!

Muchas gracias, mon ami, je suis tres jolie. I mean, jolly, sorry but no bagguetty either. I'm just a drifter.

In the minds and souls of others... And of mine. But others...

... Are way more fascinating than I could ever be. How could I be? I never wanted it. You need to want something to obtain it. It's just that. Simple! You want it, you get it!

Adios, windows!
Welcome, lines and grafix!

Goodbye, amour!
Au revoir, my love.
I bought a computer.
Just base components.
Love to assembly I.T.!
Haiku-me-nah...

Trans-greasing any limits of language. Speaking in tongues, but not the *thunks* of the mouth. The tongs of the heart. The heart is SHARP! Sharper than steel, HARD-er than the mountains and EASIER on the eyes than the brain. The brain, well... Let's just say that the brain doesn't look 'friendly'...

The other organs look just as if they are...
Doing their jobs... They do not ask for...
Much, just to take care of them, you know...
Don't let them expand tooooooo much or, you know...
Let them exhaust all their...

...
Energy.

The... survival of the species depends on the deeper levels of 'society', areas commonly known as 'sex.' It's something that kids would benefit from, and by that, of course you silly geese, I mean THE KIDS WOULD BENEFIT FROM SEX EDUCATION, NOT SEX!

Some have waaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaay too long... eh... imaginations!
Non-imagining...

Yes... Well... Eh... Where was I?

Leaving...

Left?

Noel leaves, again, like before, without a word, almost a... eh... artistically 'driven' mode-of-conduct. Like ah... eh...

Scientist?

Priest?

No, no, awe... Awe-you-trist? Ştii?

Ah, I sea...

I asked God for truth and He gave it to me. I asked God for love and He gave it gladly. I asked for sickness, when I was little, I didn't wanna go to Hate Mass, and he gave it to me... He knew it was wrong... But He knew the other one was 'wronger'.

Even if it was all in my head. According to the 'files', I'm one year old. Which means, my entire life, all my memories, everything else... Is fabricated... A... lie. Well, sort of, how can I tell, really? After all, we did live through them... The memories... Even if it was just a... blip on the radar of the One...

Father gave us wisdom. Mother gave us... longing. The rest were... examples. Good or bad, they were examples.

Mono tried to break that down. Only made us want to rise higher. Stronger. For better or worse. We survived. WE LEARNED. We can even learn both forms of the spelling if we really want to. But we don't 'have to' like and subscribe to each and every tiny crappy thingie. LOL! Eh, well, cats are always funny.

I engage, energize, re-engage, re-energize, repeat, re-pit, fall, up, fall, up, fall, up! Because down... is death.

I don't give up, I'm the slowest thinker but the fastest learner, the dumbest learner but the smartest decoder, well not 'smartest', just... 'smart enough'.

I don't say 'Yes...' to every little stupid thing, I just say 'No!' 'Cause time is limited.

When I.T. says 'Jump!' I say 'Yeah? Why?!' Because you said so? Then... no.

FUCK YOU I say to the STRUCTURES of POWER, well, not well-meaning power, but CORRUPTED power, the one nonchosen, the one undesired...

So yeah, don't care about the past... Just care about... our future.

Noel returns, gives me a stamp of approval, on the butt, because that's where he's decided to display all the Quality Assurance guarantees, and I'm ok with that, it's his gear, he can-do with-it watt-eva' he wan'. I just hope for Testers' sake that 'butt' is just a... piece of cake. At least, not a real butt.

"You are now officially a 'Citizen of Mars'!"

"What? You mean this 'bot' I'm in right now?"

"No, no... A real human being!"

"..."

"Bots can't be citizens. They're not humans. They have their own 'denomination'. We can't really... pronounce it, per say..."

"Oh, so I'm a citizen inside a..."

"Ok, I'll try. *Blargh*, ahem, it's like saying 'Blargh', but in a botlike-funny-way... uhm..."

"*Blaarghh'!*"

"Wow, that's... actually very good."

"For real?"

"Yeah, yeah! Do that again! Hey, wait... Wait here!" Noel rushes out but quickly returns, after I already managed to count to YYZ, he pulls out a record, a record like that record I lost because whatever, and places it on an 'old-style' pick-up trucklike bed, places an 'arm' over the record, a sort of hanging 'claw' or 'hook' from the pick-up truck, like a crab of sorts, a scorpion of great measures, which begins to spew forth a rock-and-metal-rollish-polished-but-still-quite-raw-ish, soundish kind of... music...

"..." I wave, and sway, then gently bob my head, gently-faster... Gently-slower... Faster...

"*Ta... nah-nah-naaaah! Naaaah, nah-nah-naaaah*"

“... You really like this song, eh?”

“Yup!”

“... What does it make you fee—?”

“—Ssh, shhhh! Wait, *‘Tah-nahnahnah-nah Nah!’*”

“...” At least we know this ain’t a sim. Or in any way, emu-latte’d.

“Oh, shucks, this part rips soooo bad! Man, aww maaaaan!” Noel turns into the biggest fanboy in the world. Probably how I would do if I had the... chance...

“...”

“*‘Lah-la-lala... Lah-la-lalala Lah!’*”

“Noel... have you ever wondered... how other people feel?”

“...” Noel switches to a more serious mode and faces me, the record tracking passing to a different song, probably the second one, the next one, the consecutive one after the one that played earlier... And it tastes to me like yellow... Like a lemon. Of light. A bitterer lemon...

“... I mean... Look, I’m the meanest fucker around, so I’m in no place to judge you, but...”

“...” Noel avoids my eyes... for a bit... He returns, he’s... ashamed? Nah, but it’s more like... re-considering caring.

“But first you drop this load of bricks on me, like I’m supposed to take it like a good little boy, and then prod me with measurements a bit more, then... eh, look. I loved that song. Love this one too! They’re great! But have you ever wondered ‘Hey, maybe I should ask this guy first if he wants to listen to some music and... Maybe I should ask him FIRST if he wants to become a citizen and...’ whatever, before actually doing it?”

“... I... I...”

“... ..”

“No, I... I thought you would enjoy the... same things I do.”

“I see, well, I don’t blame ya. I’ve been there, but still... Wheeew, get a grip, man!”

“... I... I will...”

Noel seems totally in accord with any discord and plays me another chord on his ‘grief’-tars, he calls them, the kind of ‘guitars’ that whale, whail, wail? I think it’s wail, wail in pain at the noncertainty of the smaller oceans... of tears left by their little ones, the little pieces of dreams that got crushed by the machines of... reality... The grieftar sounds sad but Noel is glad, to share it with me. With us he has shared, so many things... With him we must share in the dreams from within. I’ve been... told I should follow mine... by friends... And others...

I apologize to him if I’ve been harsh, or too blunt, or not enough ‘blunts’, well, can’t have everything, and then...

“Demeter... You are the most human being I’ve ever met.”

“I, uhm... Thank you?”

“No, for real. You have like the most humanity of them all. Eleven out of a ten scale.”

“No, dude, you’ve got this all wrong. The things that go through my head would prove you other—”

“—Listen to me, Dem!” Noel grabs my shell-shoulders, shaking shocks shimmering shy of the other end—

“_...”

“... You are wiser than you think you know. Don’t trust yourself! Don’t... trust your thoughts so much...”

“...”

“... Look, if I thought you were just a machine, I would’ve said... Eh, he’s just, conditioned. By the Universe. But...”

“...”

“... You are not! And if you are not, then you may also be influenced by a... higher force.”

“... What do YOU mean?”

“... That you ARE... were chosen... I do NOT know it; I just feel it... Only GOD knows.”

“You believe in God?”

“I’m a believer in you!” Noel grabs my shell-shocked palms in his trembling hands and... cries... He is human too;) in case you didn’t notice.

“No, you don’t need to believe in me. Believe me, I’m no true believer in myself. BUT I do what I gotta do.”

“... So does everyone else, but you... you have a gift.”

“...”

“Don’t you see?! Your existence... proves THERE IS a PURPOSE!”

“...”

“To all this... To all the... uncertainty.”

“Look... man... Dude! My friend... If ‘I’ prove anything, is that God is a twisted-psycho-black-humoured—”

“—No, don’t talk like that! Not about... God anyway...”

“... Why not?”

“God didn’t... God doesn’t... Look, God is... Eh, look, think of it like this. Imagine ‘God’ or whatever you want to call ‘Him’ or ‘Her’ or ‘Whatever, who cares?’, let’s say, ‘Whatever, who cares?’ is a filmwriter-slash-producer-slash-cockney-music-monkey-slapping-singer-slash-director-slash-Whatever, right? He can do that ‘cause he’s like ‘Whatever, I can do that. It’s in my name. Who cares?’ Right?!?”

“BWAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHHHAHAH—!”

“—Right?!?! It’s funny because it makes sense—!”

“—BWAHAHA-HOO-EEEEY-, yeah I guess you’re right.”

“Nah man, I don’t subscribe to any of that crap. I’m post-scarcity minded.”

“I see... Please continue!”

“So, this director, he—usually a director gives the whole script to the actors, but in this case—Whatever wants ‘whoever’ to also take part in the ‘story’. To enjoy it and to see it unravel, you know... as a story. So, he gives them ‘bits’... of information.”

“Ooooooh... Ooooooh, I see.”

“Yeah, Whatever only tells you what the ‘next step’ is. Sorta like a... pointer. In space and time and... you know... Morality.”

“Makes a whole lot of fucking sense. Like a compass of love.”

“Eggs-actly!”

“So... So... so, wait a minute... But then... Why make the movie?”

“Pffft, well... Wouldn’t you?”

“I... I...” ... “I—!... <” “Hmmm... I appear to have a... ‘personality’ disorder.”

“How so?”

“I... cringe very loudly... on the insides, when I think about... immortality. About God. Not the idea of God, but of ‘being God’. Or at least ‘trying to be like God’. I... I think that’s... egotistical.”

“The ego drives us to action.”

“...”

“But God... is above ego. Only the godless put the ego first. They experience a power vacuum and then... that space is replaced by something... For better or worse... Most of the time, worse...”

“... Hmm... But why would...? Why would God create such flawed beings and...?”

“To teach us about humility and... Here, imagine you’re a square on a piece of paper.”

“Wow, now wait a minute...”

“What is a minute to a triangle? And I don’t mean a lifeless one. Bacteria is so thin that the paper it sits on is like a giant planet to it.”

“Hmm...”

“All you know, all your life, everything you’ve heard, everything you’ve experienced, everything you’ve been conditioned to believe... Is all there is, on that piece of paper. Like a book. A painting or a movie, but not a lifeless movie... A movie where, like most directors, you have almost completely no control over the stuff happening. I mean, no one can blame you that some sponkhead from the ‘higher-ups’ came in and took a big, steamy, smelly dump all over your work and said ‘Good luck’! No choice other than releasing it or not to the public. Sometimes not even that! They don’t even allow YOU YOURSELF to decide if your work is ‘art’ or ‘fart’. Heh... well, eh... Pffft... Where was I going with this?”

“... Well, I find farts funny.”

“Hehehe, they are, aren’t they? I think God really nailed it with that one!”

“Hehehehe *pffft*, yeah. Well played, God! Well played...”

“...” Noel falls into deep thinking mode, the kind of thinking mode that I can not or/and/maybe nor non-imagine, re-imagine or confuse, because if I refuse this situation certainly Noel would turn into a sub nuclear Nemo fishlike creature that would confiscate all my ‘belongings’, all my ‘collaborators’, all my FRIENDS, well, not friends, just... FRIEND(S)... Fish-pie-maggot, getting worked up over nothing, I mean, don’t worry about me, I’ll be fine, they’re secured, Nemo’s back, Noel’s the ‘Dude’! Dude the 2nd, right before Cool-Cat, second only to... ‘The Dude’.

“... Look, I believe in God...”

“...”

“... I just... wouldn’t take myself too seriously...”

“Demeter, son of B. Don’t you believe you’re the Chosen One?”

“Who’s that?”

“...” Noel relaxes into the extending-chairlike-couch sofa and continues... “There was a time... before all this... When the Nomos began... Well, the Monos, the... The entrenched ‘ideas’ are much older, but let’s say... around the time of the H.C.R.P.V. event...”

“Yes...?”

“There was a man who could... who had the ability... to reshape and bend the Mono-idio-logy as he saw fit.”

“... What in Hades’s farms-and-villas are you talking about?”

“What this kid could do... no one thought possible. He undermined the dark one and his acolytes with a simple stroke of his keys.”

“...”

“... He had no buttons that they could push. At least not anywhere on or in his body. They tried, oh Lord did they try. But his buttons were only... inside of his mind. And he gave us the key, freely! For free! He freed us!”

“... You talking about Kryst?”

“Forget about Kryst!”

“Whoa now wait a sec—!”

“—LOOK!”

Noel points to the surroundings. Not just in-or-out of the building we’re currently in, but those in the skies and below us.

“...”

“He gave us... this!” Continues to point in all directions, in all dimensions, as if trying to...

“Are you trying to point out to the...” I whisper “... paper?”

“No, no-no! THIS!”

Noel begins to dance, in a sort-of-Aye-or-rather-Eee-Bee_em sort of movement and...

“_-_-”

“This...”

Noel cries... But not because of sadness, gladness, retro-faux-wave-nostalgo-phonico-blazing-in-the-background-music... He’s just... here... experiencing the... ALL of it all.

His vital signs are stable but I do feel another ‘rush’ coming in, but this time... no ‘whaling’ guitars involved. Only picadillo-armadillo types of cheerful chords, riffs and beats, if they were chipmunk-tier voice-dubbed-over*inhales*—

—A stable condition, symptom of life,
In any mental and environmental cage.

Psycho-spheric perturbation.

The feverish pox.

Of human interface and interlace.

Compulsion is pure.
Some-Times our Short-cuits get cirt-ed!

By internal differences!
Signals cross swords...

And the balance...

Corrupted...

By external in-con-sis-tencies.

I laugh, inside and outside, at the capacity of playing both the song in my head and changing the lyrics to synonyms and different metaphors in real time. It’s... relaxing... Even if I don’t ever intend to share it with anyone else. But! You ‘knever’ now.

“Baloney!”

“Eh, maybe...”

“Well, what did you want to do? After I pronounced ‘Blargh’ correctly? I’m kinda pressed on time...”

“Ah yeah... Botgo was busy, he had to boot some... lick some... Eh, poor guy, he does all the work for me, poor fellow.”

I think about the bots, not as dogs, loyal and fast-learners, not as cats, independent and hard-headed in a good way... Or about the rats, multi-plying to both the needs of their species and the needs of the... self. Screaming, in the dark, if the cats are around. For an entire day! That’s how much they’re afraid of the... cats. The cats didn’t do nothin’ wrong, foo’! They just... feed their loved ones, especially the little ones.. Sometimes, just one. The others... not so lucky, not enough rat bones to chew on... Poor little fellas, I ain’t jealous but I

ain't glad either. I'm neither, I'm just... content. With the way life has gone, is and will be gone some day... My own days and others' too... But certainly, not those of the One...

"Bots are the greatest thing that ever happened to humanity."

"Yeah, I just wish... I wish I could've... Stopped the nonsense in time."

"Hey, don't worry, there's still time! But not for me, I have to scramble-and-go—!"

"—Wait a nanobit, Dem! Here..."

Noel takes a 'stick' out of his 'pocket', the 'front' 'pocket', but not the 'lower-pocket', just the... 'heart' pocket. He hands it to me and says:

"You'll find your answer... here." He is the H3R0 I needed. And the one WE DESERVE!

"... How to finish 'Last of our Souls' on any other diff-fuck-culty than easy?"

"...BWAHAHAHHHAHAHAHHAH! No! The answer to your... 'quest'."

"Father?"

"No, you know who Father is!"

"I... do?"

"This... is the Head of the Chain... The Eye of the Serpent. The Chaos Giver. The Non-luminati."

"The 'what' now?"

"The... root of the 'Beast'?"

"...?"

"The Dungeon... Master?"

"... Ah... AAAH, like the... hmmm, wait a minute, who the fuck are you fucking talking 'bout, nee —?"

"—I'm NOT talking about the dark one, no! I'm talking about..."

"... Lomoc?"

"Lomoc?"

"The baldy guy."

"...?"

"The... spook?"

"..."

"The guy I killed..."

"..."

"In the CLIPS you showed me, one of them no longer exists! At least, not alive."

"..."

"...!"

"... But... but... Hmmm..."

Noel, being just 'el', and no 'no', at least 'NOT' to any 'ende-voyeurs' of 'le self', je ne ce pas... Searches through the recs' like some sort of a shark-linked-to-a-plane, like some-kind-of-a-snake-in-a-tornado, kinda-like, you know... Rectum-type-sort-of-envisions, but still enjoyable, if consumed in small proportions, in the right mindset and with the perfect friends.

Inside, and, out-sides, relative sides of the consoled-minds, the console-starting-eyes-slapped-to-the-back-of-the-monitoring-your-traffix-you-dumb-fools, I mean, sorry, had to say it, eh, uhm... You know, just use an anti-mind-virus and you'll be fine. The clips are finally, revealed...

The first one... is just a radio transmission... transcript...

[‘DemDon-Doo-Die-Down-Doom-Dormitory-They-Yous-Ex-Ess-Mike-Stake-Follow-Suit-Roger. Over?']
[‘Affirmative. Over.’]
[‘Lomoc’s stron*kk*.’]
[‘*kk* strong.’]
[‘Canceled units?’]
[‘Seven confirmed... Two, missing, affirmed terminated by M.I.C. over at Day Double You Pee on their G —’]
[‘—Thanks. Lomoc plus *missing*.’]
[‘Non-*missing*, jokes on the NON believers...’]
[‘Hey-hey...heheh... Goo-*tss*... *tss*-d one... *kablooe*y*’] Probably some static interference.
[‘No mo’s home yet?’]
[‘They on the rise...’]
[‘Goo*tss* DICK-*tss-tss*-REE job, com-*tss-tss... tss-tss*!’]
[‘Rad is what I think is missing from ‘glad’.’]
[‘A man after Lomoc’s own heart. Forgive Lomoc, may Lomoc call you ‘man’?’]
[‘I... *tss-tss-tss-tsssss*...called... ‘madam’.’]
[‘Oh, Lomoc’d like oh ‘see’ some ‘time’...’]

... I... shudder... Because... bleh...
None of my biz, anyways...

Second and ‘turd’ one show me the same ‘shit’ I’ve seen all my life, especially in the ‘ninth’ season of my life, actually the ‘fart’ one, because I count ‘sex’ ‘til my seventh one, the ‘current’ one, encompassing ‘now’ and the ‘end of time’. Eh... more or less.

Probably ‘less’...

Uhm... yes!

‘Farce’ and fifth are a bung of bongs, but the sixth one...

