

even the aimless would know to saunter on

through walls and waves alike

the
neoteric
pioneer

will roam

in

THE OUT

"I apologize." Yubu waddled over to the table and plopped down. "I know it's not good. Bad time of year to pop in. Now, when the calliopes bloom--oh, man. I eat like the Celium herself. Everybody does. Have you ever had calliopes?"

"Uh, no." I shook my head. "I don't think I have."

"Take my word for it, then. They're delicious. Seriously, everybody loves calliopes. But they're only in bloom first quarter rev, and after that I can't get much better than wibblers. I mean, I also know a guy who grows yulpers, but nobody wants yulpers."

I tried to imagine what a yulper could be as I scooted my chair in and settled at the table.

"Oh, it's fine, Yubu. Really. Thank you."

"It's the least I could do. Not often you see a guy fall from the sky. Can't imagine what you've been through. Going through space... that's gotta be something."

"You'd be surprised." I laughed and picked up my fork.

The leaf-wrapped lump shuddered on my plate. It wasn't too far away from what I imagined a mushroom person would eat, and wibbler seemed a fittingly bizarre name: it was a fat, grey worm, or an alien grub baby, or maybe a bug larva, slick with bright green ooze.

I peeled the leaf back and stuck my fork in the head, issuing a slow-running fountain of orange goo. The worm twitched, and then gave a harsh snap as I pulled a chunk free and held it to the light.

It was a rough cube of crisp, green meat. Strings and bits I couldn't identify dripped from the edges and pooled into a sloppy orange-green mess on my plate. It wasn't exactly appetizing, but it wasn't so disgusting I wouldn't try it.

I ate sheep brains once. That was bad--probably the worst thing I ever ate--and after that, I felt like I could try pretty much anything.

Though, really, I was *trying* trying it, because I didn't even know if I could eat food. An opportunity hadn't presented itself yet. I hoped I could.

I popped the chunk in and chewed.

And chewed.

And chewed. It was working. I was chewing. Despite its crisp watermelon appearance, the meat was tough and rubbery, and kept leaking mouthful after mouthful of juice. It was like gnawing on a sponge.

The taste was less of a taste, and more of a smell--a cheese-like funk. But as weird as it was, I didn't mind. It just felt good to eat again.

It felt good to do normal people things. Ignoring the worm part, and the mushroom man sitting across from me, I could almost pretend I was a regular person again.

Plus, it was nice to know I could eat if I ever had the urge.

I finally managed to swallow.

“Wow. Yeah. Not good.”

“Yes. It’s really bad.” Yubu chuckled. “I’m sorry. If you want a drink, I have this.”

He held up a bottle of murky red liquid. I almost grabbed it, but hesitated.

“What, uh--what is it?”

“Juice. It’s a bit ripe, but it tastes pretty good.”

Juice? I wasn’t expecting something so ordinary.

I reached for the bottle, “Oh, thanks. What kind?”

“Corble.”

I froze again, “What’s Corble?”

“Jeez, you don’t know dogs either? It’s a dog. We passed one on the way here.”

A sense of terror gripped me.

A dog.

Juice from a dog.

I didn’t want to ask, but I had to:

“Yubu, where do you get juice from on a dog?”

He shook the bottle, “The stomach.”

The cork was pulled free and hanging on a string around the neck, and I noticed an awful, vomit-like stench in the air.

It was puke. The mushrooms drank puke. And they called it *juice*.

I gagged.

“Oh, fuck no. No, thank you. I’m good.”

“You sure?” He shook it again.

“Uh, yeah. I’m sure. Yeah. Appreciate it.”

“Anytime.”

He lifted the bottle and drank, spilling red trails down his flat torso.

I turned back to my plate, forked up another bite, and got to chewing, suddenly more thankful for my nasty little worm.

I couldn't do puke. No.

Not in me. Not on me. Not around me.

Not even once.

Never.

I could eat practically anything, but everybody had their line, and that was mine, drawn in bold: no puke, period.

I swallowed and grabbed another bite. Eating the worm had a trick to it--I had to chew enough to break it apart, but not all the way, because then it would just clump up into a wad of gum and muck up my mouth. I swallowed again and grabbed another bite, flying though it now.

I loved eating.

When did I eat last? It was so long ago that I couldn't remember.

I knew when I was *eaten* last--I couldn't forget that if I wanted to. And I did kind of want to.

Even though I could remember what happened, most of my memories from then were faded and kind of dim--all except one specific moment, which never lost its clarity: the moment I died. I could still vividly feel those incisors slicing into my head, crushing my skull like an eggshell.

I thought back to Zeinhaert and his obsession with the bizarre. Maybe if he chose some other stupid nonsense to keep as pets then I'd still be living a normal life.

Why did it have to be ancient Chinese dragons? Why couldn't it be jackalopes? Or fairies? Or fart clouds?

Maybe I'd still be alive. I couldn't picture a fart cloud doing anything worse than chasing me down and spraying me in the mouth.

Or maybe it would've killed me anyway.

Or maybe I would've just died some other way.

Some other, more permanent way.

I shuddered.

A squeaking noise made me look up. I had drifted off, and Yubu was still talking at me, none the wiser to my departure.

And his spiel seemed long-winded.

"...he killed Polo. I don't have proof, but I just get this feeling, because Polo disappeared around the same time this guy first showed up. Everybody thinks I'm crazy. They think Polo just went off to bud. And maybe he did, but I can't ignore the facts: Polo and I have been best friends since agar, and I know he wasn't ready to bud. He would've told me. I think something bad happened, but I--I don't know what to do. I can't go to the Celium for help. She won't want to rush anything, and she might even cast me out. I've seen it before. I've seen her cast guys out. But what else can I do? What if I wake up in the middle of the night and that guy's standing over me with a knife and a fork or something? I can't bear it. I feel like it's only--"

I gulped down the last of my worm and pushed up from the table. I didn't want to get involved in whatever the hell he was talking about, but I didn't really know how to interject and say that.

"Wow, I'm sorry about that, Yubu. Really."

I paused to give a dramatic stretch, subtly performing the universal symbol for 'prepping to hit the road.'

He just stared at me with those bulbous, red eyes.

"But I gotta head out. Thank you for the grub. I think it was a grub. Whatever it was. Thanks, again. I appreciate it."

He blinked. Little beads formed in the corners of his eyes, and his lips began to quiver.

"What?" I asked.

Tears fell, streaming down his flat torso, and the world in his head changed--it began to spin faster, and the clouds frothed into a thick, grey sheet of rambunctious storms.

"Hey, woah--Yubu, what's up, man?"

He exploded into dramatic bawling, "He killed Polo! And he's going to kill me too! Please, Philip! I don't want you to go! You--you can't leave me with that guy! He's going to kill me, man! I know it. I'm dead, just like Polo. I'm dead! I'm dead, I'm dead, I'm dead! He's going to kill me. I can't do anything. I'm dead. I'm dead, I'm dead, I'm--"

I grabbed his little mushroom shoulders.

"Yubu, hey--relax."

He kept on his rambling and messy weeping, "Dead! Polo's dead, and I'm dead, and you're dead. Dead. Dead. I'm dead. I'm dead! I'm--"

I gripped tighter and gave him a firm shake.

"Relax!"

He met my eyes, still hyperventilating and streaming tears.