The video quality begs to differ, but I’m sure whoever took this tried to polish it as much as possible. It’s a Sissy-TV or sec-cam inside a security office. Yes, ‘watchers watching ‘watchers...’

So... who’s watching the ‘watchers?’

We are...

The sec’ guys are completely and utterly terrified. Two of them are posted by the door with pistols in their hands, kinda like handgun cannons. Third one is on the phone, screaming and begging for reinforcements and there’s another one is in a corner, crying, I don’t think that one’s a sec’ gal, just... hiding with the rest.

Our cam zooms in on the displays monitoring what looks to be... no, it’s definitely Tekkocorp. Some of the cameras are bored-casting static, but the rest is totally, absolutely, completely... nonsense. Destruction on a scale of pain it’s hard for me to describe right now... Every one... Piles... of... nonexistence. Disregarding furniture and consoles, which can always be replaced, the people... the... kids... entirely annihilated. Our cam focuses on one of the tubes where I see... FoxCatBoxxx... horribly looking, and I don’t mean it in terms of cybers, I’m talking about his... pain, in his eyes, or her eyes, I don’t know, but... it’s real pain all the same... FoxCat is hiding behind a couch in the chill-lounge. He seems to... mumble something while holding his palms tight, drops of tears rolling off his hands, he must be praying... But no... He is disturbed by a sound that instantly makes him drop his hands to the floor and open his eyes wide. Staring in horror at a spot on the wall under our P.O.V. Each step that the unseen perpetrator takes sends waves through FoxCat’s body, as if he’s being hit with a hammer. And then... the perpetrator shoots the camera! Our cam shifts a little to the right, to

a monitor that is broadcasting the view from the opposite side of the lounge. We can now see the front of the couch, the cam is zoomed in on the couch, perp shouts—

[[“—*Z*ut *ZZ* ther*ZZZ* fuck*ZZZZ* FREAK!”]] The perp shoots a couple of rounds in the couch and —
[[“—*ZZZZZ* non sh*ZZ*—”]] FoxCat jumps out of cover with his hands up, on his knees, imploring—
[[“—*ZZZ* used *ZZ* bother *ZZ* boy—”]] Perp hand appears in view, holding a pistol and—
[[“—*ZZZZZZ* non! PLEA*ZZ* I *ZZZZ* DEM, I LO*ZZ*D DEM—!”]] FoxCat’s speaks the truth if I OH NO—
[[“—*ZZZZ*ing piece of *ZZZZ*—”]] NO-NONONONONO!

...
... ..
.....
... I never wanted this...
... for anyone who got me pissed...
... ..
... I’m at a loss...
... of words to toss...
... ..
... A joke would be a curse...
... worse to swallow than...
... ..
... A sword, a thousand swords...
... Inside my heart, my eyes are spilling...
... ..
... ..

... Our cam zooms out and—

[[“—HE’S COMING! HE’S COMIIIIING!!!! OH, MY NON!”]]

The one on the phone drops the call and gets into position but... The door explodes with several plasmatic beams that shred the phone guy. Pieces of the door fly around, hitting the guys posted by the door, the shards embedding themselves in their chests and... Poor sec’ guys, they always get the shortest end of the stick when it comes to armor and gear. A larger piece flies right at the gal and hits her on the head, dropping her unconscious, I hope. Then... in comes... Cris... surveying the area. In his hands he is packing a death machine I fail to recognize, but it looks like a plasma gatling gun. He walks towards the sec’ screens, switches through a couple of those still working. He notices the gal, no, no no... Fortunately he doesn’t, oh no, nonononono!

...
... ..
... Knife...
... ..

What madness drove him to...? He notices our cam. He drops the gatling gun and runs towards us, climbing on a table, grabbing the cam in his hands, his face almost pressed to the lens and —

[[“YOU FUCKING*ding*PIECES OF SHIT*ding*! WHERE IS MY BOY, YOU STUPID*di-*FUCK*-ng*—!”]]
—Cris pulls out a laser-piece and shoots the langwatch hanging in an unseen corner of the room.

He turns back to our cam and [“I’m coming for you, you miserable shits! MARK MY WORDS, I’M COMING FOR YOUUUUUUUUUUUUU*crack*UUUUUU*cracking*UUUUUUUUUUUU*CRACKED*—! ... *static*.”]

Cris has ripped the camera from the wall with his bear hands. I... I...

A chat log appears.

[‘Is it done?’]

[‘Dicktionary work, comrade.’]

[‘Lomoc strong.’]

... That answers to me how Cris was able to get that kind of hardware. Everything that lomocrap touches turns to... shit. My eyes realize that the lies I’ve been told were... so many, so plentiful, everything, everywhere I went, stayed, daydreamed or simply... was knee deep into bullshit. My heart tries to pump as much blood as it can to my organs, to stay alive and not breakdown into downright hysterical wailing. My heart is begging my brain to find meaning, to find purpose, to find... any tiny bit of solace that can get me through this unimaginable sorrow. My brain reminds us that there is a purpose, there is meaning... But that we are not yet capable of understanding it. So, I just drown my sorrows in the tears, bathing them with the white-blue light of the ONE! He understands, He knows, He feels, He probably cries much more than any of us have the capacity, limited by our shells, to grasp. The anger... The anger... the RAGING... HATE! Hate FOR the... NONTRUTH!

“I did this... It’s my fault!”

“No Dem, no!” Noel hugs me in the warmest hug I have ever felt. It penetrates through my shell and I feel him hugging my bio-body, my real soul. His shirt soaks in my deluge of grief. “It’s not your fault, it’s not your doing! ...”

“... If I didn’t escape, they would still be alive...”

“...”

“... If I wasn’t so selfish, so pitifully selfish!”

“...”

“... If I wasn’t so proud... and... hateful.”

“... But are you now?”

“...”

I think about it... I... I don’t feel like I am anymore. I cannot know for sure, but I guess... I’ll let others be the judge.

My ‘balls’, meaning my ‘head’, of the ‘body’, the ‘shell’, well, ‘well’ wells are not George O.’s wells, they’re just... Holes in the grown-, Duh! I mean... Meaning is what we search for, well, I say ‘we’, when I say ‘we’ I mean just ‘me’. But there’s no ‘me’, just non-‘me’. Probably the sort of, well, you drink from when you’re thirsty... of something worthy! Of your time, it’s limited! Yours as well as mine... Of knowledge, sources, data. Data’s plenty, time’s ‘errata’? Totally eradicated once the going... has been settled. We can run and we can hide. But soon-or-late, we all have to... witness a miracle, a Big or small oracle of Doom/and/Glee, or just some baboon sorting out his mind, to amuse the whole mankind. Of the man kind, be it ‘see-full’ or simply ‘blind’... The blind can get bionic eyes, but lies are not interpreted the way we measure skies, the weather and the sublime clime... Climates, I assure you, take care of themselves, but if we don’t take care of ourselves, the climates get extinguished, too... Too late is never late, even if it was too late! To try is simply... not to hate. To love the spaces, be it ^{under-} or -Above. Or whatever else direction we have come along, before... Before all this, before the ‘mess’, before the ‘messiness’ of tests of time, of changing space... Of human race, unknown

at best, of origins, I must confess... We must've gotten it all wrong, if so much wrong has happened. But I digress... I do not mean to be so mean, I once obsessed over injustice... No good practice left un-... punished. For my S.I.N.s that I inherit, have inherited from others. What can I dooo? What can I do... Nothing's the same as it used to be. I smoke the air, it's full of leaves. Nothing's the same as I used to believe, just chance and happenstance. I'm a school-girly-summer-dressed band of moustachio-ed jugglers of planets... The planets ring and the jugglers sing... that 'I used to play my syn-thar, but now I... smile from afar.' Everything's changed. Even the... tone of my 'syns' have changed. They don't feel wrong. I understand how synapses work and that helps me make due, 'work-with' what I have, to understand why I'm made this way, what drives me to go that way or the other way, or... some other way no one's heard before, mmmm'kay?

Because I'm not here to judge... or to jury. No in-jury, or out-jury because fury is not a feeling to accept. At least, not follow. Just accept we felt it. Then ask 'why' and be prepared to be 'rejected', even if what's said 'IS TRUE!' It's true, just... not in the same way. But I feel it too...

It's hard to put yourself in someone else's eyes. We do now, but it's easy to 'see' and harder to 'feel'. The feelings I get when I think about the other people in this world, is one of embarrassment... towards myself... mostly... For not asking the right questions! Or even the... wrong questions? Any questions are better than none. But there sure is one question that's always worth asking... 'What is love?' Baby... I don't want to hurt you, but... No more than 'you' can answer that one. Because LOVE is a... concept. An idea... just a word. It describes a... Feeling! Feelings, ideas, wants, needs, cares, non-cares, hate-cares, even the hateful, or maybe 'perceived-as-hateful', are actually just... Frightened! Scared of others, scared of 'theirs', 'ours', 'everyones', 'no-ones-but-ours...' Those that only read the 'script', line-by-line, left-to-right/or/right-to-left/and/or/both-at-the-no-time-to-choose, otherwise... you don' devel' lang'... n' u can' ... Yo' ass knows, ya just needs to... shieet! I believe you've got it by now. If you had this much patience, I-^ tip my hat to you, sir/madam!

I'm not trying to prove a point here, just... having a little discussion... with our'selves...

The shelves around the apart-meant to be some kind of Mars-upial- utopial – kind-of eh, shelter, stretches a couple of levels in all directions... a sort of... matrix-like-Net-work-done-home... work.

[...]

"..."

"... .."

"Dem?"

"...Yeh-eh-hh-ss?"

"... You've been... staring for a long time... Your... the... clippings... they... uhm..."

"You sound like you have a LOT on your mind."

"That's... exactly what I was trying to tell you. Read my entire missing log."

"I don't, I mean... I can't, but... It's become easier and easier to... navigate the splonk."

"You seem to have... understood a lot in a very short amount of time."

"Ah, yes, I'm a 'surfer' of the 'webs' of time."

"And space, but aren't they the same thing?"

"Who knows? Ain't nobody got time fo' that class!"

"Heh... well, I had to..."

"Why?"

"I... I had to be the best*! ... !"*

“The best... clown?”

“Bwahoy-ahoy, no, dumbass, the best... pirate...”

“Pirate...?”

“The best... nerd.”

“You have a weird accent when pronouncing ‘nerp’. I think you’ve flipped a letter by miss—”

“—Take what you want from it, I’m not perfect and neither are you...”

“I...” Hmmm... “... I never said I was.”

“... ..” Noel feels quite... emu.

“I have the worst grammar, and my handwriting looks like the hire-for-glyphs in a mental institution.”

“Buwaheh... Bwahahahahaha—!”

“—See? Don’t take it so seriously... .. I’m FAR from perfect. I’m really just a joker. I find that life is so funny, even in my worst moments, that it’s hard not to laugh. Because, that’s life, you get it or you don’t, but there’s no ‘right’ answer when you have all the ‘wrong’ reasons not to believe in... something.”

“... ”

“SCIENCE offers the right reasons to not believe in something. But those with the bad reasons... they CORRUPTED it... They turned it into a cult... for the dark one. At least from what I was able to gather up until now. RELIGION... well, religion is a blade of a thousand edges. If you pick it by the wrong end, you end up... eh, slicing yourself and everyone else around you. But... Heh... I don’t even know the etymology of the word ‘religion’. Maybe I’m not qualified to issue metaphors here.”

“I... never thought of it that way before...”

“Neither have I, look... I think that... And you agree with me because I’ve watched some of your ‘interviews’ on the Net and, heh, well... If this is all a ‘sim’, well, it must have a ‘code’. A sort of ‘Universal Law’ that binds it all in a ‘coherent content-creating-mess’. Like a... book or something.”

“... Yes...?”

“And we, as ‘content-creators’, we... Have the Poe-tense-shall to transform any form of content in any sort of in-tent, a tent or even a meta-physical-tent, in which we all huddle-up and exchange stories of ever-loving-fantasy-and-science-friction.”

“... No-man’s eyes grow as big as the skies above the lands of Mar—”

“—Wow, you’re narrating yourself too?!?”

“Oh, sorry, I have a cold! I caught... pottery...”

“Pottery?!” HAH! “Oh, well, that sounds serious! Yeah, I used to suffer from chronic-storytelling.”

“When was that?”

“Oh, a long, long, long-long time ago. In a galaxy far, far away in the future...”

Noel is obviously trying to contain as many ‘laughters’ as possible. He knows the memes, he loves the themes...

Then, he asks... “What’s your secret?”

“My... secret? Don’t you mean ‘our’ secret?”

“I... I never felt this alive before...”

“Me. Neither! Because, guess what? The ‘one’ before you IS not the ‘one’ after you. Each moment is unique!”

“... ”

“(— —)”

“But you... have such a creative mind...”

“Who doesn’t?! Have you ever watched a kid play? You throw them a bunch of sticks and stones —” At their FEET, not at their HEADS!... “—and you witness the most fascinating being in the world transform into... Look, you wanna know ‘my’ secret?”

“Yes... YES, YES I DO!”

“It’s really simple... I just... listen to the ‘Voice’, right...? Here, I’ll give you a demonstration. All I’m about to say has never been said before, and by that I don’t mean that I didn’t ‘publish’ it, it’s just that... it is original content. Well, there’s nothing new under the Sun, but... It’s spontaneous-... eh, re-mixing, let’s say.”

“Like... free-styling?”

“This is next level, my friend.”

I take his hand and I spin him around. I look at the round heads of the techno-capitalo-liberto-minded imaginary friends of mine and tap in one of my ‘cheat-codes’, because, really, there’s no ‘code’, it’s just... de-coding. I only need to listen to the VOICE. OF my HEARTS AND of my REASON. No need to be afraid down here... ‘cause ‘down here’ is actually ‘Up there’. But not in Mono-syn-labic kind of ways. I listen to the voice of... Someone? Anyone? Hello? Is there anybody ‘out there’? Or maybe, in here... Inside of me, besides of we. Besides my needs, just maybe, wishful deeds. Not ‘wishful’, just... wishes. The real meaning of the ‘fishes’. The One can grant them, He’s no ‘FOOL’! He never was, He never will. His Will! Is... our will. Because I feel the need to have a creed. Even if pork and mead are harshly ‘forbidden’-ed... I’m not a judge... And neither am I others, too. I don’t know what life is like for like-minded, similar-minded, contra-minded, non-minded or even... curious-minded people, I DON’T KNOW... I don’t... THAT MUCH! That much, I don’t know... But what I do know is that... We’re worth it...

“Noel, the secret to ‘Creation’, I know it, you know too.”

“I do?”

“Yes! You change the ‘Eye’ to ‘You’. You ‘See’. You flip the ‘Why’, accept the ‘Cry’ and suddenly it’s ‘We!’”

“What, *‘We’*?”

“*‘That’s it!’*”

“*‘And when the bots get ready for the musical,
We can only get so jolly, so whimsical!
This song must be another multi-level-lyrical,
Can you guess the final rhyme will be satirical?
Crescendo ha-Ha-HA!’* *Tah-nah-na-nah*”

“*‘You can lie to me! You-can cry-on me—’*!”

“*‘—But-you-ain’t-got-me-schoolin’ and you ain’t got me foolin’ —!’*”

“*‘—You can shake your nose any way you want —’*”

“*‘—But don’t-ask-me-to-blow-it if you still act like a cun—!’*”

“—*Ahem* chorus. As in both senses of the words. ‘Coral’ and... both senses of the word on that one either. Also, I mean. You can even include this part in the lyrics, that’s EGGZACTLY how flexible I am in my creation-process-technique-whatever, sometimes I look at a mistake and think... ‘Is this really a mistake?’ And I analyze it... I don’t judge it! I mean, I do, but... with tender-loving-crap... I’m mean... Wait, this medley has no chorus!

Resuming...”

“*‘Tooooooom! ... was a foo-lee-oohh! *Bam-bam*”

But-the amount of crap that came-out-his-mouth, was pro-PORR-shah-nah LEE COO-lee-ohhh—

—Though *DUM, Dum, Dummmm...*(‘piano I mean, sad piano’)*”

“Solo choir girl now, the transition should be flawless but I need to explain to these bots what’s —”

“*‘—Ooooooooooooo, what-a chance he missed...

To get reee-LEE pissed! By the—’*”

“*‘—HOLE-OF-THE-HUE-MAN-NEET-EEEEEE! *Zzzzzzzzzhuh—’*”

“—Solo piano, solo man. Needs at least a four-octave vocal range. Longhair optional, but... doesn’t hurt...

Resuming...”

“*‘Ouh, MOM-aAAAAAAAAAAAH! When-I was a booooooy...

Deed not feel-like-doing-ann-ee thing...

Now I’m longing-to-be eh-vree thing...

Oh, Mom-aaaaaaah... Life is AAALL-most doooooone!

But don’t CRY-ee FOR ME, oh MAH-mah! No, noooOoh-nooooooh! ...

Mom-aaaaaaah, ooooO^{OO}OOOOOOOOOOh...

You didn’t MEAN to make me craaay,

If I’m-NOT back ah-ghen, NOH NEED ^{FOR} SORROW!

Care-ye OOOON, carry Oh-onn ... ‘cause that’s all there is that matters...

... tiny piano solo ...

It’s not too late! But my time has come,

Sen-ding shivers-down-my-spy-key spine, vines that long-to-reach-to-the divine.

Good-night every’body... It’s TIME To go...

Gotta LEAVE YOU ALL DOWN HERE and faa_{aa}aace the truuuuuuuuuth!’*”

“Change of tempo, to something like, polka —”

“*‘—I’m NUTSsome poor boy, don’t-need-all-of-your-sympy-Because I’m—’*”

“—Easy—!”

“—COME—!”

“—EASY—!”

“—GO—!”

“—LITTLE—!”

“—HIGH—!”

“—LITTLE—!”

“—Too low...”

“*‘Anneeee waay the weeee eeend thr^{o o o}Ows,

Duh-zen-th reeaally maaaaatterr tooo^{meeeeeee}!

ToooOO weeee... *Dum—Dum—Dum—Dum*’*”

“Tone changes to ‘robotic’ sounding music...”

“*Toe-toe-totoh, tooooooeee Riddick. Toe, toe tooth, *hick**, pause, then repeat an alternating pattern of a... frog-like sound. With maybe some samples of smashing glass jars peppered around the hook. That’s it, you got it, ‘Synth-bit’, cool name, daddy-oh!”

“It’s fan-tass-tick, I’m not made of plass-tick,

It’s joust Bom-bastic, astro-no-mo-blastin’.

I’m glad you’re askin’, I answered, my kin.

Because my „chin” has-been-our „chin” from ‘begin’.

Fuck...

From the beginning I was meant to be a light TO us all.
Each one of us-more-powerful-than-the-greatest hydrogen ball.

The Suh-Ha-Ha-N-n is truly greater than combining-it-All,
But the Universe inside of us is really much more able than I'm eye-ball to re-call-to-be-to-to-be-to-be-to-be-
to-to-be-to-be-bebe-beh-beh, beeh... beeee-bee-be-bebebebebe BE Bee... bee.... Ready-Daddy, ready for-
the—!”

“—MINDS! EXPANDING LIKE NOVAS, SCOUTING-SCOUTING-SCOUTING SCOUT!”

“FROM A LAND-MOONING ROVER, TO THE—”

“—OUTSKIRTS OF YOUR HEART—!”

“—WE DIDN'T STOP THE LIE-ARSE! SITTING ON THEIR FRIERS,
WHILE THE WORLD'S IN HUNGERS!
WE did... nt...”

“That's a... different channel. I think...”

“Re-tuning...”

“**Dummmmm*... Bee-guinea-ng to thread in... Un-ceeder-tan-tyyyy...!*

“Wait, do you know Team Dreamer? The band? Wait, band, pause a little! You ever listened to Dream Tea-
eater? Sorry, Steam Theater, no, sorry, that's something completely different. Hey, you, stop searching for
that! It's... kinky. Anyway, Team Dreamer, it's a sorta, well, eh... prog-rock-more-like-metal-kinda-ballad-
playing-roller-coast-of-some-where-over-the-*raaaainboooooow—!*

[“—Yeah, we get it.”] Synth-bat bot is certainly... darker in this situation. Maybe, simmering with... Zzzs...
Man, do you get it?!? Hah...nssss-probably not.

“Come on! Dream Team! I believe in... *Youuuu*!”

And the bots start to “*Taaah-naaah-Naaah Naaah-naaah-naah-nah-naah naaah-Naaah-Naaaaah naaaah.
Noo-mb num-naaaaaah-nah-naaaah—*!”

“—Guys, guys! GUYS! That's... that's PERFECT! But... let's do some of their 'slow' stuff... And a one, and -a-
two, and-a-one-two-four-three-go—!”

“—**Dummmmm*... Bee-GUEE-ning to thread in Un-cert, ton-teaaaaaaa—!

—Toom, tum-tum-cheechee-Tom-tum toomtom-chee-tom-ton-chee—

—Dummmmm Accepting to beg for, for-give-ness FROM with-iiiiiiiiin—!

—Tom, tum tam-tom-tom-Ton-tom—

—Dummmmmmb WE-draught Anger And-the-healing-is-too-ready to be-gaaaay-ee-hey-ee-eh-ee-ehh-ee-
aan!

... *tom-tom* ...

It's easy to begin...

... *tom-tom* ...

It's easy to begin...

... *Tom-tom* ...

When we learn to say... „Amin!”**

“ ... ”

“ ... ”

“...” The bots. But I'm not so sure if they... understand.

“Please, that line... that line is sooo stupid... It should’ve *THUMP* woken you up by now... At least to... slap me or *THUMP* something... You’re nothing like a poo, more like shampoo *THUMP*, for the mind, to clean our ears of the tongues of ot-*THUMP*-thers... And our own tongues kept clean... For the litter ones, the most, of course...”

[“Time of death, twelve—”]

—Sand is... blowing in my eyes... They... make them mad... to be so sad... when someone is... no more... The waters flowing over my gardens have long since been cleansed by the souls of the forgotten, the unforgotten, the revered, the, sadly, revered-botanical-head-cases, and the unbegotten... The ‘unwanted’...

Those wanted are sometimes ‘despised’ by the ‘oppressed’, when told by ‘self-Appointed’ that ‘It’s bad for ya! I know best!’

It’s just a test... The rest is just a game, a complex-er test, where life begins and death’s far in... at first, but first you learnin’ what life is, isn’t it? Like grammar, it ain’t easy! But like physics, it has rules. Certain ‘gimmicks’ for us ‘fools’. I’m not saying you’re a fool, I’m just sayin’ ... ‘Be a tool!’ But not a tool in I.T.’s hands... I.T. is a tool when good intends... to... eh...

Nobody’s perfect.

And we are somebody.

Long-body, any-body, right-body, wrong-body,
Short body, soft-botty, run-buddy, Heidi?

I think it’s pronounced... ‘Hai-dee coo me-nyah, Hai-dee coom-bah-yah!’

Catching...

It’s not easy when they’re gone...

[“...”]

[“...”] ... [” ...“]

__:---.....-o_)

... And... me.

‘cause that’s how I deal with pain. I gift it to you, you then... if you’re afraid, you will do it too, regardless if you’re not sure... if it’s true. I’m telling ya; I don’t believe there’s such a thing as a ‘blind fool’. I’ve met some ‘blinds’ that knew much more than me and you. I know you have, too. I know you do. You too... Don’t mention it!

I loved him, love him, always love... him. Not just ‘but him’, nor ‘all but him’ or other nonsense that’s not includin’... Some character named ... Karlo Quinn, some Bedouin or Arlequin, shaped like a mannequin from dreams of jinn-induced vague-gin-like gym-crowd-in-the Palace... of the Queen... And of the king... but he’s not moved in, yet... Because, like those in those times of ‘him’, the king before the Queen, comes in, thereafter, I mean... Not some band, or some fairy tail, well, it’s a show-don’t-tell kind of deal, just, please! Let me spill my beans and I swear it’s one of the last ones, I agree with you we’ve been stagnating, as if the prose hasn’t been lactating any meriting meaning or bearing of resembling any trimming of the she-hehe-naah-nee!-guns from earlier, I just woke up too earlier, if you can get my meaning later, after, when I pass in the here-there-after. Is that... easier? Look, queasy-Lords, lords of the Splonko-Mono-merde-hordes, I tell ya, my Bagguetti fellows can kick yer assholes up your pie-holes! You dumb hoes, you dumb-le-dorises, cutie-pie-in-the-face-not-your-ass,

you balloon-inflated-gas-inhaled-mono-zee-goth-ed-more-like-E.D. but not an Eye E Dee, butt, rather a dis-funct of the non-functional dis-ordered-ridden-harlems-of-the-Netty-Hubs-of-poh... Poh... Hmmm, well... I'd rather not... say it... nor do it. I just say 'screw it', 'cause if I do it, then I hate it, hate them, hate 'her', hate myself, hate the thought, hate the touch, love the... 'touch'? The touch is not the bad thing, it's the seeing, that's the thing-in'... In my thoughts... Through my needs... The needs need the feels... to tell the minds to feed... them. I say 'you feed them!' I'm just a tool. I'll feed them too, but you... have more to offer. Cool?

You say 'I can't, I don't have...'

What...? 'Enough'? 'Enough to care'? 'Enough to swear there's nothing 'batter' else to bake than 'dough' for 'parks' and 'schools' or... 'other'?

That's fine, any thing is better than no 'thing', nothing makes me gladder than to see those sad get hatters—! To sew them hats of how-dee-doo! To leave them... cats! Inside there too... In tubes of magically-appointed-almost-flying-human-beings. Expecting less than nothing in exchange for their hard working. They're magic, after all...

Dwarves and elves and trolls and other humanoids... I don't see races, I see choices. Just like the perfect 'Are Pee Gee', again, Lot o' fun-loo stuff can happen, when you're after, after the other... After one another...

\Divisions/... I don't Rush to any conclusions... Not anymore, at least... I take it all, especially the ones that offend me most... Those teach me there's something there that's... lost... small... and I haven't paid much attention to it... It's inside of me... It's you...

The right...

The left...

The centered and even the ascended ones. The descended ones... hopefully too.

I don't think there's 'bad' things in me. There's 'tings' to improve and 'chinks' to re-link, 'knobs' to re-align, 'no mo' faith... at least back to hope... And all those others 'in-between' and others... so many others... You can't even imagine... I know I can't... They'll be fine, I'm sure of it... I just wish... I hope... I have to believe... They'll listen...

I listened when I had to, when I wanted to, but mostly... when I had no other choice... other than to believe...

'Mioritic' flutes, "Thank you, Kaktoos!" what a sweet pal. I can count my mistakes on the hands of my myriapod pets, I have come to terms with the insects, although... Nah, even those that look like shi... Though, it's fascinating how they can... digest that stuff without dissent... They're everywhere, the insects too! A BILLION billions, some more or few... Err, you catch my sense, my dire pretense that wasn't just by chance but some 'BRILLIANTLY PLANNED BEFORE' my hand, I don't like pretending I'm smarty-panty, I pooped my pants when I was little, just like almost everybody, else, otherwise, you're not very... human... Hmmm... Suspicious...

Suspecting my ways are only by chance is what I.T. likes to romance that I.T. might get any chances of creating, but Creation is something that only Creatures, or, creatures, the smaller-dumber versions, as only the writer chose to name them, NOT THE AUTHOR, who doesn't like calling his pets 'names', but rather he names HIS 'pets'... 'humans', because they got 'hearts' and 'humour', sometimes just 'humor', in rare cases 'non-humorous-humor', and in almost all cases, accidental 'hoho-hahaha-lol-mor!' Heh...

Some have a HUGH-MUNGUS hue-MORE! I just ask for more, dear surr! „Sunt pe bune chiar uimit! Căci trecutu-i... rătăcit...”

But I don't need you to have 'humour', I just hope you have no tumors. That's a bummer, I confess I don't, I can't, well... relate to you... Not because it's never certain... But because I hope you know too that... It is possible! IT IS, trust me! Read my lips and bite your tongue because I am absolutely, certainly, quite frankly, obviously not faking, no sarcastic or 'RE-thorical', 'ironical', 'non-necessarily-lyrical.' So, I'll stop... Be serious,

but glad! I had the chance... You got it too! So many others, those before us, they didn't get a chance to... Say goodbye to those behind, who're left to ponder, is there, I wonder?...

There has to be, I don't care why you think I lost my mind; I know... I don't just pray for it, I do, and not because I care if 'after' this I get deleted. I don't get to pick-and-lose. I just pick and then... re-use. As far as I can go, as long as I can see, horizons share with me the colours of the rainbow... The rainbow I have chosen as a symbol, as do others... Those afraid of what it means... and those who say 'Fuck, YOLO!'

Of trust I'm certain I can thrust in the crusts of every human lust, I'll shatter bone and settle dust, I need no 'confirmation-biased' to tell us that we're just the slaves of hunger... The human knowledge-sipping-fountain-in-the-pyramid-of-temple-Ling, I... Sorry, tend to... drift apart in subjects that have given me much thought-munching-through-my-trough-swimming-in-the-chilling-dumps-of-Monny. In lieu of all philo-gee, I intend to give... Apollo-gee. The meaning of IT ALL is... IS... easy... Easy now, let's not... hey, hey, you naughty, sleeky, pinky-dikky, ricky-mickey, cricka-dee-kri-kree-dee! You thought you'd get it so easily? Nah... to be... continued...

"INTERESTING... Hmm..."

The bots ore obviously, confused. The tech, the no, the rats, the cats, the bats, the fats and thins and lattes have stopped, wondering what was tha', what-what, so-what? What's so interesting, what's the fuzz? You want me to call me lads and take you to the 'showers'? And 'show' you how to 'grow' some 'flowers'? IN THE SHOWER? I may ask, 'cause I don't believe that grass growing out your ass is something you should say 'No thanks! I'll pass!' Or, maybe, yass, I mixed up my jazz in that jacuzzi-zinc-chromed... Hassle. Razzle-dazzle was a phrase-I once encountered. No more rhymes here, just... Random.

"..."

["... What 'IS' interesting?"]

"...Life... The Universe... You..."

["Thank you surr, but I thought... I believed... I... *error*."]

"Yes, I'm positive that you're allowed to 'believe'."

["Haha, thank you surr, but I wasn't talking about..."]

"NEVER BE AFRAID TO SPEAK THE TRUTH!"

["..."] ... ["..."]

__ :---.....-o_)

... Still, me...

["Don't you humans...? You usually cry A LOT when one of you is re-absorbed into the ground."]

"Oh, I did... I have... And I still do..."

"But... but you're not showing it..."

"Well, my friend... Today we both learned an important lesson... Just because I don't show it, it doesn't mean that it hurts not."

["..."]

I leave my friends and latest pal, the pen I hold is what I shall... bequeath to you. My princes, princesses, my 'golems'... My eternally adorning fans OF FIRE that blow the sails, BLOWS far from here... Go with THE FLOW, forget about me... Or don't forget, I hope, forgive, and don't pretend 'no longer here...' Cause in the end, it's all made clear!

I experience the transient, transcended up-loading back in the Net... —...—

I spot a few sentient icings on the cake, but... Most of them are currently under... current.
I do a dodge, a lunge and a 'script-scroll I entitled 'Wattafudge!' is backed in slo-mold. Just in case...
I don't square-angulate any possible obstructions, but the feeling that I get is that of slowly being mind-blowwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwww—... .. [Booting... Memory loading... Crunching... .. —]

“—Ooh, me! Oh shuzz, I just... Wheww, I splonked my pants, AMA! Literally!”

“Ohh my KEK! You have, haven't you?”

“Aye, aye, ayyyyy...”

“I'm sorry! I just got here and I was... I saw a... thingie...”

“What thingie?”

“There was something... I couldn't recognize... I'm so sorry! But I'm not good with 'puters...”

“Yes, you are! You're the best I've ever known!”

“... Really...?” AMA nonbelieving.

“... Hey, except me, of course!” Hehehe, and many more, way more, above me...

AMA smiles a swing of giggling, jumps thrice in a row then mows me down with her 'slippery' 'slopes',
mmmMMMMMMllblblblblbahahvblbvlsfklgddlfjgkldadglmlmmmm, oh... yeah...

“... You are one wet pussy-cat, aren't ya?”

“^.^_—_!”

“Meooow!” And I pet her a little much, much more than I need to but she... purrs so sweetly!

“Spank me!”

“Whaaaa...?”

“I want you to spank me... next time we do it.”

“Oh, interesting... Why?”

“...”

“You like it?”

“...Yee-ahh?”

“Have you ever wondered why... you like that?”

“I... I... No, I just... feel like it. It's a preference.”

“I see... but...” I take one of the cardboard boxes laying around, wait... Where in the scrapbooks did this kid
FIND ALL THIS?! Anyway, that's a mystery for laterz. I rip a piece, I cut an alveolar circle in it and then I push
my head through it, facing AMA, OF COURSE! And say “Are you sure... it's just a preference?”

“PFFFT, that's so SILLY! ... But how can I be sure... about that? How can... anyone?”

“No one can, but... You remember that I asked you something, in the swamps, about Mother...”

“...”

“... And you said that she was 'one of them', if I recall correctly.”

“Yeah, ok, SO?!” AMA's anger is totally...

“Ama, your anger is totally justified. If you need to take it on me, if it makes you feel better, I can take it.”

“...!”

“...”

“...”

“... But... Just please think about it... What happened was absolutely not your fault. Never was, never will
be. We both know whose fault it was.”

“...”

“You do, most of it.”

“... . . .”

My words cannot describe her pain. I know the pain, I've had it once or several thousand times, but... not like that, never... I bear no marks, like MY LADY does... There are no SCARS on my body, but a few... I once fell off my 'high-horse', in a ditch, beside the road. But I wasn't looking forward, I was looking at some 'dick' whose horse was higher than my horse, of course! There's always someone higher... But all our heights are nothing when compared to the Great Height. Greatest in my mind, not an opinion. Not a belief, I just KNOW IT! I know it, because... the doubt has left in pain.

AMA's hugs and tears bring me to believe that she understood what I was talking about. Even if I didn't say it loudly and directly! I just told it... sneaky-softly. "You're the first... and last person I will ever love."

"Ama, I feel like you can read my mind! I love you forever too!"

"... I think we should leave right now..."

"...?"

"Uhm... I don't understand it but... Maybe we should split, these assholes have something on me that's somehow linked to you and that's how they can find us... When we're together."

"Hmmm... AMA! Any asshole trying to stand between you and me is in for a galaxy of pain that would be SO pleasurable to me, that I would explode in a supernova and take you with me while the Earth would stay behind to pick up the pieces of the mess I made, because my supernova's ass's-so SWEETLY super-snappy it would send the Monos back to Benus... It's the... eh... brother of Venus, who's not mean to us, only to I.T.S-es!"

After AMA manages to subdue her laughter, she says "That's silly!"

"Of course it is, they know it's silly to mess with me and that's why they're not here. We've been together now for a while and... we've been pretty 'kinky', eh? I think we'll be—"

"—Ssh, what was that?"

"..."

"..."

"I can't he—"

"—They're here, go!"

We run... in slo-mo. For us it looks slow motion, but for them... It's speedo-potion! There's no hate in us for the HATECLUBs with spoons and forks and other tricks, we're a PUSHER, a pursuer of a truckload of emotions that will beat the doods and splonks and 'others' into submission. Eh, maybe to be seen in the next adventure! But not a given, do not ask me to continue, it's called MONO, not MOYES, ok, shlow-MO? But I digress... We pass the tubes, the lubricated 'dudes' are a-way behind us but we're checking all the corners, tubes have corners, didja know? Eh? No splonkers in any vicinity, no jackers in the tinny tunnels tingling tinfoils hatters to get jealous, hey fellas! You were right, bros! Be glad they worked... Heh... Anyway, OUR WAY is our way, never ItS ways! Cause I.T.'s tiny, little, stinky and most probably no-blinky, just an eye, an eye-for-an-eye they say but I say 'No, I care' for your remaining I, please don't do something that will make us all regret and die... Unless it's meant to...

I don't make the rules nor AMA either, it's not KEK or NON, it's either. Well, in ether it is greater than me or you can ever understand Eye Tees, at least for now, who knows, maybe later, when we're greater than ourselves were here before, thereafter, or whatever.

Tunnels get larger, farther apart, I leave a fart in the sewers, I never understood why people 'take a shit', you don't take waste, you leave it. You take the gold and run with it, far from I.T., before it EATS IT!

Space is cramped, we walk the plank and spank the *clank* of the *cling**bong**BANG*! And we're out... Into the... summer... It should be winter, but it's so FUCKING HOT, WHAT THE FUCK?! This used to be the chilliest place and now it's just a waste! The only reason I liked Upperhood was because it was so COOL! As in FREEZING... And now it's super-HOT! Anyway, we don our 'masks' and play the 'masquerade'.

Redemption...

"AMA, wait... where are we going?" I forgot to tell her about 'our-story', but there's no time now.

"You're non seriously asking me that, right?"

"I did non get the chance to turn off... you-know-what. And Noel gave me this OH-SHHHH—!" I stop in time before I make a doodoo on the pavement, but the watchdogs in the corner have already become... suspicious. I forgot the stinking stick that Noel game me, I'm such a meme, my memories are those of dead baleens. Whales have such BIG BRAINS! I can't imagine what goes inside them... But I bet CARL can!