“S-Sorry. I’m sorry, Philip. I’m so sorry. But you believe me, right? He killed Polo and he’s going to kill me next. I know he is. And I need help. You gotta believe me. Please.”

I sat back down.

“Of course, I believe you, Yubu. And I’d uh--shit, I really would like to stay and help...”

But I didn’t want to get involved.

Getting involved was my job once. It was my career. I did it for a living. The whole process was predictable, emotionally taxing, labor intensive, and unbelievably draining.

Going back to that sounded like a fat can of wibblers to me. And I wasn’t ready for any part of that life again. I didn’t know if I ever would be.

No, I wasn’t going to open that can.

I tried to come up with a good excuse on the fly, “But how could I help? I’ll just make it worse. That’s like--that’s like my thing. It’s like a curse. You’re going to need something from me at some point--some specific kind of help, and I’ll promise to deliver, but when that deciding moment comes around... BOOM! I’ll fuck up and cause a big accident, and then you really will be a dead mushroom man.”

It wasn’t a very good excuse.

“Mush... room man?” He cocked his head.

“Oh, sorry, mushrooms are a food where I’m from. They’re not alive like you--well, they *are* alive, but like a plant. Or--no, a fungus. And you look exactly like a... uh, I don’t know, a shiitake, maybe? I’m just realizing that I don’t know a lot about mushrooms.”

“They’re f-food?”

His mouth hung open and his eyes swelled up like red, watery golf balls.

I was scaring him.

I didn’t mean to--I just wanted to avoid getting roped into some bullshit kooky adventure for once. But it looked like he *really* needed help--emotionally, at the very least. Especially if he had a stalker out to get him.

And no matter how I felt, these bullshit kooky adventures seemed magnetically drawn to me. This was my life before, and it was going to be my life forever. I just had to accept that.

This guy--this mushroom man--didn’t even know me, yet he took me into his home without hesitation. He fed me his food. He shared everything he had. He was kind to me. He opened up to me and had the courage to cry out for help.

And in return, I was being a dismissive dick.

A lazy, dismissive dick.

I sighed.

"Ah, I'm sorry, Yubu. I don't know why I said that. I didn't mean anything by it. I don't even eat mushrooms, honestly. They taste bad."

"Oh--that--that's good." He sniffled through a runny nose.

I leaned forward, "So, anyway, you were saying there's a guy stalking you."

"Yeah."

"What does he do?"

He grabbed a rag and pressed it against his flat nostrils, blew out a comical whistling noise, and then dropped it to the table.

"Well, I mean, I catch him watching me all the time, through my windows and stuff. I even catch him following me home after I leave the Celium's soilyard sometimes. It's like he's everywhere. I see him every single day."

"Every day, huh?"

I stared up at the cobbled, wooden ceiling.

All I had to do was talk to this guy--just one short talk to help Yubu out, and I'd make it quick. No kooky adventure. No bullshit. Just a quick talk. In and out.

I could do that.

He sniffled again, still wearing that pitiful, tearful expression.

"Alright." I patted his hands. "I'll help. But then I really gotta go. Okay?"

He leapt from the table and wrapped his little arms around me, squeezing as hard as he could. His body felt porous and spongy.

I noticed that he was the perfect consistency.

Yeah, I could cut him up into thin slices and dress him with some kind of seasoning, like curry powder, and get the pan all hot and ready--wait.

What?

What the hell was I thinking?

Yubu was annoying, sure, but I didn't want to eat him.

I didn't even like mushrooms.

So, why did I think that?

I could still feel the odd urge tingling in the back of my mind.

I didn't want to eat him.

But I couldn't help salivating at the thought.

Was it him? Was he somehow controlling my mind?

Maybe this was why he had a stalker. Was this planet full of mind control mushroom men that telepathically convinced people to eat them?

Definitely plausible.

Or maybe my mind was just messed up by eating for the first time in an eternity.

I laughed to myself. I was desperately hoping to avoid getting caught up in another kooky adventure, but I just realized it was futile--I couldn't avoid it, no matter how hard I tried, because I had already been on one this entire time.

I was just like Wilson: out on my own, a lead-footed pioneer stomping across new realities, theorizing about made-up nonsense in some made-up nonsense universe--every moment, a new, kooky adventure.

Look at me go.

"Thank you, Philip." Yubu was still hugging me tightly. "I was worried you were going to say no. Thank you, thank you, thank you!"

"Don't mention it, bud."

The world on his head slowed again, and its storms broke, dispersing into bright, fluffy ribbons of clouds. It seemed like his little planet's weather was linked to his mood.

Interesting.

Oh, god.

Interesting. I really was turning into Wilson.

"Yubu... what's up with your little planet, man?"

"My... planet? What do you--" His yellow skin turned bright pink and he recoiled in shock. "OH! Please!"

He jumped back and tried to cover his world, but his arms were too short to reach around his crown, so it looked more like he was dancing a celebratory jig.

I fought a smile and focused on being serious. His dance was making it very difficult. The way his little arms flopped around...

I cleared my throat, "What?"

"It's impolite to ask about our..." He leaned in and whispered. "Our worlds."

“Oh. Okay. Sorry. I did not know that. No talking about wor--”

He cut me off, “Don’t say it. Don’t even think it. It’s not a topic for discussion.”

“Alright, I get it.” I held up my hands. “I won’t. I’m sorry, man.”

“It’s fine. Just like... keep it in mind.”

I snickered, “I will. Like you, right?”

He looked puzzled for a moment, but then seemed to get it, and frowned.

“Man, no. Don’t make jokes about it. You’re helping me, and I really appreciate that--like, we’re cool. But you’re not from around here. If you say something like that in town... to the wrong guy... well, just don’t. Just don’t think about it.”

He was very serious now, which made it even harder for me to be serious in any capacity. Nevertheless, I mimed a zipper across my lips and nodded.

“Come on, say it.” He went on. “Say you won’t mention it again. Not even to me, Philip. Please. Promise.”

“Really?” I whined.

“Really. It’s important. It’s life or death important.”

I just wanted to know more. That dome globe of his was searingly interesting. In all my years on the Network, I had never seen anything like it. But I didn’t press him. I stopped.

Yubu was cool.

I had to be cool.

“I won’t mention it, Yubu. I promise.”

“Good.”

He hopped down from the table, hobbled to the window, and stared out in silence.

After a moment, he looked back, “He’s out there right now. Behind a bush.”

“What’s he doing?” I stood.

“Just watching.”

I walked over and crouched behind him.

There he was: a towering, hairy guy trying and failing to conceal himself behind a tiny bush. I was surprised; he was a regular human being, and not at all like the two-foot-tall carrot monster I was expecting.

He just seemed like a homeless guy--a typical Vegas vagrant. How the hell did a homeless guy end up here, of all places?

This was getting interesting.

"There he is. You ain't kiddin."

"S-So, what do we do?" Yubu looked up.

I walked to the door, "I guess I'll go talk to him."

As soon as I turned the handle, the guy scrambled up and made a frantic dash toward the curly-tree woods.

I glanced back at Yubu, "He ran off."

"Oh, yeah." He muttered. "I should've said--he does that."

"No biggie. I'll go after him. Be right back."

"Okay, good luck, Phi--" Yubu's voice faded fast.

I ran across his yard and had to stop at the edge to wait for a fat, spherical vehicle to chug down the road. It looked like a purple grapefruit, except it was roughly the size of a car, and covered in glowing white veins that pulsed along with its chugging.

A squat, red mushroom man leaned from the window and waved at me.

I waved back.

The thing was barely crawling at five miles an hour, and rocked back and forth in exaggerated lurching motions as it rolled, roaring like a jet engine and shaking the ground. Eventually, it passed, and I was able to cross behind.

I booked it straight for the trees.

Yubu's stalker was quite a ways ahead, weaving between trees at the edge of the forest, clumsily kicking through the thick brush. But he was jogging at a pretty slow pace, like a mall-walker, and I was able to catch up quickly.

I came up alongside him, and as I closed, he spotted me and twisted off behind a large, looping tree. And then I lost him.

I jumped into the brush, ran up to the tree he disappeared behind, and circled it.

But he was gone. The woods were empty.

What the hell?

I stood still, listening intently. If there was any movement in the dry, crackly brush, I would hear it. But I stood for a minute, and then two, and then five, and didn't hear anything except the soft rustling of tree limbs in the wind.

I cleared my throat and spoke.

“Hello?”

There was no response.

“Where the hell did you go?”

And again--no response.

I sighed.

How? How did he just disappear?

I turned to head back, but a gleam of light caught my eye at the foot of the tree. Something was buried in the leaves. I leaned down and brushed them away, revealing some kind of device dug into the ground.

It was a round, copper platform with a slit down the middle, an uneven row of buttons along one side, and a big metal dial on the other. The metalwork was crude, badly dented in spots, and uneven all over, leading me to believe it was made by hand.

There was a line scribbled on the top with magic marker, and I tried to make out what it said--maybe Viln? Uiln? But I couldn't tell.

Whatever it was, it was definitely how that guy got away.

I crouched and fiddled with the buttons, pressing nearly every combination possible, and then pried at the lid, spun the big dial, and even gave it a solid kick. But nothing happened--the thing just sat there in sad, dented silence.

I rubbed my chin.

I was going to have to wait for him to come out.

I hated waiting.

But what choice did I have? The thing wouldn't work. I could go back and ask Yubu for help, or try to tinker with the thing some more, and maybe take it apart...

But I didn't want to bring Yubu out here. He'd just freak out. And if I kept messing with the thing, I'd probably break it and ruin my chances of catching this guy.

But was that all I could do? Just wait?

I couldn't see any other options.

I didn't want to, but it was probably the easiest route.

I sighed for what felt like the hundredth time today.

The wind kicked up as I fell against a nearby tree. I rooted around in the leaves to get comfortable, and slipped back into that state of mind, preparing to go

from everything

TO NOTHING

Philip flicked his wrists and wiped his face again, struggling to rub the vomit free but only succeeding in spreading it further.

“Fuck this.” He spat.

“It’ll be alright.” I patted his back, careful not to touch any vomit. “Remember, it’s all gone the moment we leave.”

“Yeah, I know, but that doesn’t help the sloshing in my pants right now.”

I led the way as we strolled back down Mary-Ann’s steps, heading toward the exit point--the gleaming, silver circle at the far end of her lawn.

“I’m sorry she puked on you, Philip. I promise it's not normally like this.”

“Three in a row so far.” He spat again.

“Yes. It’s uncanny. Hopefully we’ll have more luck with the next one. Listen, you’ve done well. I know this is a lot, and you don’t have to do this if you don’t feel ready. It’s okay to not feel ready. You can shadow me. This takes time.”

He blinked and rubbed his eyes to clear the vomit, but just smeared it down his cheeks and then squinted dramatically.

“I’m pretty sure I’m ready.”

I smiled, “Alright. Then I’ll see you on the other side, and we’ll get to work.”

I stepped up to the plate. It engaged and bathed me in that familiar warmth, followed by a tugging sensation.

And then I was in the dark,

and there were the stars,

an immediate comfort,

massive, far away balls of fire peppering the black sky,

and then I

then I

then

I

realized something was wrong.

It wasn't going like it should.

I knew that for sure--

it's something I can feel--

I do feel--

and I felt that it was not going like it should be going.

The stars weren't getting bigger. They were shrinking into the dark.

I was going the wrong way.

My ears pounded with blaring crackling noises, and then

I couldn't hear anything anymore, and then

I couldn't see anything anymore, and then

I couldn't feel

anything

anymore,

and

I couldn't help but wonder,

‘ IS THIS REAL, OR NOT? ‘

"Philip, put that out of your mind." Wilson had his nose down as he flipped through his journal. "We can't shut it off without knowing, for sure, beyond any doubt, that she's no longer conscious. That's the goal. We need to know."

"But--I mean..." I lowered my voice. "Did she look alive to you? In her chassis? Did she look alive?"

"No, she didn't." He slid his notebook into a jacket pocket and finally met my eyes.

"But think past that. Yes, she died, but we just confirmed that she's still conscious. She is responsive, and intelligent, and communicates far better than any organism or anomaly could. That's her. Somehow, some way, and in some abstract capacity, she still exists here. Maybe she's stuck, but she's still alive, and that's enough for me."

I studied my shoes while I thought it over. Yeah, he was probably right. He was always probably right. I stood from the steps and swiveled to face him.

"Alright. I--I understand. I'm sorry. What do we do?"

"Well, first thing's first, we go back in there and talk to her. We'll let her down gently--lay out our options, explain them to her as best we can, and answer all her questions. Then the final decision will be up to her."

"Okay." I gulped.

It was a lot to take in.

"You said this was like being a doctor, but this is like... way worse than being a doctor. Doctors think it's hard to tell people they're dying, but we have to tell people they're already dead. I mean, how do you do this?"

"It's... tricky." He put a hand on my shoulder. "We have to be gentle, but we can't sugar-coat it. And it's important that they feel cared for. Just follow my lead, and--"

The front door to Mary-Ann's house suddenly disintegrated, exploding outward in a barrage of splinters and smoke. She was standing there when the smoke cleared, completely naked and rocking a baby in one arm.

But it wasn't a baby. It was a rotten hunk of meat.

"What were you saying?" She cooed.

"Oh, god--" I drew back, ready to run, but Wilson stepped forward.

"Mary-Ann. We need to talk."

"Ooooh." Her voice was scratchy now, like a violin needing tuning. "Yes, Mister Wilson? I sure hope I'm not pregnant again! I can barely handle this one!"

She smiled down at the meat and curled her finger under a particularly fatty chunk.

"No, Mary-Ann, we need to talk about your life here. There's a complication, and it's important for you to understand. Can we come in?"

"Oh, but my house is such a wild mess!" She flourished her free hand.

Something came over me. I was overpowered by an emotion I had never felt before. I couldn't simply stand aside and watch this madness unfold.

It made me sick. How dare she?

I rushed forward.

"Philip, what are you--" Wilson reached for me, but I was too quick.

I pushed by and slapped the hunk of meat from her arms.

It gave a wet splat as it hit the ground. She stared at it for a second with a blank face, and then began to scream, piercingly and full of terror, like a wounded animal. Her mouth kept gaping wider, and wider, until it consumed her entire head, which had to stretch taller to accommodate.

The stretching continued, and even sped up. Her head was ten feet tall, and then twenty, and then a hundred, extending forever. I couldn't see her face anymore, but I heard her gag, and then she was spraying a fountain of yellow-green bile.