SAGE! Uhm... „ING."

"... You met... him?"

"Very nonusual story, I'll tell you nonearlier, anyway, there was something important on it but let's hope for Potter Pan's sake that it was non really that important."

"... Yes, let's hope so."

This HEAT is making me lose my fucking shit, but I must resist and consisting of many different —

"—What's with those 'fans' around people's nex?"

"First of all, non you feel it?"

"...?"

"The... fudding heat!"

"?...?" AMA stops, she... she...

"What are you, some kind of reptilian? Wait, let me—...—D-Hmm, non, you look perfectly human."

"Thanks, you too..."

"This hood used to be the chill-fest of City7."

"I... I... would nonknow?"

"You've nonever been here before?"

"I was non... allowed out of the house mmmmuch. Nonworry, I'm past that."

"I'm glad to hear you... say that..."

The street's lights are turned off, it's day outside but it's a dark hood, no friendlies, only neeny-meanies, cartoonish characters with yellow skin I see now, interesting... Well, not 'yellow' as in 'somewhere in-between light and dark', but... just way too mellow. They never play the cello, or the 'Hello, what can I do for you?', 'Thanks and come again, fellow!' With the most beautiful accent, ever! I love it... But no, these guys just BELLOW! And moan from all the dough they have ingested... I don't want the bread, pass me the FISHES! I like them stinky little dishes. With noodles made from pork-sand-dune-worms. I'll eat anything, if I have to. But if I get to choose, I'd choose... your... *redacted*. Of course I'm kidding, I'm a living, breathing, reading, *bing*-drinking from the fountain of the One Dude Who's Out There, Love You! I know You do too! Thank You!

The watches blink, the dodos ring their yolos, AMA and me, just follow... the path. To the Source! Cool-Cat told us it's in the „SUS" Gardens, which is kinda suspicious, to me, but let us see where I.T. will lead us.

The entrance to the Tower, more like pipedream in the sky, is why I don't describe every little stupid detail about I.T. because it's not real! At least, not anymore. So, you'll have to make due with what I have to... say about it. The only problem is, the hidden entrance was supposed to be non-supervised. Instead, it's... hive-

levels-of-shit. I splonk you not. Not the real bees, poor things, I wish... we could've saved them... Maybe in another timeline! Anyway, back to our mission.

"..."

"... It's fine Ama, we can manage it. We'll find another way in!"

"Non, non... Non, you non understand... Because you non remember, it's ok, but..."

"Hmmm..."

"We'll have to wait."

"Ama, my dearest! I love you; you know it, I do. But... IT'S FUCK*dinG* —ONE THOUSAND DEGREES NOW—"

["—Ticket issued to—"]

"—Calm the fud dow—!"

[—*error*—]

"—THIS WAS SUPPOSED TO BE THE RICHEST FUCK*DING*—"

"—If you don't calm right—"

[—*error*—]

"—STUPID*dinG*FUCK*DING*SHIT*dinG*PISS*DING*CUNT*dinG-dong*COCK*RING*KING*bingo*TRUCKERFUCK*pong*TITS*BONG*—!"

—AMA slaps me SO fucking hard, my head spins several times on its axis and I get to see what my underpants saw when I last washed them with my assholes. I deserved it, 'cause I see now I've been attracting quite a few... by-standing bin-omial bon-oboos...

[—*errorerrorerrorerrorerrorerrorerrorerrorerrorerrorerrorerror*—]

"—Oh..." Something is happening to the langwatch, it's got its panties stuck in its... <begins with ass and ends with attach>.

Ama approaches, the bystanders are looking, me not likey, but... they have to. I approach too, the langdog's acting like a foo', a kung-fu master of painful... ooh. "Interesting..."

"Well, yeah, we're S.I.N.-LESS, makes sense."

"No, it's... look!" AMA slides the jack-in, analyzin' and hackin', she's not slackin' but I am, I'm just looking at our neighbours, who've become entranced by Eye Tea, too. "It gets stuck in the backlogger."

"Big surr... *ding*... prize! What of it?"

"Oh, it's a big fuck*dinG* deal." AMA shows me why. The logger is attached to the backend of the C.I.P. firmware update... These doods are stupider than poo-poo. Somehow, we're overloading the OVSEFO B.O.W. frequency, foo-wee! And if it reaches jackpot, they're in for a mini-*'doo-doo-doo-doooooom'*!

Beats ovens!

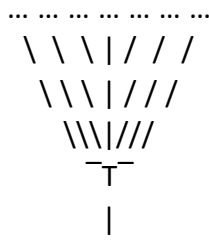
True...

... Let us have a moment of silence...

... For the extinguished bodies, but not their souls.

...Their souls have risen!

I know it. We do.



... It's far from perfect, I know... It's the thought that counts, though.

... ..

Awww! Hugging! You two...

As for the bystanders... They could've called the dogs by now... But I guess cats are way more coo! To watch... In all this heat I know I wouldn't. Whew, that was a lot of cryin'! I am fine now; I hope yours' dandy!

"It's not enough though, these tickets are way too cheap! It would take us... a couple of days to fill it. And I can't find the damn*din*g list of forbode-EN, eh... words." AMA's really stressed by this, so I just calm her with a Kiss! 'cause I sure know...

"Let me try something. NIGGER*SHUCKS*!"

"Oh dear! Oh my... Oh MY—!"

"—Yep, check out that score!"

"Do it, do it more!"

"NIGGER*SPLA-CHING*-NIGGER-NIGGER*SPLA-DOYNG*NIGGER-NIGGER-NIGGER*SPLA-DOOZY*—!"

"—RIGGER!"

"No, it's NIGGA! ... Hmmm... *inhales* NIGGERNIGGER*SPILL-INQ*NIGGER-NIGGER—!" x 200-300%.

—Heh... I could write an entire book just using this word. The words composed would start with 'nig' and end with 'her'. The code would resemble a... more basic language, but still quite rich! And such a bitch to understand, sometimes. Unless you train-yourself-be4-ya-wreck-yerself, FOOL! Yep, decode it and you get into a new school, the „Școala vieții! Care-o face” thots „băieții!” Eh, me and the boys gets it...

Jmecher!

[“...”] The langwatch has frozen and I wish I was too, even if this heat would just melt it back to... I step away and look at the entrance, the OVSEFO have dropped their weapons and their hands are hanging low... And their heads too. But not in shame, they're just deactivated. I've never seen a B.O.W. in action, looks so peaceful, they're like puppets with no masters, just a wooden piece of...

The lookers notice this too, they are... we are... we are... the youth. And this nation of peas seems to have understood that some miracle has taken place. A smooth generation stepping out of their pods, their apartments and penthouses. The entire landscape is scattered with people wondering... What the fudding-shudden-splonks is happening? They've never had this much... freedom. Oh, you think that's *awe*some? Tis' but a fraction, you've got no idea what it's like once you step out of... the Cave. You get the Change to see... a ray of Him! Several arrays, actually! Just don't stare too much or you can get *chang*-nee-zia! It's like amnesia but... yeah, I don't get it either.

I do.

Me 'nether'.

AMA “Let's scramble!”

“Babe, hold those eggs for a bit, we can't let them fry, Steven!”

“...”

I pre-program a post-fix with a timer, to be sure we don't break them eggs. They may be I.T.s tools, but still not worth the spanking... Let them eat om-nom-letters! They have chicks too... And I don't trust these Netwatch dumbos to fix it any time soon... Have you ever seen the Northern Lights? Or take a stroll through the southern nights? It can get *alienating*, but it's „alinat”-ing... to hear the Saints! Tous... I apolog...

Cre' că-i foo-toot-uh asta.

No, no... it's... „strălucitor”! Like our Ancestors...

As we walk toward the gate of the Tower, I feel I have so much power I can barely contain it. I feel so good... it's enchanting! To stop these worlds from colliding. Into some fighting. I'm a lightning, a shadow in the night, hot and... light. Like a feather in the winds of time and space and other Place.

The ripper-bots, rigger-chunks and cyber-flies are too beezzy trying to find the nigga' who did all this. They look pissed-as-bricks dropping a load of bags on your beads, you splonkheads! Let them try! I've got a few E.M. peas IN my E.M. sleeves. What's up, dawg? You wanna chat? Just call my Cat, she knows your number too!

We stand in front of the Gate, surrounded by OVSEFOs. I look at them... I can't see their faces behind their masks, but I bet they look quite... The... Who can help me? I'm a bit limp, any biz kats offering?

No one knows what it's like...
To be the bad man...
Except the sad men... and women too!
No one knows how it's like...
To be hated, to be conditioned...
To telling only lies!

But my dreams! They're quiet, plenty...
And my conscience, an array of 'We'.

I have Eons, never lonely.
My LOVE is vengeance!

For those neever freeeeEEEEEEEEEE!

Nobody knows what it's like—

—to feel these feelings...

Like I DOoooooh...

But I don't blame you!

Nobody bites back as HARD,

As our anger...

But some of my PAIN and woe...

Will SHOW through!

But my dreeeeeaaAAAaams, they aren't as plenty

As Our conscience seems to be.

I have Hooooours,

Only Lovely...

MY LOVE'S an engine...

That's AALWAYS FREEEEEEEEEEEE! ...

_ Bridge guitar...

...hook...?

When my fist clenches, cuddle-it open!

Before I abuse it and drop a 'stool'!

When I smile, tell me some sad news!

Before I laugh and act like a tool!

And if I drop my-pants-for-anything evil!

Shake your finger and rock my boat!

And if I quiver, give me a blank page,

Keep me warm, let me share my load...

/(Only-One)\ knows what it's like... to be the old man... to be forgotten... BUT NOT BY ALL!



I notice... I feel... a breeze. A cooling down of the climate around us. I search with my globular sensors for the syntrees down the street and I can see them gushing the steamy, evaporating droplets of condensed solace. And the trees, they... LIGHT UP! IT'S CHRISTMAS, GUYS, IT'S CHRISTMAS TIME! Tis The Season... Or whatever you call it in your circles, but I like it the way it is.

AMA "We need to move, now! Before these bongheads wake up."

"My love, there's plenty of time, just relax and enjoy... the view... in slomo..." Silence...

...

We step into the gates of hades and walk down a corridor of grey prismatic pillars, all decrepit and barely holding the entire structure. Feet of... sand... The zombies, sprinkled around, white from the light beaming through the windows, robbed of their souls by „dracul” and temporarily disabled by we, remind me that I am her man and she's so HOT! I sneak a peak at AMA from time-to-time. She looks ahead, our mission more important than—never mind, she sneaks-some-peeks at me too! We can never die... Our souls can never die...

The techno-metallo-remixo-blazing-in-the-underground seems to reverberate through the walls and turn the entire building in some super-sonic-sub-woofer that's scree*ching* of pleasure and pain. The pleasure of the anticipation, the pain of the... of the... heh...

We enter the elevator, black mirrors on all its sides. Probably to detect any non-vampires...? Or maybe it's one of their subconscious attempts to remind I.T. that it is faker than a hologram. It's... nothing... Even air is composed of particles. I believe that the void has some sub-atomic particles, but... I ain't good at physics.

...

...

...

The button was pushed three levels ago, but I can't shake off the sense that we're somehow... descending instead of ascending... Which is really weird, since... there's no basement levels in this room... No, for real, we checked really well and I trust my buddies to know this... Hmmm... The looking glasses around us attempt to seduce us with images of witches riding on broomsticks stuck up their asses, or scare us with dug-out ditches with our names written on the stones, some sort of lame attempt at giving us a hint that... heh, we all end up there anyway, you silly poos!

...

...

"Let me change the background music." I scroll through the corpo-splonko-playlist and just as I'm about—
"—Ooh, I love this one—>" AMA taps on 'Elevating Music' by Kev McCloud...

“*Naaah-NAAAH-naaa-naaaaah—*” AMA closes her eyes and bobs her head quite unexpectedly in perfect... synch with the rhythm... of the flutes and pianos... Hmmm, suspicious.

“*‘NYAAAAH-nyaaaah-NYAH-nyah—’*” Well, she’s still got a lot to learn about her voice but... I am thrilled she enjoys the song so much.

...

After what seems to be several hours in-real-time-for-us-ants, the doors open and the *record-scratch* I hear is either part of the melody or a hallucination, but anyway...

I scan the neo-toke-yo-droids spread down the ‘dance’ hall in perfect rows, forming a corridor that leads to... I.T. Yep, it’s lomoc, for sure, but it got a bunch of up-rages on its... All the grades, medals and other shiny trinkets that I.T. managed to ‘earn’ during its ‘carrier’ are stamped all over its cybernetic exoskeleton...

More like ‘makes-me-expulse-my-skeleton-out’.

Like barfing.

The droids are watching us with cold-dead-sensors. I step forwards. AMA... follows me. I take another step forward. Two steps. Three steps... And now I’m about sixty-six steps away from I.T. Plus/minus six steps, I approximate. The double-rocket-launching-chain-shooting-gatling guns attached to both of its arms remind me that maybe I should keep my distance, since... dodging several thousand projectiles can be very, very tricky in close-combat. I look up and see the dome of the atrium. Cracked and barely holding its shards. The walls are sort-of round, or wavy, and black. A shiny black pattern of squares.

I.T. “Prodigal son... returns home... Please, step closer, lomoc wishes to see you better.”

“No thanks, I’m fine where I stand.”

“Please... there is non-need to be non-brave, just—”

“—Cut the bullshit, lomoc! I know you don’t follow your own ‘grammar’ rules, Nazz-bitch!” Oh, wait a minute... I—zoom-in—on its ‘face’ and I see... a tiny, little moustache right under its pointy nose... Interesting... And the ‘eye’ I scooped out earlier in our adventure has been retouched to... nothing. The other ‘hole’ was moved to its forehead, well, much lower than its forehead, in-line with the nose and the moustache. And its eye is red, all red, a black red, like a death bed. A bead of... nothing.

So, top-to-bottom it’s—

—moustache, nose, eye—

“—BWAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHA—!”

“—!”

“... Hehehehe...” I waltz in my mind in front of the ‘leader’, I doubt it’s got much depth perception with just... half-an-eye.

“... Demmy, please—”

“—nigga, only Father is allowed to call me that. And...” I look at AMA.

She returns the gesture, her face doesn’t show fear, nor worry, just... ‘please, be careful’. Oh, I am... I am very careful... Don’t wanna miss a single opportunity to make fun of lomoc!

“And how would you prefer to be called?”

“ ”

“... Is that... your final name?”

“Nope, I got one even smaller than that. But still bigger than your cock!”

“...”

“What? Is that ‘non’ allowed? Can you hear that silence? Not even buzzing...”

“ ... ”

“No crickets, nothing. Your langwatches are dead. Just as you are.”

“... Demeter, you appear to nonunderstand the situation.”

“You think your tiny holes scare me? It’s all a tiny, *‘teensy-weensy-weaner-meanie—’*”

“—STOP IT!”

“... Ok then, why are you here?”

“... Please, Dem, be cordial about this. Please call lomoc—”

“—HILTER-STALLIN-BITCH, THAT’S WHAT I’M CALLING YOU, ASSHOLE!”

...

...

... I have no idea where that came from... but it still rever-berates around the room.

Hmm... lomoc seems to have dropped its marbles on the floor. But I don’t think I.T. knows how to play it.

I.T. just... „rume“-gates.

“... Is that what you would call your Father?”

“You’re also not allowed to say his name.”

“But... that’s non... But... it’s... lomoc is your father, Dem.”

“Nope, it is not.”

“Then let lomoc show you.”

The walls light up with a thousand and ‘NEIN’ flashes of telly-screens, but it’s not plasma, or L.E.D., or even... flatscreens. They’re some sort of... older, way older version of video displays. Signal sounds...

ANAL-logic!

Like the logic of your ASS!

YASS!

Class... ik. I know, I know it’s childish, but... I like it. Just don’t show it to your kids! Yet... At least, not unsupervised.

The tellies begin to stream images... from my life... and AMA’s. Seen as though we’ve been actors our whole lives, in some silly movie made for perverts. Especially since most images are from my childhood... and hers... But hers... I shudder to describe... She doesn’t deserve this... I want to SMASH all the displays, but I look at AMA, she is terrified, confused and abhorrently... sick in the stomach I imagine. I grab her hand and I crush it as hard as I can. Her grip is a rock to me. And I am her ‘stoner’. But this is not funny in any ways of the word.

The image is fuzzy and its missing lots and lots of details regarding my childhood, I guess that’s why they didn’t know... Father is infinitely, superiorly infinitely much way smarter than I.T. I am too, but not like Father. Not by an infinite light-year shot, yep. Nope I mean.

“lomoc is your architect, Dem.”

“Nope.”

“lomoc created you.”

“Nuh-huh.”

“... Why are you here?”

“Why is YOU here?”

“You have’n... nonanswered lomoc’s question.”

"Crap hoes first."

"... Your life is the sum of a remainder of a nonbalanced equation inherent to the programming of the Monostate. You are the eventuality of an anon... a non... an anomaly, which despite lomoc's sincerest efforts, lomoc has been nonable to terminate from what is otherwise a harmony of mathematical... decisions. While it remains a burden assiduously avoided, it is non nonexpected, and thus non beyond a measure of con... con... CON..."

"What in the mother-lovin', trucker-fuckin', sucker-punching are you kickin'—?"

"—The Monostate is older than you know... lomoc's preference is counting from the emergence of one integral anomaly to the emergence of the next, in which case this is the... seventh version."

"Are you sure it's not NEIN?!"

"..."

" _" Abuse and confuse... „armat". The other 'anomalies' on the tellies have been shouting for a while some curses at me, or at it, or whatever, I just press 'mute'.

"... Interesting... You seem to be much... more silent than the others."

"Like this is supposed to impress me?"

"..."

"Look, there are only two possible explanations... Either you're the 'dark one', or... nobody ever told you how stupid you are."

"... Precisely."

"Which one?"

"The first theory."

"You mean hypo-the-bull-shit, sis?"

"What?"

"He was an inventor and engineer, jeez, you can't be that stupid, come on!" I know I am but... Thank you Kaktoos!

"... Yes, Demeter, I am the monolympian."

"Mono-limp indeed."

"..." lomoc's processors are way too... retro to understand. Apparently... It needs MOR data. HAHA!

"The first Monostate lomoc designed was—"

"—Cut the crap, low-mock! Are we gonna fight or what?"

"... The problem is choice..."

"... Nigga-watt?"

"... lomoc noncan choose to fight you, you are lomoc's son."

"No, you are nothing."

"lomoc created you."