Her head continued twisting upward, reaching for the sky as the puke kept on coursing--thousands of gallons of vomit spewed into the air, drizzling down in a disgusting acid rain. It began pooling on the ground, flooding the chaasm.

And she never stopped screaming--her wails only intensified and grew sharper.

Wilson fell to his knees and splashed in the pool of vomit, sobbing hysterically.

"Why? Why, Philip? Why?" His eyes were bloodshot and streaming tears. "You were supposed to be my partner! You were supposed to take the reins! Philip, why?!"

"Shut up!" I yelled.

Finally, I could yell. My voice was mostly drowned out by Mary-Ann's powerful shrieking, but it still felt good to yell.

I waded over to her. The vomit flood was up to my waist now, but I didn't really care.

"Mary-Ann, I hate to say it," I slung my arm around her shoulder. "But you're dead."

Her head suddenly stopped growing and fell from the sky like a retracting tape measure, spiraling and trailing her black hair as it snapped back into shape. She teetered to a stop and wiped some vomit from her lips with the back of her hand.

"Oh, yeah, I know." She smiled.

I opened my eyes to a green blur.

Mary-Ann needed help--

No.

Wait.

She didn't. She was dead.

Long dead.

I had been dreaming. Of course.

Of course.

Of course? I had been dreaming?

How long had it been since I had a dream--

a real dream, and not some bullshit hallucination?

I certainly never dreamed on the Network. That didn't happen.

Why would I dream now, after so many years?

And why would I dream about *that*?

It happened so long ago.

Such a long time ago.

And that was not at all how it went down.

I shook my head and focused my eyes.

The green blur crispened into trees. I was staring at the interwoven, swirling branches of so many trees, and smelling the sweet, unmistakable scents of dirt and tree bark. It took me a moment, but the wild, curving trunks brought me back--I realized I was in the curly-tree woods on Yubu's planet.

Hours had burned into days spent packed under a gnarled, curling tree as I bided my time, watching the copper device, waiting for it to do something--anything at all.

But in all that time it didn't so much as shudder.

I stood and habitually stretched my legs. Oddly enough, I was feeling hungry.

It felt kind of nice to be hungry again. But why was I hungry?

I was hungry, I fell asleep and dreamed, and I even had urges for things, like eating Yubu. Why was this happening to me? *What* was happening to me?

I didn't understand any of it. Was I becoming human again?

Was that even possible?

My heart dropped as I considered something else--I hadn't tried to leave yet. Could I? Could I even leave this place if I wanted to? Was I going to be stuck here--

My thoughts were cut short when the copper device suddenly whirred, clanked twice, and split down the middle, and then the dirty, hairy man was standing before me.

"Oh--hey!" I called out and rushed forward.

My right leg got caught on a root and I lost my balance. I stumbled, hit the ground, and rolled through the leaves, and then quickly pushed myself back up.

"Ah!" The man crouched to fiddle with the device.

"Wait, no! Stop!" I yelled.

He paused and glanced over his shoulder.

"Please, hold on. I--I just want to talk."

"What in..." He whispered in a low, hoarse rasp.

"Hey. Hi. You're human, right?"

"Yes." He stood again and turned to face me. "I am."

In an instant, his scared, sheepish behavior fled entirely, and he stood with confidence at nearly seven feet tall. A few bright, broken beams of sunlight danced over his face, flushing his deep bronze skin in glowing amber. It was uncanny. Everything about this guy reminded me of Wilson.

I almost thought he *was* Wilson for a second, but I quickly decided that wasn't possible. He was disgusting, and jumpy like a rat, and his nose bent to the right at a weird angle.

It was just an uncanny coincidence.

"I'm human too." I held out my hand. "Nice to meet you."

He looked down at it, "Philip."

"Huh?" I finally met his eyes.

God, I was thick. His nose was weird, but how the hell could I mistake it?

He *was* Wilson.

My mind went

from nothing to everything

ENTIRELY TOO QUICKLY

A flash of this

A flash of that

I couldn't help but focus on a particular set of numbers that repeated in my mind,
powerfully read aloud by a foreboding, disembodied voice, unremitting, for all eternity.

For this eternity,

for that eternity.

I couldn't feel how many eternities it had been. I couldn't guess how many eternities it
had been. I couldn't know how many eternities it had been. I couldn't feel how many
eternities it had been. I couldn't guess

how much I was floating away from, or

how much I was floating into, or

how much I was at all,

anymore,

really,

because there wasn't much to wager a guess on.

Black, dark, black, dark, a flash, a set of numbers, black, dark, black, dark, a flash--

Se⁷ven. Eight. Seven. Four. One. Two. Five. One.

Eight. 8

Seven. 7

Four. 4

One. 1

Two. 2

Five. 5

One. 1 5 2 1 4 7 8 7

Another flash.

A sky.

A sky?

A sky.

A sky was in front of me, above me, below me--

A sky was completely around me.

A sky.

Since when?

A sky. Since now.

I was about to fall into it.

I would fall into it if I wasn't careful.

No--I hadn't been careful--I was already falling into it.

I was falling fast, and it took me hours--or maybe it was only seconds--to notice the rapidly approaching ground below. It was coming at me alarmingly quickly.

Up until this moment, I thought I was dead. Or gone. Or I didn't know what I thought.

But I was still alive, and I only realized it mere moments before my expiration--

before my surprise commitment with the ground below.

That seemed to be appropriate for me, for my history--or at least it lined up with the general feeling I had about myself, although my mind was so clouded and stretched that I couldn't remember anything specific. I knew I was Wilson.

Or at least I was pretty sure I was someone named Wilson. And that was it.

I guessed my time until impact: at my current rate of travel, I figured I'd hit the ground in roughly three seconds. Yeah. Three seconds.

Three--

I hit the ground with a loud slap.

Death was painless.

I spread out and watched my limbs and my torso and my insides run away, bending off in startling, impossible angles, and then everything quickly snapped back together.

My pieces snapped back together. I snapped back together again.

A bird chirped somewhere.

I stood up, very seriously concerned by how painless and easy death had been.

I didn't feel a thing. There wasn't even a quick cut to black.

It was nothing. I just hit the ground, and then I was standing up like nothing happened.

I looked around for my body.

But I didn't see it anywhere. I checked a wide circle of grass around where I fell, but there was nothing--no chunks, no gore, no blood.

Did I leave my body at all?

I did see a big mushroom--probably the biggest mushroom I had ever seen in my life. It was bent sideways and slightly smashed in.

It must've cushioned my fall.

I checked my hands. They seemed like my hands, down to the old scar along my left pointer finger from that horrific soldering incident.

I checked my chest. I was wearing my red buttoned shirt. My best shirt. It was a really nice shirt--I had owned it for a decade, at least.

I checked my shoes. They needed a polish, but were otherwise neat and tied up tightly, just like always.

This was my body. I didn't leave my body.

I wasn't dead.

I hadn't died at all.

I was alive,

ageless and ancient,

AND ONE IN A MILLION

"It was... let's see." Wilson put a finger on his chin. "We just started work on that woman with the ghost baby, and she vom--"

I cut in, "She vomited all over me! Yes! Mary-Ann. That was one of my first chaasm jobs. Wow. How fucking weird--I just had a dream about her. A nightmare."

"Really? That is an odd coincidence."

"It really is. Damn. How long ago was that? Like 2010?"

"Close." He nodded. "2011. And that's the last thing I remember. Leaving her chaasm. What happened to me in there? Why was I force-extracted?"

"What? You weren't. Nothing happened. We left and shut her down."

He furled his finger and tapped his chin.

"Really? There goes my theory. Oh, well--I remember your anxiety about Mary-Ann. How did you do?"

I grinned, "Bad. I couldn't do it. You had to."

"Ah, but I'm sure you came around eventually, right?"

"Yep. Very next week. You went off to a dig site and left me alone with that girl--Jessie Ismeta. I didn't even have any help. And, of course, I cried for days."

He held up a finger, "But you did it?"

"Yeah." I admitted. "But not without a phone call to you."

"I knew you could." His chair creaked as he leaned back and grabbed a brown bottle from his shelf.

It had the word WATER scribbled up the neck.

"Drink?" He held it up.

"Oh, god." I laughed. "Is that really water?"

"Yes." He raised an eyebrow.

"Then yeah, thank you. These mushroom fellas drink dog puke, man."

"Oh, my."

He laughed too.

I missed that laugh.

I grabbed the bottle and downed half in a single gulp, delivering a cold lump down my throat that seemed to fade and trickle away somewhere around my chest.

It was like I was full of holes, and the water couldn't make it to my stomach, but it felt fantastic to drink again, regardless.

"I'm stuck on something." Wilson folded his hands on the table. "So, my theory was wrong. I wasn't force-extracted. Then how did I get here?"

"Great question." I slid the bottle back. "I know how you *are* here, but as to how you *got* here, I can only guess."

Something clicked on his control panel, and he looked over, but gave a dismissive wave and a breathy chuckle.

"This is very surreal for me, Philip. Not only is my junior mentologist alive and well here, wherever the hell here is, but your knowledge has surpassed mine entirely.

"Oh, I don't know about that."

"No, it's true. You don't know because you can't see yourself. But I can, and it's true. And I'm proud of you, Philip. Really."

"Thanks, but it was all you, man."

A tear rolled down his cheek.

"Hey, woah, Wilson--"

"I never thought I'd see anyone again." He shook his head and smiled. "I didn't know how much I could miss this. But I do know now, and I--I can't even begin to describe..."

I reached out and put my hand on his. It was warm and rough, and all scabbed up.

"You don't have to describe anything." I squeezed, "Not to me. I missed it too, man."

He quickly pulled his hands away and wiped his cheek, and his face slipped back into stark, emotionless business.

"So, what do you know? And what are your guesses?"

His behavior struck me as odd, but I didn't want to press him.

"Oh, well... it's this whole thing." I leaned back. "Technically there are thousands of us. Every time we entered the Network, for every chaasm we visited, it created a full-on, conscious clone. The mechanics of how or where those clones end up is a bit... messy. And I don't really understand it. But you and I are talking proof."

"A clone? Every time? And, so, what--we left, and our clone got jettisoned off into the Network? Or how does it work?"

"I'm not really sure. Up until a few hours ago I thought I knew. I was force-extracted, and I knew I wasn't dead after, so I added two and two. I figured otherwise the clones just stayed in the chaasm. But that can't be true. I mean, I was there when you left."

"Hm." He rubbed his lip. "Very, very interesting. How do you know all this?"

"Cat Medy told us all about it. That was a different you, obviously--oh. Man."

It dawned on me.

"What?" His face was blank.

"God damn, you got off early. You never even met her."

"No. Cat Medy? Who is she?"

"Ah, well, the cat part is... hard to explain. Most of the time she was just regular old Medy, and she was one of us. Our third. You hired her right before the George and Arthur shit, which, ahh--you just missed that too. 2015."

"Interesting. Medy. It's a pretty name. What was she like?"

"Oh, you would've loved her--I mean, you did love her. She was the best of us, for sure. Brilliant, cocky, funny, a little annoying, and a fucking walking encyclopedia for VRC knowledge. She was the perfect teammate."

"Wow." He grinned. "She sounds amazing."

"She really was, man. And with her, we were the perfect team. Well, no--you all were. I was mostly just dumb comic relief. And all in all, I probably caused more problems than I solved, if I'm being honest. But yeah, you guys were just great."

"We were?" His smile faded. "Were."

He stared down at the table, took a deep breath and sighed it out, and then lifted his head again.

"So, what happened to you?" He asked.

"Me? Like what do you mean?"

"How did you leave? How did you get cloned?"

"Oh. I was force-extracted, like I said. Zeinhaert's stupid cagon ate me. Binbo or whatever he called it."

"What? What in the world is a cagon?"

"Oh, yeah, so, you know those Chinese dragons he had?"

He nodded.

"Well, after he died, we let his pillar get uh... out of control. Waited too long to shut it down. By the time we got around to the final sweep, the place was just a mess. Completely falling apart. Mutations, warping, geographical shifting--you name it, it was there. The cagons were just a mutation--one between his dragons and stray cats.

"The name actually came from him. Well, his projection form. He really embraced the skewing--I mean, he *really* leaned into it--the mutant organisms, the buildings, the warping. He loved it all. Gave everything a cutesy name like that."

Wilson was staring off into space.

"What's up, man?" I poked his arm.

"Zeinhaert." He muttered.

"Oh, shit. I keep forgetting you don't know--"

He held up a hand, "No, it's--well, it already happened, right? I guess I should be thankful that I never had to see it. I'm sorry you had to go through that alone, Philip."

"I wasn't alone, remember? You were there too, and you helped me through every minute of it. Just know that you got off at like the perfect time. Shit hit the fan not too long after. Eoghan went bananas--well, more bananas, I guess. He killed Zeinhaert."

"What? Eoghan... killed him? That sick son of a bitch."

Wilson gritted his teeth, and I saw something new boiling in his eyes.

It was rage.

He was furious.

I had never seen him that way. Never.

I tried to change the subject.

"I'm sorry--I didn't mean to bring all this depressing shit up. Hey, you know, I didn't even think of this, but if you left in 2011--does that make you... thirty-seven?"

"Thirty-eight." He looked away. "Or--I was thirty-eight. I don't know now."

"Thirty-eight! Shit, Wilson, you really are a young ass man under that beard! Dude, you're younger than me! By like a lot!"

"Really?" He glanced back. "You don't look a day over thirty."

"Well, I am. Twenty years' worth of days over. I got cloned in 2035."

"Huh. Fifty-seven? You look fantastic for fifty-seven."

"Well, thanks, but now that I think about it, that's not right either. Actually, counting by days, I'm probably several thousand years older than that."

He drew back and shook his head in disbelief.

"Several *thousand*?"

"Ah, yeah. Listen, I don't mean to keep circling back to me. I can tell you all about my whole life, and all the insane shit I've been through, but before all that, I'd really like to talk about you."

"I understand, and I'll answer what I can, of course. But we're looping back to this."

"Yes. Of course. So, you got left behind somehow. What happened to you after Mary-Ann's chaasm? And what the hell is with this place? Mushroom guys with worlds in their heads? You're spying on them? That copper circle thing we jumped through? And this cave? You got some serious explaining to do, man."

He leaned back in his chair and pulled a deck of cards from his pocket.

"Want to play a game?"

The cards made a loud thwap as he shuffled them against the table.