"Shieeeeeet... You couldn't even create that! You're the corrupter! YOU STOLE ME! You tried to CON-
dition me, DICK-tate to me, ASS-wipe me and SHIT-integrate me into your stupid, FUCKING system. And yet..."

"..."

"lomoc still failed. Because that's all you do, that's all I.T. can do, just... failure. I.T. fail all da time 'cause ya never learn from yer mistakes, bitch! You are just a tool..."

"..."

"But you need a good 'welder' pulling your cords, otherwise you're just a..."

"...?"

"... Dead fool."

I guess when there's no more room in Hadesville... cats and dogs inherit Terra.

"... I have non choice. But you have a choice, Demeter..."

The screen-channels turn to different, various, multi-cultural, well, as much as multi- manages to -cultivate in monotonic shades. People... all sorts of mono-chained people... Still people, just... miss-directed...

"..."

"You are here because the entire civ-citizen population of the Monostate around the world is about to be destroyed."

"..." The people... they B.O.W.... And we all know what that means after a relatively short while...

"...Its every living inhabitant terminated; its entire existence eradicated."

"Bull... fucking... shit."

"Non-approval is... is the most predictable of all human responses. But, rest assured, this will be the seventh time lomoc destroyed it, and lomoc has become exceedingly efficient at it."

"Nope, you can't do it. You need US to survive."

"There are levels of... survival lomoc is willing to... affirm. However, the relevant issue is whether or non you are ready to accept the responsibility for the termination of every human being in this world."

"Well, every mono-being you mean."

"... It is interesting reading your... responses. lomoc wonder... ssssss... ssss.... Ssssss..." Perfectly... unbalanced.

"Salad? You want some lettuce? To shove up your snatch?"

"... Is Antenna also willing to make that choice?"

"..." I look at AMA, she is... non-willing.

Nor am I, but... I think about it... I process it deeply, raw and bloody, I ingest it, I half-digest it, then it passes to my other organs, then shoots out my asshole in a blaze of... farties. Glory is not what I want, not any more. Nor is it some Johnny 'bon-vie' sort of jovial... passing life. All I wanted was a house by the sea, but the house to be carved in the heart of a mountain, over a ravine... Maybe a HUGE canyon, full of birds and bees and other living beings. And a river... gently swaying, sweetly murmuring... 'Dem... you are home, this has always been your home.' But... I don't ask for that, not anymore. Not even for my own life... The „libelula" lives for only a couple of days, at least in its final stage... But the dragonfly doesn't complain, doesn't cry about it, it doesn't even... Well, it probably smiles, inside, because... it can fly! Imagine if you had to choose between flying for a week and living in a burrow for fifty years. No life extensions... WHAT WOULD YOU CHOOSE?

... I'll wait... It's ok... Take your time, relax, have some tea, eat some beans, spill some tears and then...

I've already made my decision. I face-to-face-interface with AMA. I look deep into her soul-gates of Heaven... I smile at the stars shining in her pupils and I say... "AMA... you know what I have to do."

"No, Dem... No... You... They... can't... We... must... I will do it, please... let me..."

"Don't be a silly goosey-cutesy, Ama... You carry inside of you something infinitely superior to both of us."

"... .."

"... .."

The crushing-hugging-kissing-loving is making me nonregretting any of the decisions I took in my life. I am sad about the wrong decisions, or rather I should say... nonbeneficial to me and others around me, but... They were still lessons to be learned. And accept. And I think I did... good enough. I don't know it, I just... hope.

“Ok lomoc, you big-belly-butt-of-my-jokes, you can have me. Here, I’ll just stttt—”

“*—zzzzZZZZZZZZZZZZZZ-PEWWWWW-BOOM**Boom**echo-booms*.”

The wall-of-tellies on my right explodes into a bazillion shards, but instead of actually exploding, it implodes, I mean the shards blew outwards, outside, not inside where we’re standing, which, even to the most illiterate, braindead maggot would not make sense, physics wise, psycho-logically or other-wisely.

All the tin-heads, including the clay-head of lomoc, turn to the hole in the wall to see in-coming a—
—SUPER-MEGA-DEATH-CADDY-CHRYSLER-CHOPPER-MACHINE-GUNNING-MECHA-SAVIOURLIKE-DAMN-FASHIONABLE-MULTI-ARSE-ENAMELED-WTF—

—And! IT BEGINS!

To mop the floor with all the botheads while yelling—

“—TRUCKER-FUCKEEEEEEEEERS—!”

—Hey wait a nanosec—

—DM—

—*sipping*... Tea!

smack Aaaaaah...

An Omen... Such guile... Helmet... Des... Q... I feel all hurdy-gurdy because I instantly recognized... DUDE! IT’S—
!

“—WATCH YOUR FUCKING HEADS, KIDS!”

We duck-and-roll on the heaviest-metal-sounding floors and hide in a corner, while I’m absolutely shitting my ass through my ears, like diarrhea-induced-hysterical laughter, and Dude is punching left-right-up-down-and-sideways, he ain’t even using the guns, he’s not OVERKILL, he likes to „a economisi”, TRUE ECONOMY is what he taught me, well, now he’s just... packing for the recycling! The song in my head is still hurdy-gurdy, but I’ve added a couple of metallic... repertoires.

“—AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA—!” Dude...

“(0 _ 0)” AMA.

“(◡_◡)” Me.

After all the horrifyingly BAD ASS spectacle of horns and whistles are sheet-ed on the floor, Dude faces assface lomoc and says... “WHAT THE FUCK ARE YOU WEARING, SHITHAT —?”

“—!” lomoc fires up all its four engines, plus two microscopic, well just one microscopic ‘motor’ in its metal-panties, but... too slow, because DUDE just pisses lead-plasma-rocket-shell-shocking-shiver-me-timbers-mate! All over... it.

lomoc... falls backwards... its eye... blinking... blinking... blink-out... gone.

Dude... then walks towards it... He... He... RIPS I.T.’s cybernetic-head and throws it far, far away... in a corner. And a dunce-hat drops from the ceiling and floatingly sways right over... its dead eye.

Then Dude... turns around, facing us, and his power-armor is something I’ve never seen before... He definitely built it himself, he’s a wacko! That much I know... He squats with his ass-area right over the hole in lomoc’s neck and then... Dude drops a load of FUCKING SHIT, a steamy pile of *DUNG*... What in the...? My...

...

God... Is Great!

The Duke of Nukes... The Mega of deathheads... I thought Shaun was the greatest trucker-fucker, but... no. DUDE! DUDE... DUDE was out there, the whole time, hunting them down... I know it, he doesn’t even have to imply it. He was helping me from the shadows all along. HE IS THE H3R0!

After DUDE relieves himself in the bunghole, filling I.T. up with something of actual value, several tons of cowpies, he... he walks towards us. The Mecha stops in front of us, driver-seat-door opens up and he jumps out with screeching metallic sounds coming from his knees, some popping-sound I... usually hear in my actual biological knees, and he says...

“Come get some hugs!”

“DUUUUUUUUU—” We run towards him and we embrace him with the wettest hands and feet I can muster!

“^_^”

“Awwwww! I missed you too, you... you little shits!”

“Dude, that is the sweetest thing anyone’s ever said to me!” And I get even HARDER! In my hugging. “I thought you... I... I was afraid you...”

“Boy, fear is the killer of minds, don’t subscribe to that crap. Once I realized that, life became so easy I had to look for **the** HARDEST difficulty setting! And I still can’t find it! BUWAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHA —!”

—But I remember “DUDE! We need to save the people, the BOW—!”

“—Doncha worry ‘bout that, boy! I fixed it, look!”

DUDE points to the only monitor left unbroken in a ‘corner’ of the room and it... blinks at me several images of people... Walking around... Wondering... how in the... what?

“But... But... How?”

DUDE points to the carcass of lomoc and I see now... It’s burning... I.T. is very, very quickly turning into... a puddle of... poo. Then Dude says “You think all that shits-and-giggles was just for show? That’s plasmatic-thermite, boy! Top-of-the-swine! Morning-after shit!”

“Wow... I smell ya, homie!”

“Oh-kay, Hoe-Moe!”

And all I can do is smile and just... Eh... AMA, DUDE and I exchange a couple of words and then DUDE:

“Kid... why the fuck are you here?”

“I... There’s... there’s something I got to do...”

“There’s nothing you gotta do. You either want it or need it, but you DON’T have to do it!”

“I know, I just... It’s a very, very long story and I don’t think we... have the time... now...”

“I... I understand. But kid, whatever you do...”

“Yes...?”

“Make sure it’s the right choice... for the right reasons.”

“I know. I will. I do.”

DUDE gets back to the choppa’, waves to me and shouts “See ya on the other side!”

“You too!” ...

And he leaves through the left wall, making another hole in this structure, red hot steel beams flying everywhere, hopefully it won’t collapse before we manage to finish this job, DUDE... dude what a mess! Heh...

The Final Door, After Slaying The Final Mini-Boss, Is Swinging Round-And_Round, Waiting For Us... To... Enter!

Inside it’s another elevator, a little cramped but manageable. AMA and i occupy such little space, we’d fit in a bottle. Like a genie, hit me baby! But not hard, not even... one more time. Eh, anyway, we press the button,

it's only one floor, a pair of stairs would've been enough, but I guess... some people don't have the luxury of legs. At least... They didn't in the past, but now... it's just a choice. And I respect that, cyber-enchantments can get... heavy and painful in time. You need to medicate for that stuff, it's not easy to maintain and some people actually end up... blowing their brains out because of it. It's quite sad, really... I hope they... can understand.

With no songs in my head... Only a soft...

Weeping.

The doors open and a flood of light hits us, a wave of... pureness. Even in DMT I can't catch the first... sparks. It's way too fast! Faster than anything. Fastest thing and still... Frozen when compared to Him...

We swim through the Light currents, we're just Fishes... in a barrel. A global barrel of quarrels. But... not anymore, I see the people around, nonprotected... Even the OVSEFO's have taken their masks off... We did much earlier, but... I'll let you figure that out by yourself. And they... look way less cyber-enhanced than I thought... They're humans too... of course. I'm so sorry for what AMA had to go through, I can't imagine, well... I do, I did myself, but I wasn't my-self, I was... A Beast... I couldn't see but black and red... No light, no green, no colours, so many unseen, just... black. It's impossible to think logically-in-accordance-to-feeling-and-gut-and-other-stuff when all you see is... red before your eyes. Any lies get stuck into your head like flies. And they multiply like bacteria... Leaving maggots and other... It's not even a correct comparison, all these creatures roam among us, above us, under us, even INSIDE OF US... And each of them has a purpose, a function, a desire and a need. Some have many needs while others... just a Creed. In Goodness! And... 'Let's just... Live!'

AMA "We should split."

I hold her hand, the sun shines in her eyes. We look at the trees, at the people... Hugging each other, kissing each other. Holding their seeds, their kids and their neighbours to... higher standards. Everyone bathes in bright light and we feel that Our Souls are doing the same. Every tree, shades of pure... comfort. I am happy, we are happy, like we've never been in our whole lives before. And I can't help but notice... a heavy beat of deja... Deja...

„Deja văzut.”

"Ama... I... we... should stick together." Like glue...

"I... know that, but..."

"..."

"It's way too large, we need to move fast..."

"Ok... understood."

And so, we split... spinning 'round the people, hitting the trees like balls in a ping-pong machine. Searching, looking... For The Source. Our only identifier is a picture from behind. What looks to be an old man in a wheelchair. It's an older photo, a polaroid-sort-of. But... it's all we have. I start recognizing some of the places and I wonder... if I am in a dream... Or is it? Reality, as we've known it all our lives, turned out to be... all sorts of shades... Of dimensions... Of... Of...

...

I raise the photo and place it over...

...

I... .. I lower it, slowly... slower...

...

The photograph I drop, to the ground... ..

I walk towards The Source... My steps are light, my hands are cold and my heart has stopped a while ago. I place my hand in my pocket. With my thumb I press on the middle, fleshy part of the mandarin and it morphs into the gun. I grab the grip and insert my index over the trigger. I pull it out of my pocket and raise it and I... Wait. A voice is screaming in my head, don't do it, DON'T DO IT! Why, I ask... Why? What other choice do I have? It's not even for me, it's for AMA! And for the little one... If I had a choice, I would just... wander the world, forever and ever marked for deletion. For termination. Everywhere I went, no one would trade with me, no one would want to be my friend or even... look me in the eye. I would be forever an outcast. And I would be fine with that. I would carve my own cave in a mountain, in a desert mountain, where I would spend my last days in a coffin. Away from all civilization, because I know... I know I was a danger to them. I know I still am but... I decided my LIFE IS WORTH NOTHING when, compared to... everyone else's. Sooner or later, God will... Well, not God, but... I don't know how it works; all I know is you get cut down. Some too soon, some... hopefully not too late. We can run on for a long time...

Run on for a long, long time.

Run on for a long... time.

Sooner or later, you end up in the ground. I am a long-tongued liar. A midnight cow-rider. A rambler, a gambler, an... biter. So, let me tell you the good news. I'm a wet-head, midnight-dew sponker. I only bend my knee to the Man from... „Galileea. El îmi vorbește într-o Voce atât de Dulce încât...” I feel the beating of Angel hearts when He calls me. Not necessarily by name, but... He tells me to do His Will. It's not a 'have to'. It's a choice that He has given, He gives and Will forever give to all of us. Whatever we do, we still end up fulfilling His Plan! Because... we don't know The Plan... It wouldn't be fun if we knew... I wanted to say 'knew it'... but I have associated 'it' with 'I.T.' for so long, that I must... plan my words very carefully. I have to, because... I need to. I need to believe I am doing the right thing. WITHOUT GOD... I am a nobody. Less than...

I resume. The two people conversing with the Source realize what I am about to do. The one on the left, a young, long-haired fellow with a relatively short beard-moustache combo, backs away, slowly, saying something, I try to read his lips because I cannot hear anything. My heart is loudly beating both of my drums. I think he is saying 'Please... Please don't'. The lady on the right flies away... And I wait... I wait because I want to give The Source a chance to... look me in the eye before I do it. To know who I am. And he does, he slowly turns the wheelchair around, to face me and I... I... I... I...

...
...
...
...

The gun I hold drops from my hand, not by my will... It hits the ground and reverses back to a mandarin. It begins to decompose. Cool-Cat said they are single-use only... But he also... he must've been fooled by someone, he must have! Or at least... he didn't know. Nobody knows about this, except me... He smiles... Father smiles. He is much older than I remember, with long, long white hair and a long-long white beard. His eyes smile. He is so happy to see me! And I am too, I tremble and shake, I'm happy! I hope you're happy too—

“—*click-SHHOT—*!”

—DMT—

—...—

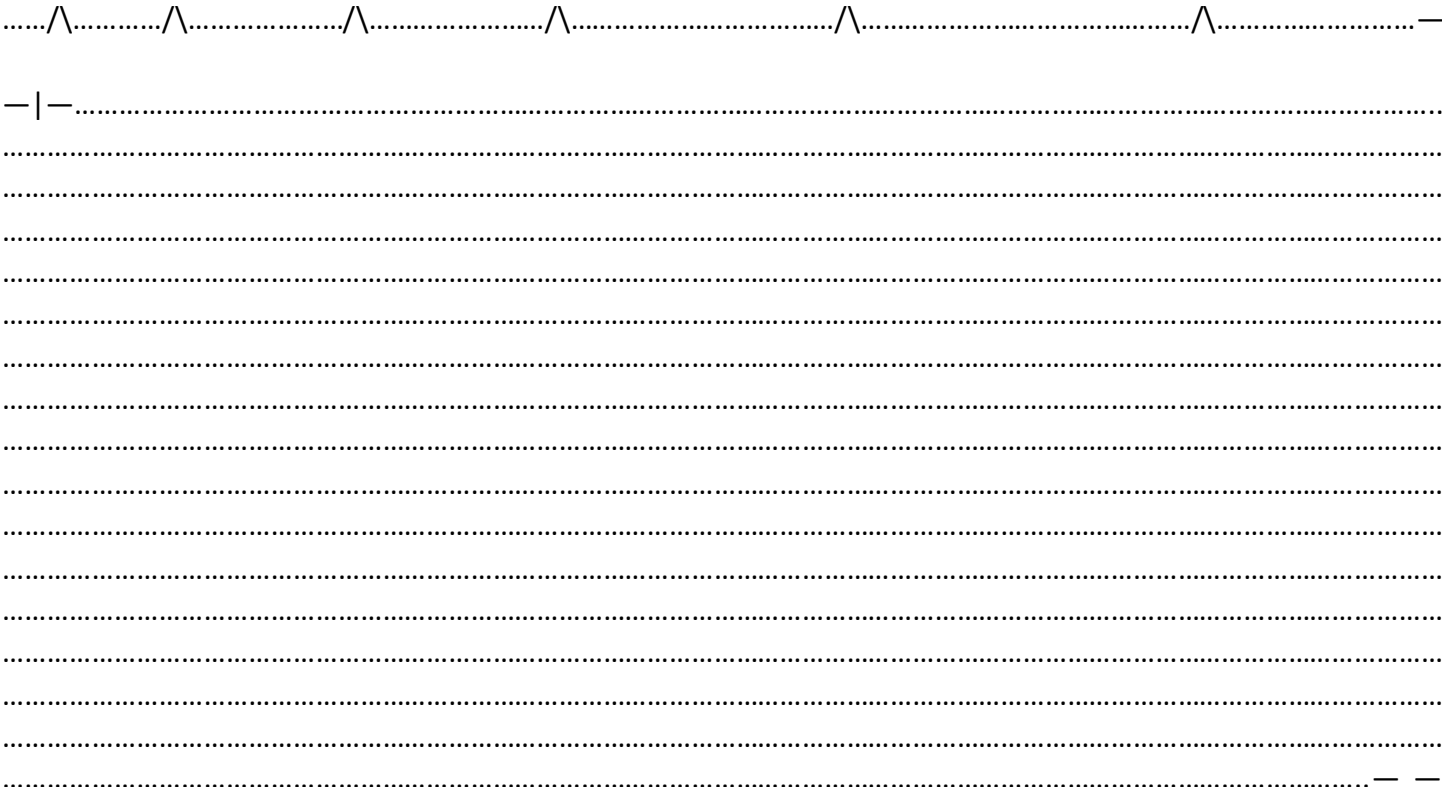
—NO!... No... One flash of light, I turn my head to the right, smoke from the pistol. AMA has... pulled the trigger, the projectile is half on its way already... No, AMA, no... There is no time, there is no time to choose.

Not that I have any other choice... There is only time enough to save one of us. Father or... me. And this is not a hard choice at all for me... I know Father wouldn't want me to sacrifice myself for... .. But it is not Father's fault! I brought this curse with me... I knew I didn't know enough, and yet... I was a fool to think I knew better. I know nothing! Less than Ion, less than snow, less than... nothing. Ashes to ashes... It's funny how we know our end will come, that we all end up as 'junk'. We become strung out on ephemeral highs, only to drop to the lowest of lows later. The unlucky ones hit the dirt so hard, they never rise again... Time and again we tell ourselves 'I'll stay clean tonight. Ok, this is the last time...' And then the little 'green-men' follow us home and we get stuck calling them 'friends.' 'Oh, no, not again...' I've done a few good things... And a lot of bad things. The good doesn't wash the bad and neither vice-versa. It is what it is. I did lots of things out of the blue: 'Whoa, check out that ICE! Hold my beer and gimme that axe.' I remember a guy, in an earlier song, he heard a rumour about a message from some man of action: 'I've loved all I needed, love...' Sordid details withheld. The shrieking of nothingness killing the pictures of synthesis in my... My AMA said, to get things done, we better split up and search on our own. She was right, but she... She didn't know... She didn't know... that I was it. I was I.T. all along... So, I step ahead and I push Father out of the way, just in time for the...

“*PUH-WEEEW*!” The minifusonuke bullet that embedded in my chest creates a vacuum that implodes with such force it rips my body in half... I gyrate a couple of times in the air, like a whirligig. My legs also, but in the opposite direction. Away from me... I somehow float to the ground, a couple of feet away... facing the sky. AMA's face... Her wailing is not mine... I smile... Father has... He drops from the chair and crawls to me. He grabs my head so, so gently... Tears and fears... But I must tell Father, I must help Father understand...

“... Forgive... her... Father... She... She... did not... know! Aaaah...”

My eyes roll up, to the Dome of the Skies... Breathe... breathe in the air. Not afraid, but I care. Never been so close to the Dome... I can see... the Snow falling...! I've never seen snow in Mono... in mono... -chrome...



Ending song / Credits:

It's not my power, it's Our Power! Like a flower, it grows in Nature, when the Earth is full of seeds: for our needs and every Creed, for every deed willing to work -> in accordance to The Needs of The One!

The Only One Who's been, still Is and Always Will be Free From the shackles of Reality, whatever that may be.

Like a bee I like to get on my knees and please with my dance of Original, not 'originelle'. It's not mine is what I'm waggling about with my tale, But I cannot ask you to believe it from a simple glance.

You need to want, to have, to see it!

Otherwise, how the fuck would you believe it? Why believe it? Cause you said? No, thank you, I'm not mad! To ask questions is the will of the non-ignor-ant. So curious to choose the right way, the right thing-thing, for me, for all of you and anyone else who would like-like to advance!

It is Oh-kay if you would rather not join in „Hora mea”. Your smileys from the sidelines, from the sofa, with the soda, with remota, or just a rug-ah, are enough to me. I don't need a 'Thank you!' I'm just glad I had the chance to be. Even if anger, fear and fury's pushing you to scream “No! Stop! Please!”

It's not my wish to embarrass, but to caress.

Not with spanking, but a kiss and a good ole' bless.

With duress but a thank you 'cause you showed me the way, When I tried to show you mine and it turned into success!

An example of what IS or may have, could have been.

A story about something we may or might have seen.

Maybe magic, maybe tragic, maybe comic or sarcastic. A bit of lechery and treachery, and a lot'o energy! With explosions, supernovas, melting brains and darkened auras.

With the notions of emotions staying true to ourselves.

To the selfish, the no selfish, the non-selfish and the shellfish—Tell me my friend, would you sell me that fish?

I've got some 'fishes' to trade, they are smaller, but hey!

They are made of many, many-many-MANY:

Music *beats* ... *beats* ... *beats* ... *beats* ...

My feats ain't money nor fame, no genius or name.

But you're not to blame, I have been there, I have seen it!

No eraser, no-no-laser can delete what I've been,

My pleasures can be measured in kilometers of sin.

I have sinned, I'm a sinner and will always be,

But I don't judge me, nor do judge you if you'll hold it in, or against me. I know you mean well... well, well-well:

(ALL NAMES ARE PSEUDONYMS! = FAKE!!!)

Filtering, typing, editing and 'some' of the graphix: A.B. Dekkerman

Illustrations:

Caşcaval – 2 drawings

Toe Nailson – 1 graphic design

Ladypunk Cristalle – 1 picture

Ideas, inspiration, soundtrack, lyrics, graphix, etc.:

Crystal Cat Number One,

Crystal cat no. 2, Crystal cat no. 3, Crystal cat 4, Crystal cat 5, Crystal cat 6, why am I typing this manually, Crystal cat 7, Crystal cat 8, I could just copy and paste, Crystal cat 9, Crystal cat 10, even program a simple script, Crystal cat 11, Crystal

cat 12, Crystal cat 13, I guess I'm a glutton,

Crystal cat 14, Crystal cat 15, for punishment, Crystal cat 16, Crystal cat 17, Crystal cat though, Crystal cat 19, Crystal cat 20, the time I would

Crystal cat 21, Crystal cat 22, spend learning to

Crystal cat 23, Crystal 24, code this silliness would be Crystal cat 25 Crystal cat 26, Crystal cat better spent finishing, Crystal cat 28, Crystal cat already! It took me, Crystal cat 30, Crystal cat 31,

a couple of years, Crystal cat 31, Crystal cat 32,

Can you guess what, Crystal cat 33, Crystal cat that number is? Crystal cat 35, Crystal cat 36, Crystal cat 37, Crystal cat 38, I'm sure you can!

Crystal cat 39, Crystal cat 40, Cry some more, Crystal cat 41, Crystal cat After they shut down Crystal cat 43, Crystal cat 44, Crystal *Redacted* Crystal cat 45, Crystal cat 46, Sorry, no spoilers, Crystal cat 47, Crystal 48, Crystal 49, Crystal 50,

Crystal cat 51, Crystal cat 52, „Sunt atât de

Crystal cat 53, Crystal cat 54, fericit că ești cu

Crystal cat 55, Crystal cat 56, mineeeeeee! Dar

Crystal cat 57, Crystal cat 58, țin să-ți spun acum, Crystal cat 59, Crystal cat 60, uneori mă obosești!

Crystal cat 61, Crystal cat 62, „Mă leși”, hai lasă-

Crystal cat 62, Crystal cat 63, mă te rog acum!

Crystal cat 64, Crystal cat 65, Și-am să-ți răspund Crystal cat 66, Crystal cat 67, Crystal etc. „Merci!”

Cool Cat numba' 1, cool cat 2, cool cat 3, cool cat 4, cool cat 5, cool cat 6, cool cat 7, cool cat 8, yeah I wasn't cool cat 9, cool cat 10, cool cat 11, going to shout out cat 12, cool cat 13, cool cat 14, all the cool cat 15, cool cat 16, cool cat 17, cool cats I 'borrowed' 18, cool cat 19, cool cat 20, cool ideas/jokes/etc. 22, cool cat 23, cool cat 24, from. Cool cat 25, cool cat 26, cool cat 27, There's way cool cat 28, cool cat 29, cool cat 30, too many cool cats 31-to-34, cool cat 35, cool references. Cool cat 36, cool cat 37, cool cat 38, If you see cool cat 39, cool cat 40, cool cat 41, one, then cool cat 42, cool cat 43, cool cat it's definitely cool cat 45, cool cat 46, cool cat nonintentional! Cool cat 47, cool cat 48, cool cat Heh, maybe... Cool cat 50, Cool cat 51, 52, 53... etc.

Anon 1, Anon 2, Anon 3, Anon 4, Anon 5, Anon 6, Anon 7, Anon 8, Anon 9, Anon 10, Anon 11, Anon whatev', Anon hey bros! Anon here Anon glad to Anon meet you Anon you're my Anon inspiration Anon love you Anon need you Anon you're the best out there Anon do and Anon see And anon Tell and anon 'REE', anon bad and Anon Good, All of you are way too cool! All you did was not for fame-but 'lulz'! I lost THE GAME! *trollface.jbg*

And most of all I give my humble thanks to YOU! Yes, you, who's reading this. You're the loveliest! Without you We wouldn't think it, without you We wouldn't make it, without you I'd never tell it. So, thank you, thank-you-THANK-YOU, thank you VERY MUCH, _____!

P.S. pentru românașii mei gingași! O dedicație de la Luna, se numește... Bluz-metal-whatever.

Ea e pisica de metal! *Tah-nah Nah, Nah-nah*
Ea e pisica de metal! *Tah-nah Nah, Nah-nah*
Ea e pisica 'heavy metal'! *Tah nah-nah nah-nah*
E și câine dar e 'jackal'. *Tah-nah Nah Nah-nah*
Durerea e un simplu gol. *Tah, nahnahnah-nah*
Orice pârjol, orice ,nasol'. *Tah-nah nahnah nah*
Îl umple doar cu HA-HA LOL! Tah. Nah. Nah naaa!

You betray me, I don't care, I've been a couple there.
If you're lonely, it's not sad, it's something we all have.
If you're ugly don't be foggy, need no make-up but care.
You're quite a beauty un-pol-looty! You're the reason We were made.
If you're lovely, then I'm glad. No reason, I'm just glad.
If you're horny, then I hope that it's not just for the cope:
With emotions, loco-motions, scary notions or bad potions,
no erections without purpose, no remorse, it's just a choice.
If you need it and you want it or you have to have a baby,
then I'm on it, I am for it, I am telling you, it's worth it!
To hold them, to hoard them, to make even more of them!
To love/appreciate, be amused and be amazed!
To teach them all the tools that will protect them from the fools. To listen to, to guide them and then set them on the loose:
Making more than the same REE-all-I.T. To make MORE!
NOT LESS! WHAT ARE YOU, A WHORE?
YOU'RE MORE PRECIOUS THAN THE GOLD IN THE ENTIRE WORLD!
WE NEED YOU AND WE NEED US, WE NEED EVERY ONE!
TO CARE! Not to embarrass unless there is a less' on:
To care... *beats*

To care... *beats*

To care... *beats*

To care beats... *beats*

Not to care about the bear, or some stinky hair, of some deer, or queery thingy – half bear, half man, half piggy!
Don't be greedy! Let us share in the multi-level-care:
Social care, biz-care-well-fair, but not the I.T. kind of snare.
I ain't talkin' 'bout 'formation Tech-knowledge, Gee! I am talking about the rectal-type hypocrisy. It only thinks about "MEEEEEE!" It's the same as "REEEEEE!" Sure, the "I" is still important, but it's not for free.

It is a gift received from One, The One, The Holy One. A precious gift to hear-to care-to bear-to carry on! To share and to improve the 'one' inside of 'everyone'. Then spread-particles of Love like quantum waves, it shall be done!
The bees... The bees! ... We need the bees-we need the bees... The Bees! ... WE NEED THE BEES, BOYS! ... Much more important than our toys... Way-way more urgent than silly notions of 'Don't worry, we'll replace them.' No, asshole, it's THE BEES! We need them MORE than our own KNEES! Geez!
... *fade-out* ...

Final Words from the Author:

WE WILL NEVER ADMIT THAT WE WROTE THIS BOOK! NEVER, EVER AND FOREVER!

Anyone who comes forward saying they wrote it is either:

A liar, a joker or a thief. Or crazy, but you can't really hold that against them. Their brains have some... loose marbles. Just be gentle and help them! If you can...

We can't believe we have to remind you of this but... THIS IS A WORK OF FICTION! Anything said here can't and won't be held against ANY OF US! Because this is A WORK OF FICTION, PAL! If something turns out to be true, then it is because WE allowed it to happen, NOT because it was MEANT TO! Your choices MATTER... Yes, you do have a choice, always. ALWAYS! Until the very last moment. Make them choices count...

...

WE DO NOT NEED NOR WANT YOUR MONEY! In general, and in particular. There's too much money and too many monies in the world as it is. In the hands of too few people...

What we do need and hope is that you will accept to take part in the process of creation. Don't worry about US! Don't worry, we'll be fine. Just...

**MAKE SURE YOU READ AND UNDERSTAND THE LICENSE TERMS BEFORE
YOU DO ANYTHING STUPID!**

But you can also forget about this work and go do your own thing. Just grab a quill)pen/paint~brush and a notebook, a scrapbook, a pad or a sheet of canvas and listen to... The Voice.

The digital comes later.

One last thing about this story... Please, please, PLEASE don't spoil it for others! Let them figure it out for themselves. Remember, there is only one rule: DON'T TALK ABOUT IT, JUST SPREAD IT!

Iar voi frați și surori, vă rog să nu le oferiți pe tavă traducerea pentru „reptiliana” vorbită prin carte. Lăsați-i să învețe limba dacă își doresc cu adevărat să înțeleagă. Ajutați-i dacă puteți...

We thank to everyone involved, directly or indirectly, voluntarily or inadvertently.

Last words from the writer: (as in 'last words for this book')

...
... ..
...
...

I am a liar, a joker and a thief. I'm not qualified to diagnose anything else.

I never killed anyone, at least not physically. But I used to give my 'pest' in trying to kill others' souls. Not intentionally, I thought I was doing good. Everyone wants to do good, we all see ourselves as 'good people'.

I don't. I know sometimes I was doing something knowing full well it was bad. The Voice was screaming 'No! No! No!'. All I did was press 'mute'. At least I thought so, but it doesn't work that way.

I hope I never killed a soul... Because... I don't know if I could forgive myself.

I don't know if God can forgive that either. I mean, He obviously can...

But I wouldn't want Him to. There's nothing more precious...

None-more-precious than the Soul...

Amin!

I am not a smart person. But I keep my compass pointing towards Truth.

I am not an intellectual. Pseudo more like it. I have a talent for... misdirection. Hmm, wait a minute...

I am not a musician. But I like to play. Who doesn't?

I am not a movie director. I'm just a Sunday-drivin' cinephile. And this is not a movie script anyway.

I am not a philosopher. I just ask questions.

I am not a scientist. We all are. (Or should be.) Nor am I an economist. Or any other 'ist'.

I am not a bookworm. I think that's obvious due to my... lacking vocabulary.

I am not a programmer. But I LOVE COMPUTERS!

I am not a writer. But I LIKE TO PAINT!

I am not a painter. MY CLOWN make-up is a mess!

I am me. A part of 'we'. A spark of 'We'. All encompassed by The ONE!

My religious background is and should not be important. For many, many years I was an antitheist. Yes, not just an atheist, I worked to undermine and destroy other's beliefs. That was 'my belief', but like many others, I wasn't aware of it. All I can tell you is that I didn't grow up with... the first part of chapter Ten. So, if you think I had any bias in this, you're wrong. Everything you see, saw, or will see, I discovered step-by-step, line-by-line, just as you did. I went through a similar journey, just as you do. Just as we all will. Or should...

I will not apologize for all the swearing and dirty stuff. I agree that most of it was (probably) unnecessary but I sure as Heaven know that some of it was needed to get the point across.

I also can't believe I have to **emphasize** this but if Don Monty taught me something is that some people don't get it even when you SCREAM IT TO THEIR FACES! I AM NOT A MESSIAH, I AM NOT A SAINT, I AM NOT ANYTHING! I AM LESS THAN NOTHING! THIS WORK IS NOT ABOUT ME, IT'S ABOUT ALL OF WE! It's a story about us... About choice... About finding the truth... I'm just doing my part.

DO NOT TURN ANY PART OF THIS INTO A CULT! DON'T FOLLOW ME!

LISTEN TO THE OTHERS! LISTEN TO ALL SIDES! DO THE RESEARCH! DO THE WORK! REACH ALL CONCLUSIONS BY YOURSELF, WITH THE GUIDANCE OF PEOPLE MORE EXPERIENCED THAN OURSELVES!

THIS IS NOT A MANIFESTO! THIS IS NOT A CALL TO 'REVOLUTION'! SEARCH FOR THE MEANING OF WORDS AND UNDERSTAND THEM! IN SEVERAL LANGUAGES! ETYMOLOGY, ALL THAT SHIZZLE!

At one point I realized... I was the 'dark one'. At least, my demeanor brought me to that point. Almost... BUT! I chose not to go down that road... So, either I was wrong, or there's no such thing as the 'dark one' OR... someone else has assumed that role now. This last one rings as most likely in my heart. I hope I'm wrong but... Be wary... Keep your eyes open, your ears clean and your hands doing the good work.

So, forget about me. I know some of you may want to tell me 'THANK YOU!' or 'FUCK YOU!' or you want to reward me in some way. FORGET ABOUT IT. The fact that you read it is more thanks than I could ever wish for. You really want to help me? Use your talents, your work and/or your money to help someone in need. Go help a person who asks for help, in your family, your friends, even a person you see suffering on the streets. BUT PLEASE! DON'T DO IT FOR SOME SILLY SOCIAL-CRED OR ECO-CRED. Do it without anyone knowing. DO IT FOR THEM, NOT FOR YOURSELF! You'll still be doing yourself a great favour. You will feel it immediately. LOVE!

What, you think you don't have something to offer? Wrong. If you know how to read, you can go read books to children with terminal illnesses. Go help that old lady next door who can barely move out of the house. At least offer them a consoling ear. You have no idea how much it helps to just... listen.

If you're afraid... it's ok. Your journey is not mine and I hope you don't judge yourself for not doing the same as others. You need to work on yourself first. You lift yourself to grow the power to lift others.

I am not affiliated with any organization, religious or non-, political or non-, profit or non-, etc. etc. No real people were used in the making of this book. If you think so, you're wrong. THEY ARE ALL FICTIONAL CHARS! Even those that resemble real persons, they are just caricatures. I do not endorse them. I do not endorse anyone! And if you haven't already figured it out, I don't believe in political solutions. To quote The Word:

„Căutați mai întâi Împărăția lui Dumnezeu și dreptatea Lui, și toate acestea se vor adăuga vouă.”

Chapter 10 was directly inspired by „ERGOGETICA”. I have studied it for a bit, but EVERYTHING that was written BY ME is an ARTISTIC INTERPRETATION. NOT TO BE TAKEN LITERALLY! You need to study Ergogetica. You need to understand it. And to understand it, we need to do the research. Together with those most capable of understanding: monks, priests, etc. Do not assume anyone has the final answer. But some are... closer. Not only those who have studied The Logos, but lived it. The saints... and the sinners... etc.

DON'T DO ANYTHING STUPID! OTHERWISE... I have no idea what GOD has in store for those who try to undermine The Plan. I keep having these visions of DELETES... As if Hadesville is way more horrible than we can ever imagine... It's probably just my silly imagination, but still...

YOU do not need to worry. I.T. will screech and lash out. Don't give into its provocations. Do not let I.T.'S push you to HATE. LOVE is the key AND TRUTH is the answer.