"Sure, I guess. Long story?"

"Long, but mostly wrong. I've done bad things here, Philip. I'm not the same man you knew, and I'd like to hold on to this moment for just a little longer, if you'd let me. How about we play a game of... Svoi Kozyri?"

He was acting strangely, and it was making me nervous.

Wilson was Yubu's stalker. And he showed up the same time Polo went missing.

So, where was Polo?

Did Wilson actually do something to him?

He certainly seemed upset about something.

But could a Wilson in any form really, intentionally cause harm to another living thing?

No.

Never.

I was missing something.

Maybe he didn't do anything at all. Maybe it was just a coincidence.

"It's a Russian game I've always had a fondness for." He added. "It removes random chance as a component. Plays more like a memorization game than traditional cards. I guess it's my little litmus test for people."

He stared at me expectedly, wearing a slight smile, but he couldn't hide what he was feeling. I could tell he was beating himself up about something. I saw it a million times before. But was he beating himself up because he did something to Polo?

Or was it unrelated?

This man was Wilson, regardless of what happened to him--regardless of what he did. He was my best friend and my mentor, and he always would be, no matter what.

There would be time later--time to confront our problems--time to confront our actions.

Time was one thing we had a lot of.

We had all the time in the world.

I could ignore whatever this was and indulge him in his game.

What was the harm?

We could just enjoy each other's company again.

For a while, anyway.

"Alright." I scooted my chair in. "How do I play?"

"Ah, since it's your first time, let's pull out the sevens and eights. And then we pick a suit. I'll be diamonds. You?"

"Buh... hearts."

"Hearts. Perfect. So, the object of the game..."

He began to haphazardly deal the cards.

Or was it

HALF-HAZARDOUSLY?

Wilson slapped a six of diamonds on the table.

Did I lose?

His poker face was entirely unreadable. I looked at his empty hands, and then down at mine. I was still clutching twelve cards.

Did that mean I lost? I thought it did. Maybe?

I took another sip from the bottle and slid it back.

"I think you may be worse than Eoghan." Wilson smiled and grabbed the bottle. "Did you ever really grasp the rules?"

I tossed my cards, scattering them across the table.

"Wow. Okay. And *I* think that may be the worst thing you've ever said to me. And I met like... shit, I met a lot of you, Wilson. You've said a lot of awful shit."

He took a drink and raised an eyebrow.

"Oh, really? Like what?"

"A lot. Like when you were a medieval knight. You--uh--*he* threatened to impale me with a spear, I think. And he accused me of being a witch. But he also managed to avoid comparing me to Eoghan, so he's got that going for him. Actually, he was a pretty great guy, now that I think about it."

"You know I didn't mean it like that. Eoghan is... well. You know how he is, too."

I nodded, "Yes, I do."

"You're not even capable of being that way."

"And neither are you." I smiled.

"I used to think that."

He hung his head and we sat in silence. The tension between us wasn't awkward. It was real, and radiating, but not unnatural. It made sense. We both knew why we felt it.

He did something. Or at least he thought he did.

I wanted to believe it wasn't anything serious.

This was Wilson, after all. But I never met a Wilson like this.

"Well..." He spoke softly as he pulled the cards together.

"Well." I repeated. "Start at the top. Tell me everything."

"I..."

He tidied the deck, slipped it in his pocket, and closed his eyes.

I gave him time. I didn't want to make this harder than it needed to be.

He looked up, "I killed someone."

I didn't speak, or make a face, or give any reaction.

He went on, "I don't remember much. I was with you in Mary-Ann's chaasm, and then I was in the dark. And I don't know how long that lasted, but when I opened my eyes, I wasn't there anymore. I was falling."

"Here?"

"Yes. I fell from the sky, and I thought maybe I was dead, or dying, until I saw the ground below, and from there I figured it out pretty quickly. I braced, expecting to die on impact, but when I hit, I didn't feel a thing. I stood up completely unscathed. And then I realized I didn't feel *anything*. I didn't even have to breathe."

"Just like me." I nodded.

"Yes. And then I saw the mushroom person. I landed on him. Or her, I guess. I don't know. I landed on them. I killed them."

So that's what happened to Polo.

As morbid as it was, I breathed a sigh of relief. At least it wasn't on purpose.

"Polo." I shook my head. "Oh, man. But that's not your fault--"

"But I just didn't know." He held up a hand. "I didn't know about them. I didn't know what they were. At the time, I didn't even realize I killed someone. It was just a mushroom to me. And then I saw that world on the ground. And I took it."

"Well, that's half the mystery solved right there, Wilson. It was a genuine accident. And it's not your fault. How can you control where you're going to pop into existence and plummet to earth?"

He shook his head, "Although I feel guilty for it, that's not the issue."

I held up my hands.

"So, what? What did you do? Fuck his corpse?"

"Wha--my god, Philip! No! Why would--what is wrong with you? You know I didn't."

"Well, you're saying shit like 'I'm not the same man you knew' and acting all dramatic. Like, come on. I mean, I wouldn't fault you for reacting that way if you had, say, fucked his corpse, for example, so I just wanted to make sure it wasn't anything like that."

"No. God, no, Philip. I'm not an animal."

"Alright, then what? What is it?"

"I..." He trailed off.

"Wilson."

He sighed, "I used the world."

"You used it? How? What do you mean?"

"Well, I didn't at first. I stored it here in this cave, and just went about exploring. But this whole planet is just untamed wilds--thickets and forests and beasts and monsters. I hated it day one, and I got so upset. I was depressed for a month--stuck up in this cave, unable to do anything, and so, so homesick. I just wanted to go home.

"One day, while I was wasting away in here, watching the little world spin, I got an idea: I thought maybe I could use its energy, like Ko, to go home, to travel, to do something else--anything aside from wasting away in here. I wanted to take my mind off this place. So, I started drafting a plan."

This was all a huge relief. He hadn't changed at all. He had me thinking he was corrupted--transformed into some malignant, awful monster like Eoghan.

But he wasn't.

He was still the same old, sad, sappy Wilson. I smiled.

"Okay, so what made you think the world could help you go home?"

"Well, nothing. I didn't think that. I just didn't know what else to do. I was grasping--working with what I had. Keeping myself busy. It took me a long time, but eventually I got all my tools and everything together, and I wired the world up. But it didn't work at all. As soon as I connected the leads the thing blew up in my face."

"Wow."

"I broke it. I killed it. I don't know if it was alive, but it's surely not anymore. The explosion was strange, as well. A yellow bubble appeared and spread out like a mushroom cloud. It grew through the cave, over me, and then got too big to see, so I ran outside, and everything else was already yellow. It grew over the whole world."

"A yellow bubble." I repeated, mulling it over.

"Yes. And then I almost choked to death. I realized very quickly that I had to breathe again. All this terrible pain came down on me, and in an instant, I was alive again. Really alive, and not just some Network ghost. I cut my finger and it bled."

"Holy shit." I mumbled.

His yellow bubble made him alive again.

Maybe that was why I kept feeling all these unusual, life-like sensations.

It was a lucky break that it didn't make *me* alive again. That could've been bad. I tried not to think about it.

"Yes." Wilson went on, "So, I knew I made a mistake, but I didn't know to what extent, exactly, and I set out to gather more information. That led me to the town. I saw the mushroom people and immediately understood what I had done. I wanted to know more. I needed to know more, so that's why I was watching them--that little one you were with, and a couple others--"

I held up a finger.