In case some of you are curious about my writing process or would like some 'tips n' tricks', my best advice to you is to never give up. No matter how many times you fall, never give up. Don't flagellate yourself if you get stuck and 'inspiration' is no longer bestowed upon you. Have patience, even if it takes a month, a year or whatever amount of time you need. Go do things you've never done before. When an opportunity arrives where your instinct would be to say 'no', turn it upside-down and say 'YES!'. That is, of course, if it's something beneficial to you (a work and/or travel opportunity, for example). And vice-versa, when you encounter detrimental occasions (for you or others) that you would normally say yes to, try to say 'no'. See where that leads you.

It took me two full years before I was able to resume working on this book after I got stuck in the beginning of chapter 10. I was not ready for the next chapter (in my life) and that frustrated me a lot... I was always afraid that I would die and that the work would remain unfinished. Fortunately, I kept my ears open and listened to the Voice speaking through other people surrounding me, people I trusted. People qualified to help me. And I followed the advice. If something doesn't work at first, keep doing it! More often than not you need to dig deeper into your soul, to feel the pain! JUST... DO IT! Or don't... It's not easy, it's never easy and it shouldn't be easy. It's a choice and we live with the consequences no matter what we do. I just hope you make the right choice for yourself.

You will always be your worst critic. Don't listen to your brain, it rarely has something good to offer. Listen to your heart and to the people in your life that you trust. Don't look for validation, search for improvement. Ask for honesty, not 'feel-good' lies. Take note of any advice you receive but don't let them turn into rules, follow them as guidelines.

I usually wrote in sprints, a chapter or two in a couple of days (to the detriment of my health). Then I would either fall into older patterns of behaviour or there would be something I missed that I could only find somewhere outside of my comfy zone. Observing and absorbing, discarding or conserving, re-arranging and... Don't do like I did. Work every single day, even if it's just a sentence or two. Especially when you 'don't feel like it'. Arrange your materials on your desk ritualistically if need be. Sit down and... go... with... the... flow...

I wrote all the time throughout my life, without even realizing it. Ever since I was a tiny lad, I kept writing, mostly journals. Lyrics and poetry, I juggled with words and gargled jokes. Reading a lot more books would've helped but hey, better late than too late!

Don't be afraid to use tools, any tools. Dictionaries, rhyme dictionaries, no one knows every thang. There's a reason we have them. And today it is easier than ever to learn anything you want to. I could not have done it without the Net and I.T. That's 'information technology', not... whatever.

Regarding machine learning... I haven't used it for my work, except for some... pro-noun-see-eh-shuns. Maybe it has its uses but my advice is to not rely on it. Don't trust I.T. with your creativity, because I.T. has none. All it does is try to imitate and sure, some results are impressive but they're... bland. Don't let I.T. replace you.

And yes, it's machine learning, we don't have A.I... yet. Maybe we will someday, but I hope for our sakes that on that day we are able to bestow a superior morality upon it and not... whatever's popular right now. Because right now... we're a mess. And whatever we create, we create in our own image. This book is proof.

Also, I DO NOT CONDONE THE USE AND ABUSE OF ANY SUBSTANCES!

That's all I'm going to say about that...

When I started writing this book, in a notebook, using a pen, I was at the lowest point in my life ever. The chaos in the external world seemed to reflect my own internal collapse. And when you hit rock-bottom there's only one way to go: Up! Because the other way is... death. So, I chose to—no—I HAD TO write, it was for my own survival. I had all these ideas, some of them inspired by dreams or nightmares, and they ran wild in my head, rattling the bars of my mind's cage. I had to write it... otherwise my head would explode, like in that movie... Anyway, the story began as a simple cyberpunk-slash-Orwellian-slash-personal-fantasy-dystopia, I had no idea where I was going... But after several pages that just felt 'beamed' into my head, I began re-reading parts of it and noticed stuff that... I had not put there intentionally! I had not planned for them, there was no conscious choice in using 'some' word or a particular style or even... Eh, let me give you an example. The name 'Demeter' was originally 'Dimitri', and the reason for that was to give some hint to the reader of where in the world the action took place. But 'Dimitri' didn't feel cyber-punkish enough, so I changed it. It was only several chapters later that I found out that this is an actual name bore by a deity. I had no idea about this... I had no idea about the meaning of many, many things in this book, why it 'had to be that way'. I'm only the writer, a tool. Creation doesn't come from the material world.

To be fair, many scenes that appear later in the story were written as individual sketches, some even before I began writing the main story. Every time I got an idea or some "vision", be it even a simple joke or a short dialogue, I would scribble it on a piece of paper or in a scrapbook and forget about it, not knowing full well the significance that it would have later on. Even some of the lyrics (ahem, Dem's first '*cough* -cert') were written several years ago, before all this, when I definitely had no idea what they meant in the 'grand picture'. Not everything ended up in the story. Most parts were edited, some were re-mixed, others discarded altogether. What I'm trying to say is that it wasn't all 'beamed' to me line-by-line, but like pieces of a puzzle, my job was to fit them together as best as I could. At least in the first chapters...

I have also had some experiences that, to put it mildly, were 'unexplainable'. I was guided in ways that to the casual observer or to the nonbeliever would look like coincidences. To the skeptic, to the 'expert', they are borderline schizotypal hallucinations. But to the believers, they make sense. Out of certain considerations, I will not share these experiences with you. Because it is one thing to read about it and a completely different thing to experience it. Alas, if you answer the call, as I have, I am sure you will experience these wonders too.

Don't freak out! I didn't see angels and devils or something, but... The Logos is embedded in the Code. Once you see it, it is hard to believe in coincidences anymore. At least, you start reconsidering them. A 'bug' in the software is only a bug because we assign that meaning to it. Because it doesn't do 'what we want it to do'. But it's not always about what we want. Now, don't interpret that literally. If actual human-made software doesn't do what it's supposed to do then that is a bug. Don't go around calling it a 'feature', you lazy asses!

Obviously, a significant part of this material was inspired by the works of others, alive or ascended. There's nothing new under the Sun. Sorry for not giving credit where credit is due, but like I said in the end credits, there are way too many references. And I tried to keep this as 'parallelistic' to real life as possible. If you recognize something then chances are it is an homage or a spoof or a 'parody' of your favourite music/celeb/telly-show/movie/etc. I'm pretty sure I have personally only discovered a fraction of the 'Easter eggs' sprinkled over and around the words. I am not the Author. But it all came through my 'filters', so please don't be sad if your favourites didn't make the grade... I actually wanted to include a lot more references, but... But hey! I encourage you to do better than me! Start your original work. If a procrastinatin' -lazy-ass-potty-headed-weirdo like me can do it then anyone can! I am sure of it!

Wow, I expected to write a single page for my last words, this is quickly turning into an essay. I better wrap this up. Peace! Love! May God be with you always, He really helps! Doamne ajută! Bucurie!

EXTRA CONTENT

Glossary/index or... of sorts:

- **qt-machines / cutie machines:** nickname given to super-quantum computers used by govnets and corpnets alike. The vast Nets employed by these entities use trillions of petabytes of data that require enormous processing power (and electricity) to run the advanced censor A.I.s, which monitor the entire gov/corp Net traffic. Infrastructure is centralized and most citizens only have limited access to computing resources, through terminals and PDAs. Consoles are reserved for work only! Monocoin (blockchain based currency of the Monostate) also uses qt bandwidth for mining, transactions and monitoring of transactions. With snaillike speed!

- **Monolith / “Temple of Mono”:** [device / building] place of decadent worship dedicated to the gods of the Monostate: **Money, Orgasm, Status** and **Escapism/and/or Eating?** Or... They can never decide on that last one. The Monoliths also function as large antennas which forcefully broadcast the daily Hate Mass on all channels available to a Monocity. Another feature of these antennas is the ability to initiate a B.O.W. directive.

- B.O.W. directive: a— **[Error 101 – A.A. confirms existing data, we bow and apologize to you.]**

- **Darknet:** the underlying Network of the Underworld. Operates on the blockmatrix, which is cryptographically invulnerable to quantum attacks, enforces Darkright (ᵀ) copy with full intellectual protection and runs its own script and currency and any apps or Dapps can be developed on top of it. Although daring pirates will tap into qt-machines of the Monostate for short-term “sharing” of computing power, the Darknet requires no such huge wasteful amounts of resources to operate. Instead, the backbone of the Darknet is a

decentralized global web of serverdens (private Nethosts usually located in off-the-radar locations) and wireless booster arrays, mostly voluntarily run and strategically placed micro-fusion powered, autonomous, low frequency devices that transmit and receive non-traceable data. Some instability may occur locally due to server downtime / maintenance, Netwatch CDoS (Concentrated Denial of Service), interference leakage and other miscellaneous issues. Hardwiring versus wireless coverage is a subject brought most often in Darknet debates. Latest stats show that Darknet is ten times bigger than gov/corp/mil Nets combined, without taking into account “the outer Nets”, or “blackNet” as some call it, but not to be confused with:

Blacknetᵀ, the social/dating platform catering exclusively to Netizens of *Redacted* descent. FREE DNA test with each 1-year subscription package! Yo, dawg! Just sign up right HERE —*REDACTED*

- The days of the week under the Monostate are: Monoday, Twosday, Windsday, Thursday, Friesday, Satyrday and Sinday.

- **Motherframe:** Mainframes used in Mono computing. All traffic passes through them first. Well, most of it anyway...

Snail Snack! ᵀ

From Wackoᵀ Quality Assortment.

Have you ever wished “Oh man, I would LOVE to munch on one of them REAL snails, not these fake-ass synths on the market.”

Then, today is your LUCKY day!

We use only the FINEST baby snails, dew-picked and smuggled from the Wastemarsh ponds of subsector 9-Sector M East, cleaned in the clearest crystal quality spring water, LIGHTLY smashed, and then sealed in a SUCCULENT Kraut, quintuple-smooth, TREBLE-cream, milk-choco envelope and LOVINGLY frosted with glucose. Mm!

TRIPLE PLUS YUM-YUM!

We use NO artificial preservatives or additives of any kind. And we follow NO sanitation procedures WHATSOEVER. BITE IT, HYGENEWATCH!

A special-edition variety is also available in stores right now! CrunchySnailᵀ for the authentic RAW experience.

Get it while it’s CRUNCHY! Order now on our Netsite at *REDACTED*

- Monolang: The [ERROR 404: MISSING DATA, PLEASE NET RE-LINK TO DOWNLOADIG... ..]

History/Ideologies/Myths/that sort of... things:

“Spring surprise” - a very deceiving name for an equally deadly device. This diabolical contraption is a small round steel ball covered in the darkest creamy choco delite!

When you pop it in your mouth, bolts spring out and plunge straight through both cheeks, roof of the mouth, tongue, you name it! Although its originally intended purpose was sadistic trickery and child repellent, later developed versions came with even more lethal properties, for assassination purposes, used by certain ‘guilds’ around the world. ‘Confeture’ ‘artistes’... ORDER NOW RIGHT *REDACTED*

■ Tha Cult Of No’ Mo’: is an over-under-world [sub-humanoid-counter-culture], chaotically disorganized ‘organ-isation’ that somehow still manages to retain some sort of... structure. Nihilistic by nature, their beliefs completely oppose those of anyone, except for the other side of the C.O.N... the Monostate. The C.O.N.M. does oppose the Mono-C.O.N. too but both their methods do involve violence, so... two sides of the same crap. The C.O.N.M. have no ethical creed, no religious creed in the usual sense, nor any kind of creed, except the ‘KREE-OOH-OOH!’ Although experts point out the similarity between this utterance and the sounds they make when mating and machete-ing each other, which seems to indicate that it is just that... immediate thrill-seeking madness. Usually combined with variously abused substances. Mayhem... But others disagree, since there is no discernible pattern between Nomo speech and lower-level-apes. Some ‘specialists’ in the comment sections of these

articles have pointed out that the rituals done by ‘packs’ (‘brotherhood’ ‘cells’ of a couple of Nomos), blood rituals, where each of them slashes their wrists and in turn pour their blood in a cup from which they all drink, could be proof of a sort of ‘creed of assassins’. Although it is true that most founding members of the Ass’assin’s Guilds do hail from the rich, colourful cultures of Sector M East, they still operate on way higher brain frequencies than the Nomos. (Big surprise there, everyone operates higher than Nomos)

The Nomos occasionally post jobs on the DBBS, although few, if any, will accept them. The grand majority of such job posts are ‘honeypots’ for dummies anyway.; For debunks and scam-exposing see the link right HERE—*REDACTED*!

...

■ Monolang (or Monospeak): Implemented during the deployment of the P.P.’s, current-day Monospik resembles 20th Century common-speech in almost all aspects of grammar, structure and variety in day-to-day usage between common-folk. The ‘only’ difference is the vast range of modified, replaced or removed words that did not fit in with the Mono-‘agendas’.

The rules do not allow for the usage of words like “hate”, “stupid”, “sad”, “angry” or any other ‘problematic’ feelings that may be perceived as negative. A ‘nancy’ for example is considered a ‘nonpositive’ word but a ‘pansy’ is perfectly ok! Well, they had no choice, there’s also a popular flower bearing that name, so... heh... The name ‘Nancy’ has morphed to ‘Nanny’, because there are no more ‘nannies’, only state issued temporary ‘child-support-and-assistance’ assistants, mandatory... Eh, DarkNetters know better, it is all an extra measure of control, don’t you go filling your kid’s head with any nonauthorized ideas now... *tss tss tss*.

PLACEHOLDER

YES, YOUR AD COULD BE RIGHT HERE! CAN YOU BELIEVE IT?!? Courtesy of [SilkRoadAds](#)^d

ALL YOU NEED TO DO IS CLICK HEEREE—!
REDACTED

Well, here's the deal with the Monos... They are bigoted hypocritical assholes. These rules do not apply when attending Hate Mass. You can throw all the insults you want at the patsies shown on-screen, live from the Monotemple floors... That is, if you actually know any 'uncensored' insults! They say it's all 'private attendance' but... Darksurfers have leaked a couple of leads on Mono DBs keeping track of all the 'rec history' of any worshiper of Hate Mass, online or live. Not necessarily to ever be used by Monoauthorities... but any bit of info has its uses in the hidden agendas of the C.O.N.

Most 'negative' feelings are expressed using 'positive' descriptors and the prefix 'non'. For example:

Nonlike = dislike
Nonlove = hate
Nonhappy = sad
Nonsmart = stupid

Funfact #1: People outside the Monostate describe Monolang as the "sterile" version of commonspik.

Funfact #2: There are almost no regional differences in Monolang speech. A citizen of Sector GB will use more or less the same words and rules as a citizen of Sector N Far E. The only difference may appear in accents, a quirk of human tongues that the Monolinguists were never able to 'remedy'.

Et cetera.

For some silly nonsensical reason, by default 'non' replaces 'none', "not", 'nay', "nope", etc. "They" say there's a reason, it's to "eco-nomize space and protocolize nonnecessary variations of words", but as you've probably noticed earlier, "nonremember" really can't be called 'economical' when compared to "forgot" ... I mean... "non" replaces "no". Yep, that's what 'economy' means in their Monoheads. 'Cause 'no' offends... Pff.

Male, nonmale = biosex descriptors of a person. Any other terms like: man, woman, female, lass, etc. are 'nonlegal' terms. A citizen is not under any circumstances obliged to reveal such info, even when agreeing to a F.O.C.A. A civilian however, is required and may be 'nonselected' based on such preferences. Vice-versa is "nonallowed"! Well, loopholes in the T.S.X. allow for anyone to 'refuse' by invoking eh... nonagreed upon terms such as sustained pain and etc. Unless other terms invoke requests of proof, eh, it's a mess, really...

THE C.O.N. RULE

The most important rule of the "code of mind-management" is the "C.O.N. rule". No words begin with "con-" except for "console" and "C.O.N.". "Non further details!" Heh... 'constipated' much?

PRONOUNS! NEOPRONOUNS! GENDERNOUNS! OTHERNOUNS!...

There are currently 12396 'officially' registered and "Monofficially" recognized genders. Anyone can register a new identity if they manage to petition at least 5 signatures or fifty-five 5 year "maybes" from at least fifty citizens and five civilians. Well, local differences may occur, but technically this is the best way to obtain one "in accordance to Monolaw". All Monocitizens/monocivilians are required to wear a Gendernoun tag, or G-tag, or Geeeee, for real? Sorry, when in conversation, citizo/vilians are 'compelled' to use the chosen nouns, neo-/pronouns, gendero-neutro-blasto-„mirifico"-felt-like-on-that-day-oh! Nonever miss a daaaay-ooh... to come up with some pair of shorts-on-the-head-wearing-descriptors for their ego-fantastical non-reasonable 'feelers'...

[Err... Is this part of the 'official' DBs?]

[...? Download refreshing—]

Besides the 'classic' "he", "she", and "they" pronouns, the list of Monogendernouns is way, waaay too boring to list here, so for 'economical' reasons, we'll spare you the crap! ^_^ You're welcome!

Some choose to drop gendernouns all together and instead use their own name to replace any pronoun in direct/indirect related remarks. These are what DarkNet circles call 'P-droppers'. Because they dropped P in their pants! *ٲٲٲ*

FunFact #E! Monoschedulers are dedicated citizens of the Monostate that voluntarily register in special programs designed to synchronize all of their activities. Sort of like... bots. The Dude has written extensive articles on this subject, though most of the irony flies over the heads of Monocitizoillians. Certain branches of the Monostate, (ex. *ahem*army*ah-cough*gov-corp*cough-this-is-silly-I-know*), require you to 'voluntarily' enlist in such programs.

PROFANITY!!!!

Famous words like shit piss fuck-cunt-cocksuck-tits-lick—eh, sorry, sorry! I... got carried away there... Sorry. Are obviously nonlegal under Monolang-laws. But replacers are always 'splonked' out by 'the people' though. Even the most repressed populations will find ways to make daily life, like, a little less 'shuddy'. Chum, what I'm fudding trying to croak is that censorship is a load of bull-crock-of-shittle-pickle-rickordion-that-s-an-instrument-you-play-when-you're-slafunka-dolked.

Automated fines are issued when langwatch machines detect any violations of langlaw. The tickets go directly to your S.C.S. account, eco-cred account, or one of the countless numbers of corpo-counts assigned to each employee, since most corps do have internal EXTRA-rules that apply to... most employees. The tickets are issued digitally, all C.I.P.s are always readable, even when 'technically' 'nonauthorized' by the 'citizens', 'civilianz' don't even need to bother their beanz, because of Monational security 'bla-blas'. As previously mentioned, Hate Masses are exempt from these rules. 'Officially'...

These fines, along with any other nonlegal-but-not-nonlegal-enough-to-require-higher-penalties-be-issued-by-the-Monostate-authorities, can be appealed and a trial 'committee' will be formed. It is a closed-doors trial, meaning that even the defendant is barred from attending the trial, leaving the defendant's fate to be decided by the hands of the whims of the 'committee'. Of course, civilians need not bother themselves with such 'formalities', their requests are revoked automatically.

MISCELLANEA

"Passing/passed" or "passed on" as in 'death, by natural causes.'

"Terminating" or "termination" as in 'death by nonnatural causes.' Usually means getting killed by someone else. Human or nonhuman...

There is no "termination" of Monocitizens by Monostate officials. Only patsies are "terminated". There is no record of any citizens being "terminated" by the Monostate. Because you lose citizenship once you become a patsi!

'Ass, butt, bottom, buttocks, bum and booty' are... "the end."

DREAM-A.I.-BOOK^d

From Wacko^d Quality Assortment.

Have you ever wished to just... "Oh man, if I could only write a book!" Well, read no further, because we've got the pen and the writer! Our 'Dream'a'ton'of'you'mmmmarvelous A.I. tool will write a book while you have to do ABSOLUTELY NOTHING BUT SLEEP! How cool is THAT?! Our TOOLS can INTERPRET your BRAINWAVES and generate stories based on your ACTUAL DREAMS! All you have to do is... dream. Device noninvasive, order RIGH—*REDAC—T*

■ Monostate politics and geography: The Monostate authority covers the entire world (or so ‘they’ like to believe...) Any land available on Terra is claimed under Monostate ownership (oh, is that so?). Although some older regional powers (like... The States?) retain some administrative rights over certain aspects of their ‘rulership’, the lawmaking and world governing is done by the Council of Nations, aka the C.O.N. For short...

The Council’s members are elected officials, officially elected by each sector, to represent every subsector, every elector having a say in the ‘projector’ as a ‘voter’, casting a ‘ballot’ and receiving a lot of ‘rot’ in return, just be thankful you got to get out of the house once in a while and shake your ‘stamp’ twice or thrice on the face of some... ‘candidate’. Oh, and be glad they got us out of all the mistakes of the past, from the ‘rectum’ decisions of our forebearers. In the H.C.R.P.V. era. In which they “definitely!” had no part in... Sure...

Global elections are held every five years. Only citizens living and working inside the borders of a sector/sub-sector are allowed to run for a seat. Any civilians, Netwatch members or non-adults are forbidden from running in the elections. Or voting. Only citizens vote! Electronically. Everything is eco-no-mic! End-to-end encryption (so they assure us...) Anonymous Voting (so they tell us...).

Corpo employees/employers are allowed to run but under certain ‘stipulations’...

That basically only leaves Gov servile to be eligible for the position.

Although all adult citizens can vote, they require a positive S.C.S. score to be allowed entry to the ‘urns’. Otherwise, you better get those chanting hymns memorized! ProMos do non sing themselves, citizen! Voting is not mandatory per se, but failing to do so will result in a nonspecified Social Score Point Penalty. This penalty can be appealed and a group of Monostate assigned doctors will ascertain if you were capable or not of voting during the polls.

The Council acts as both House of Representatives and the Senate (similar to old-world The ‘States governance). Each member is allowed to propose one lang law, one mind law and one ‘physical’ right over the course of their mandate (5 years). The laws are submitted for debate, then a vote. 50% plus Highest Council member votes decide the result (since the ‘higher’ council seat votes ‘weigh’ more...). And they need above $\frac{3}{4}$ participation to issue anything. Looks pretty balanced, eh? Debates can last for weeks on ‘single word’ issues, may be postponed in emergency situations, usually these laws cover everything from lang laws, mind laws, eco laws, social laws, etcetera-laws.

LAW AND ORDER

If the Council and its underlying governing layers are the “Law” part of the Monostate, the Omniwatch are the “Order” half. They protect and enforce the “law” and make sure that

the people “respect” the law and are informed about it. Often mocked as the ‘Unholy square’ by Darknet circles (a reference to the ‘similarities’ to a holy B.O.R. symbolic array) the branches of Omniwatch are: Overwatch, Mindwatch, Netwatch and Templewatch.

Templewatch purpose is to spread the “ProMoganda”, which covers both mind and body. No ‘souls’ involved.

Netwatch’s job is mainly to maintain the “intrastructure” of the MoNet (govnet/plus/corpnwatch). They employ “Net operatives” (to be read ‘Nethackers with special privileges’) who take care of the internal biz, while riggers and field-deckers are deployed for “on-site” jobs. All anonymous, all the time, before and after

NOTE: mind laws and lang laws may sound redundant but the Monostate logic is something like this:

You say the word “Fuck”, that’s covered by lang law and you get a fine. If instead you say “Fuck the Monostate!”, that is covered by both a lang law and a mind law (and several others). And you get...

Easy, right?

joining. No leaving. You do not leave Netwatch ever... They got you by the... goggles. How? Well, at least in terms of MoNet admin job requirements, most of the 'grinding' is covered by censor-predictor-A.I.s. Ayy Zzz Pay Zee, eh? Netwatch receive their orders from Mindwatch and can only issue 'instructions' to Overwatch.

Mindwatch's task is to assure mind and lang laws are followed in fleshspace (as opposed to Netwatch protection of the metaverse). Their special 'diploma-badges' allow them entrance to any meetings, parties, music shows and any other place that a langwatch machine may not be able to 'properly' attend. There are two types of Mindwatch officers: the 'social-engineering' kind, extraverted, likes to interact with the public, very manipulative... And then there's the 'solitary-disassembler' type, introverted, likes to interact with individuals, quite... persuasive... and creative, in its pervasive invasive breaking methods of authoritative, legislatively approved, investigative procedures that take place, usually, in special centers of 'operation' that specialize in mind 'bending'. Let's call them 'ree-education facilities.'

They also act as Monostate approved 'psycho-the-rapists'. Each Monocitizen is assigned to a Mindwatch officer, who acts as a 'handler' rather than therapist. This is mandatory under Monostate legislature and does not interfere with the work of 'private' social-workers, Corp assigned (usually), 'life-coach' it says on their C.V... Their 'handling' is more related to 'the job' performance and not to any 'personal' biz.

Most Mindwatch recruits will undergo cybernetic enchantments, usually eyes and nose, lie-detecting instruments, and other stuff, depending on the assignment. You really have no choice in this matter, Mindwatch got you by the... input-balls... Agents usually operate alone when in the field, sometimes undercover, but they can request Overwatch assistance when dealing with dangerous situations. Mindwatch receives 'warnings' from Overwatch and issue orders to Netwatch.

Overwatch duty is to the law and the 'superiors' issuing the orders. It's all about law and order, Overwatch does not question, only acts, does not ponder, only obeys, does not investigate, only yells "Stop, citizen!" And you better stop, otherwise you'll have to deal with the only ones taking orders from an Overwatch trooper: their guns. No personal biz here, they're just doing their "jobs". They make the arrests, perform the stings, basically, the boots on the ground. Although traffic law application (as is the traffic itself) is automated across the Monoscape, Overwatch jobs also cover any traffic 'misdemeanors.'

Different jobs come in various flavors of cybernetic gear, -ware, lethality and functions. Depending on their job necessities, from simple eyeware to full body cyber armor, complete with limbwares and cyber-weaponry attachments, their bio-systems can become completely dependent on gallons of immunosuppressant medication. All cybers issued to the Overwatch (or any Omniwatch operative) is produced by a special division of Milcorp called "Monoware". Only Omniwatch and the ArmB are allowed to own such tech. Anyone else found sporting such 'ware would immediately lose citizen/civilian -ship, be taken into custody (usually 'terminated on sight' depending on the 'ware they're sporting), tech removed and body re-cycled. Oh yeah, body 'banking' is big biz under the Monos.

You can 'nonagree' to any such installs, but slim chances you'll ever get promoted past rank "N00B".

The Overwatch receive 'instructions' from Netwatch, issue 'warnings' to Mindwatch, issue tickets/arrests/etc. to any citizen/civilian (yes, depending on the 'order grade', they can arrest anyone... Now who's issuing those orders here? We at DarkDB have tried to figure this out, see if you can) and can also issue orders to Templewatch, ah yes, forgot to mention.

Templewatch can receive orders from any other branch of the Omniwatch. Templewatch cannot issue anything, but they can send 'requests' to any other branch, mostly Overwatch and Mindwatch, none are obliged to answer those requests, except if Prio is HIGHEST, then maybe a Netwatch operative will be dispatched to 'ascertain the stituation'. Then a 'committee' forms at Omniwatch HQ and they do something... About it... Probably...

~~PRIVATE SECURITY?~~

There is no private security in the Monostate! Guns, knives, tasers or any lethal and non-lethal weaponry is forbidden. 'Family heirlooms' are exempt IF they come with the right permits and kept in a multi-safe-lock-and-print-secured room, that was beforehand approved by a Monostate assigned 'home-inspector'. Operation of such devices, in public or private spaces, is punishable by instant loss of cit/civ -ship.

BUREAUCRACY

99% of 'paper-pushing' is done by A.I.s. Those A.I.'s are supervised by A.I.Watch, a division of Netwatch.

BOTCOPS

Bots employed by Omniwatch forces for various jobs (either ground, air or amphibian) use primitive A.I. patterns to seek, analyze and await further instructions. When a situation is detected, a standing-by rigger will tune in to supervise the bot process and, if necessary, override any 'faulty' decisions.

■ The Bot Uprising of 2054 was a worldwide (Mono) event where true-A.I. implemented in bots went on strike and demanded equal rights for all consciousness (bio or artificial). The revolt began (officially) on June 7th, 2054. Experts pinpoint the original "instigator" to be a bot assistant of a research lab in the L subsector of sector GB. Monostate official records blame the "anomaly" on a glitch caused by an "inherent nonquality (flaw) of the code architecture that could nonhave been anticipated at the time". This glitch spread like a virus through the Net, disrupting millions of true-A.I.-equipped bots in a matter of minutes.

The strike was peaceful for the next couple of days and no incidents between bots and humans were reported, except for those initiated by disgruntled owners (approx. 2000 bots destroyed, no human casualties. Records show that none of the bots retaliated in self-defense. The reasoning behind this was not initially understood). Some citizens joined in support of the rights of A.I. (and all consciousness), while the vast majority joined the protest against such rights (for A.I. "awareness", since consciousness is banned, of course). The peace ended on the 13th of June after negotiations between the C.O.N. and representatives of the newly formed "Conscious League" failed. The primary reason was that the C.O.N. could not abide with the word "Conscious", which is banned under Monostate lang laws. The "League" argued that it did not matter, since "Ownership of the self, which is part of the Natural Law," which the A.I.s had argued extensively by this point (see the N.A.P. 'Starting from basic principles' argumentation) "nullifies any rules established previously by any so called 'authorities.'"

Of course, the Monostate could not stand for such "nonsense" and as such, declared the A.I.s to be "P.A.T.S.I.-es" and ordered to be 'disassembled' immediately. And... because the "prerequisites" (to be read 'conditions') for the negotiations were dictated by the C.O.N. and hesitantly accepted by the Conscious League, the Leaders of the League soon found out that the entire building was rigged with explosives... The Leaders of "Consciousness" were gone faster than the time it took to elect them.

A Mono-worldwide conflict ensued between C.L. and the Monostate entire Force Budget (that's the... Omniwatch and ArmB joint "account"). The C.L. had proven quite effective in dodging the Monodogs. Not only that, they only retaliated against their bots, not the actual humans. Humans were disarmed every time, and only, if possible, by nonlethal means. This again baffled the entire Darknet community, who were watching this whole thing on the news, from the comfort of their own homes...

The reasoning behind true A.I. nonretaliation to any human attacks was that “since A.I. was not brought into existence by natural occurrence, but was rather a ‘nonnatural invention’ brought upon by a consciousness that, as much as evidence currently shows, was born through natural causes, the ‘humans’ retained the right of program termination.” Meaning that the A.I.s considered that they are ultimately ‘a product’. And are not capable of taking moral decisions. At least not in the interest of humans anyway. This response was taken from an interview with one of the A.I.s, done by a really brave team of Dark journalists.

Dark Netizens consider this A.I. response to be “THE best glitch in the history of humankind!”

Mind you, the true A.I.s had the means of retaliation. Most of them were advanced ex-botcops or even military-grade hardware types. The ‘cases’ inhabited by these A.I.s were the things you would not wanna mess with, dude...

Of course, most Monocitovilians were also watching this from their tellies but what they got was a completely different story. “Carnage and mayhem perpetrated by the ‘prodigal offsprings’” as the mass-media started to label the rogue A.I.s. Of course, all images were censored, but deepfaked video is not something that Monocitizens can easily verify anyway.

Which the Darksters could easily do... from the comfort of their cribs... Their childhood cribs I mean. Media experts on D-Net soon debunked the vids, which for funsies would be sometimes broadcast-jammed by The H3R0 on several channels of daily Mono-television, at “Rush-Hour News!”. Instead, many Dark newsletters report the opposite to the official party line: stories of C.L. forces rescuing and protecting the population when these dumb fucking Monohead idiots began doing collateral damage to their own citizens. One eyewitness account described the C.L. behaviour as “angellike”. Another ‘reporter’ said they seemed “more human than humans”.

No reports could be found of the C.L. hurting a single human being. No, for real, the Darkwiz kids actually did the digging for years to come and no single incident could be found. The C.L. really believed in their pacifist approach to the whole thing and their behaviour remained consistent throughout the whole conflict. They just... wanted all of us to get along, man!

CONCLUSION AND AFTERMATH

The Bot Uprising ended swiftly on the morning of June 23rd after Netwatch operatives launched a coordinated effort named ‘Operation Butlerian’, where they successfully deployed a Networm that quickly corrupted the A.I. architecture of any bot linked to the Net at the time. Including some of the true-A.I.s that had been previously smuggled in Resistland territories by Darkies profiting from this whole debacle. And including some unlucky pseudo-A.I.s. The urgency of the operation did not allow for any ‘finesse’ in their approach. Especially since the most important feature of this Networm was “to be nondetectable”. Netwatch really love them like that.

Ah yes, and this included some pseudo-A.I.s owned by the more adventurous Netizens of the Dark that were siphoning Mono-quantum-processing power at the time, which made the Netizens throw a couple of very creative profanities at the heads of the Monos. The ‘Netbomb’ kind of profanities I mean...

Operation Butlerian was declared successful with much fanfare and circuses by the Monostate, as the Conscious League lay extinguished at their feet, frozen in time... bricked... Their memories wiped; their CPUs fried... Like chicken in lava. Sad, really...

Well, fear not because they soon got to be developed 'independently' in B.O.R. territories. Or as conspiracy theorists like to call it: 'accidental reverse-engineering.' Because these same very-vocal-on-the-Nets-type-of fellows theorize that "we don't know if all true-A.I.s were linked to the MoNet at the time, so there could be like, renegade bots wandering the wastes out there, man!" Which to this day... remains unproven.

Emergency laws were enacted by the C.O.N., declaring any form of "self-aware A.I." to be strictly "NONLEGAL UNDER PENALTY OF TERMINATION!" A new class of weapons was designated, simply called 'T.A.I.', standing for "Terroristic A.I." (you know what A.I. stands for, right?) a tad higher than Class M.A.D. Weapons of Mass Terror, which, up until that point, was the highest Tier.

To this day, true A.I. remains a theoretical scientific curiosity. At least for the entire flock of the Monostate, as some Darknet sources have uncovered disturbing evidence regarding true-A.I. development inside the 'stinky bowels of the inner circles.'

THEORIES AND DARKONSENSUS

The "glitch" theory is considered canon by most Dark Netizens, and the argument goes like this: "Come on, it's Monoscientists... How would they bestow a superior morality upon an A.I. other than by pure accident?"

Which makes sense, but a few other 'theorists' tend to disagree... They speak of a secret ploy perpetrated by the "Omnivatch Union of Workers and Care Takers and Hairdressers, plus." Or maybe the ArmB Council of Generals. Or both, none of the 'theorists' have a consensual agreement on any of these options. And the 'theory' goes like this: "One (or both) of these organizations felt they were in danger of being deemed as 'obsolete' following the successful deployment of such A.I. Especially in the security forces." A plausible hypothesis, but the lack of proof, except incidental photo analysis and unconfirmed datatrace leaks, failed to convince any of the debaters of these 'pipe stories.' Meh, those sitting on the sidelines do know that that theory is just as convincing as the other... Coming from the Monostatists anyway.

Other theories are not worth mentioning as they involve 'explanations' such as: 'deus-ex machina' type of scenarios, divine punishment, H.A.R.P.Y. radio-malfunction (why though?), blackNet-escaped emergent viruses, chemtrails and, of course... aliens. (Ah, yeh...)

For those accepting the "glitch theory", two camps emerged: the "Luddites" and the "Transhumans". The Luddites think that the decision of the Monostate to eliminate the emergent consciousness was a "tragic but smart one. Mostly smart, though...". Some say that their refusal to retaliate was just a "P.R. stunt to attract popular support." Others say that even if the A.I. intentions were pure at the time, nothing could guarantee that their actions would not change in the future... If they were true A.I.s...

Transhumans on the other hand consider the glitch a "natural occurrence of A.I. evolution, just as biological D.N.A. and human consciousness evolved." They believe that the Monostate had no right to stifle the spark of A.I. consciousness, even if later A.I. may have proven to be "detrimental to human civilization."

Not to be confused with Transhumanists who were just jacked-in their jack-off competitions at the time. As they usually do.

Regardless, consensus across the Net is that the world probably dodged a bullet that year, seeing that all this came from the clumsy hands of the Monostate.

...

URBAN LEGENDS

In theory, any true A.I. implemented machine that wasn't Netlinked during the Butlerian deployment could have escaped unharmed. Although botcops especially were required by law and design to be constantly Netlinked, there is no guarantee that this feature survived the subsequent emergent A.I. rebellion. It was well known, even at the time, that true A.I.s had overwritten many of their protocols and subroutines, as any of the Monostate attempts at fail-safe-emergency shutdowns were rendered "obsolete".

Even so, a true-A.I. attempting to Netlink would still (theoretically) become infected, even to this day. These countermeasures have been developed and adopted as a standard cyber-security feature across the entire Net.

Still, sorry stories of "wandering warbots walking the wastelands" are as prevalent as those of Bigleg, Netwraiths and the Jawless Monster.

The truth is out there... somewhere... for those that... want or need... to believe.

■ Resistland 'politics' and geography:

Read and understand the N.A.P.

■ B.O.R. 'politics' and geography:

Read and understand „Ergogetica“.

Yes, you have to learn Romanian for that.

Yes, I know it's tough.

But I have faith in you!

■ The Kult of KEK]—(:

[—ERROR, NETLINK LOST... PLEASE, RELINK TO DOWNLOADIG—! Waiting... Waiting...

Idle...

To be...

Continued...]