"But wait, I'm missing something. Go back. You used wires? How? Where'd you get wires? Where'd you get any of this shit, for that matter?"

"Ah. This cave. Those are natural copper deposits." He pointed up at the wall.

"It took me forever to get enough, and even longer to melt enough down to make the wiring, the panels, the manhole--I don't know, maybe a year in total, and then another few months after that to get it all in working condition. I always knew how to smelt, but actually doing it turned out much more difficult than I imagined."

"Woah, you made all this shit?" I scoffed.

"Yes."

"God damn, and in a year? Jesus. That's awesome. Really impressive."

He pressed his lips together and gave a slight nod.

I waited for him to go on, but he didn't.

"So, is that it?" I asked. "That's the whole story?"

"Just about. Since then, I've been using the world for power. And it works, for the most part. I powered the lock on the manhole, and I was able to convert my panel into a water purifier that gives roughly an ounce of water a day, which is pleasant. But other than that, it was just a big waste."

He leaned back and drained the bottle.

"So, how exactly are you a changed man?"

He shook his head, swallowed, and gave me a look of disbelief.

"What? I killed someone! And then I took a living world, tried to harvest its energy, and destroyed it in the process! For all I know it could hold their souls! And I blew it up!"

"Right. Yeah. But you didn't know any of that. How's this any different than the Network? You found something you didn't understand, and in a moment of desperation, you tried to use it. It went wrong, and now you're so beat up about it you

think you're Eoghan. Except Eoghan wouldn't be beat up about this, would he? He wouldn't give a shit at all."

"No, it's more complicated--"

"It's not. You feel like it is, but it's not. You didn't mean anything by this. You didn't know. Yes, you fucked up. You made a mistake. But look at you. You're beating the shit out of yourself over this. You're regular old Wilson, Wilson--guilty conscience and all--not a changed man by my book, and I know you pretty well. So, stop with that shit."

He looked down at the table.

"Seriously." I went on. "You're good. I get that you feel bad, and you probably always will. But you just gotta move forward and not do it again, you know?"

He didn't respond, and kept his head hung low.

Something occurred to me.

Why didn't I think of it before?

"I want you to show it to me." I said.

"What?" He squinted up at me.

"Show me the world."

His eyes moved over my shoulder, peering deeper into the cave,

wearing worry

AND HIDING NOTHING

I crouched to get a better look at the basketball-sized world. It was humming softly, and pulsed waves of warm air and purple light. The air smelled oddly metallic.

"Yeah, it looks bad." I leaned in.

The brilliant blues and greens I saw in Yubu's world were missing, replaced by dark storms of brown and red that enveloped the world completely, crackling with violent, splintered lightning. There was a ring of copper jammed into one side, coiled with crude wiring that ran away and across the cave floor, terminating at another copper ring just below Wilson's control panel.

"Have you ever disconnected these?" I tugged on a wire.

He looked worried and shook his head, "No. Why?"

"Maybe we should. You're using it for power, right?"

"Yes, but I guess I thought the damage had already been--"

I didn't wait for him to finish. I disconnected the leads and let them clatter to the floor. The little world flushed with grey smoke, and then swirled with milky white like pouring creamer in coffee.

I heard a faint rushing noise and the smoke dissipated, revealing rocky, brown earth and blue seas. Clouds formed in tiny spots and spread outward, weaving into a thin, wispy layer that wrapped around the world, tucking through its mountains and peaks.

It was dark, and ugly, but it almost looked normal. As it shifted, I felt something change. Something big changed. What changed? It was as if I took off a heavy coat.

I stood, not quite sure what I was experiencing.

"Well, there you go." I said.

"W-What?" Wilson crouched down to look at it. "It just changed back? Just like that?"

"Looks like it."

He held his breath for a moment, and then gave a dramatic sigh.

"But it didn't. It's not like it was. And I still have to breathe. Everything is still yellow."

"Yeah. Something's still broken."

"I--I wish I knew what I did, Philip. I'm sorry for putting this on you, after all you've been--"

I cut him off, "It's fine. We all make mistakes, Wilson. Listen, this is unrelated and probably stupid, but hear me out: I wanted to see it because I have an idea."

His brow crease deepened.

“What?”

“I know I didn’t really go over the specifics, but as I said, I can travel outside worlds. It started with chaums on the Network, but now that I’m here with you, I’m thinking maybe it’s not just chaums. I’m thinking it’s more. A lot more. And I’m thinking of trying to get into that right there.”

I pointed to Polo’s world.

“You’re--what?”

“I’m going to try to go in. It might not work, but if it does, maybe I can fix it.”

“Philip, wait--this is all so sudden--”

“Yeah, it always is. Just chill out. Drink some water. Stare at the wall. Go to sleep. Whatever. I’m gonna try.”

I turned to the little globe and shoved my hand in. My fingers slipped through, and it felt like I was being submerged in cold liquid, and then

I

was

falling

into a

FUNGAL DREAM

WAIT

WAIT

wait

wait

I was saying things--

screaming things--

but my body wasn't stopping or even slowing down,

and I kept screaming,

even though my voice didn't make a sound,

as I fell through countless, swirling miasmas of bulbous blue orbs--unctuous, burning globs of heat and light that dripped sweat into the dark. They zipped by, one after another, in an endless cascade of falling blue fire, as I ascended beyond them, above them, to somewhere else.

My vision faded, tapering down until all I could see was a pin-sized blue dot. And then I hit a barrier, a wall, a ceiling, and I slipped through, and I was free, falling into somewhere new. I was flying away from an infinitely tall wall of dirt.

But it was too big to be a wall. It was the ground, and I was sideways.

I flew up from the ground for a moment before slowing and dangling in the air, and then my eyes adjusted to the new bright of day.

I was in Polo's world. All I could see was dust and dirt, and Wilson's massive copper rod jammed into the earth. There were faraway mountains on the horizon that swooped down and became plains and valleys, forming dips and plateaus, spreading into a rippling countryside, but it was all the same pasty, dusty brown. For miles. Forever.

A heavy wind hit me, and I realized I was still hanging around the time I slammed into the ground face-first and sucked up a mouthful of dirt. My mouth and tongue were caked, and I could taste an overbearing metallic flavor, like copper. Like blood.

I stood and spat, and then stared up at the light blue sky. It was painted with abstract reflections of the dusty ground, like a broken mirror, and shimmered slightly, making it partially see-through. I squinted and saw the behemoth, sky-sized outline of a face behind the clouds.

It was Wilson.

He was peering down at me.

Could he see me?

His face was unmoving, like a statue, or an immense, inert planet, and his eyes were fixed downward. He didn't seem alive at all.

No. He couldn't see me.

I began to walk, still occasionally spitting ineffectually, trying to rid my mouth of dirt.

The place wasn't as interesting as I imagined. In fact, it was the opposite--it was really, really boring. It was nothing but dust, rocks, and dirt. I got excited when I thought I saw a little shrub in the distance, and ran over to investigate, but it was just another misshapen rock jutting from the ground.

I assumed there'd be an obvious solution to the problem--a lever to flip, or a city in peril, or a fire to put out, or--well, I was expecting a thing to do. Anything.

But there wasn't a thing to do.

I was thinking about it all wrong. This place wasn't like that. It wasn't like exploring a chaasm. It wasn't made from memories. It wasn't even human at all.

I was out of my element, and I had no idea what to expect.

I kept on walking, losing a bit more interest with every step, until I missed a step entirely, tumbled to the ground and rolled. I kept on rolling down an incline, and the light of day began to fade. I wasn't tumbling to the ground; I was tumbling *into* it.

I had been distracted by my thoughts and made complacent by the infinite, dirty nothing, and didn't even realize I was walking straight into a hole. My knee got caught as I fell and I flipped over, slammed down face first, and took in another mouthful of dirt. That was getting annoying. I had to learn to keep my mouth shut.

Keep my mouth shut. I chuckled and sat up.

Wilson would've liked that one.

I was in a tunnel of smooth, solid-packed dirt that extended down as far as I could see, ending at a tiny orange circle in the distance. It looked like the sun.

Interesting. Much more interesting than an endless dirt desert.

I stood, brushed myself off, and began walking down the tunnel, still spitting every so often to clear my mouth. I would think I got it all, and then a second later I'd find another clump of mud jammed behind a tooth.

The light from above dwindled and fell off, and I meandered into complete darkness, but the tunnel was straight and smooth, and proved easy to traverse. I walked forward with my arms outstretched, feeling the soft, packed-dirt walls as they grew cold and shifted into smooth stone. The circle at the end grew larger, and I realized it was a hole, spilling orange light on the surrounding stone like a star's corona.

I kept on until I reached the hole. The tunnel ended at a flat wall, but the path kept on heading down, suspended through a massive, hollow opening.

The room was immense. I had never been in a place so unbelievably tall or wide. It was hollow and perfectly spherical; I realized I was staring into the center of the world.

I pushed through the opening and continued down. The orange light I saw before was emanating from below, flickering up the cavernous spherical walls like a campfire. I crouched and flattened out on the path to peer over the edge, and saw a great, curled bug lying on its side, rippling with red static. The tip of its bulbous, orange tail was glowing and flashing sporadically like a dying ember.

It looked just like a firefly. But it seemed wounded. Or maybe sleeping? I couldn't tell.

I stood again and kept down, heading straight for it. Its massive chest was rising and falling slowly, and I could hear faint rattling from its lungs, like a shaking paint can.

Weird. Did bugs have lungs? Bug lungs.

Were bug lungs real? No. Right?

I was pretty sure bugs didn't have lungs. Not real lungs, anyway.

I stepped off the path, approached it, and then leaned over its head, careful not to get too close.

"Hey. I don't know if you can hear me, but, uh, my name is Philip. Are you okay?"

It stirred, lifted its head, and cracked its eyelids, revealing deep crimson eyes with no pupils. A soft voice came to me, like someone whispering directly into my ear.

"You are--"

The voice was cut short as the bug began to gasp and cough, squeezing its abdomen and shuddering its wings and tail, which dimmed and then flickered out.

After a moment, the fit passed, and its tail glowed orange again.

"Excuse me." The whisper returned. "You are new. And named."

It leaned up on a tree-sized leg and looked me over. Up close I could see it more clearly: it was just like a regular lightning bug--exactly like the thousands I had seen before, except blown up to the size of a semi-truck and bristling with red static electricity.

"Hello, named Philip." It nodded. "I am a vo, the last vella."

"Nice to meet you, uh--wait, your name is Vo?"

"No. I have no--"

It began to hack again, but this fit was milder, and passed quickly.

"I have no name." It wheezed. "I am a vo, of vella."

"So, what do I call you?"

"If you must, call me vo vella. We do not need names--only bo, ro, vo. Only our place in the family. We are a great family."

Its eyes grew bright, but then it hung its head. "Were."

"What happened?"

"Ah. We lived through a great quake. A sundering. And although our force was gone, we lived. But then, just as we settled, the great rod came bearing its storms. They culled us. All of us. We heard of it, but did not believe... who would? Who would?"

"The great rod?" I asked.

"Yes. It came from the sky. It broke the world and brought the storms."

Shit. That was definitely Wilson.

"The winds... the winds burned us--" It reeled back, seizing into another coughing fit.

The hacking and clicking reverberated through the hollow sphere for several minutes as it struggled to settle down again.

I felt bad.

It was in pain--struggling to breathe--and talking to me was just making that worse.

"The winds burned us to dust." It sat up again. "Ro hurried vo to the core. Many survived. But we did not have enough wer. In time, they all died, one by one, until I was all alone. And I should die now, too. But for reasons I cannot understand, I will not die. Vella won't let me die."

I couldn't tell Wilson any of this. He inadvertently committed lightning bug genocide and subjected a living, conscious being to unending suffering and torture. Nope. Couldn't tell him that. It would fuck him up really bad.

"I'm sorry." I took a step forward. "But hey, the storms are over now. It might be barren up there, but we can go out and try to find more, uh... wer? We can look, at least."

It shook its head.

"No. I cannot move. I am too weak. I am done, now. The vella are done. I have but one request--one remaining problem to solve, if you would help me."

"O-Of course. How can I help? What do you need?"

"Kill me. Make my end swift."

kill me

my head was spinning;

it all happened so fast, and a ringing, mundane question bled over my thoughts

make my end swift

is it

BAD FORM

to kill a dinosaur?

No matter what. No matter fucking what. Every fucking time.

If Wilson was involved, at the end of the day, I could pretty much bet that I'd be walking away covered in something--some kind of shit.

Sludge. Piss. Shit. Slime. Soup. Juice. Acid. Milk. Butter. Puke. Crab goop. Bug guts.

No matter what it was, I always walked away covered in something--even thousands of years later, on another planet, in another universe entirely.

I looked down at my hands, now slick with red and orange bug blood. Even though I desperately wanted to scrub them together and wipe myself clean, I knew there was no point in trying. This shit wouldn't come off.

I just had to leave and hope the juice didn't leave with me.

But... how could I leave?

Something shifted.

A heavy, thunderous weight slid somewhere above me. And then another.

I turned to see the suspended bridge cracking and collapsing behind me. It fell apart, raining down giant chunks of stone that slammed to the ground and fired up thick clouds of dust.

After a few moments of cacophonous chaos, the dust settled, and silence fell.

My heart fell with it. That bridge was my only way--

The ground began to shake again, and a deep crack busted open, buckling the stone between my legs. and then it all broke apart and crumbled to nothing, and I fell into darkness.

I glowed orange in the dark, still soaked with bug blood.

It was all I saw until I looked up and noticed the behemoth orange orb above me. At first, I thought it was a star--another world--but as I watched it twist in the air, I realized it was the glowing tail of the vo vella. Its corpse was falling with me.

The dark suddenly flashed into blinding white light, and then I was falling up, toward the sky, as the planet crumbled to nothing below me. The vo vella's flesh disintegrated to dust, leaving a massive, black skeleton behind. And then that fell to pieces as well.

A flat, wobbly strip of blue was growing larger, and then less than a second later,

The image features a central, vertical, abstract form that resembles a stylized human figure or a flame, rendered in a light, ethereal blue-grey color. This form is positioned against a background of a light blue sky filled with a grid of small, faint dots. The bottom of the image shows a curved, blue ground surface. The overall composition is minimalist and evocative, suggesting a sense of reaching or soaring.

I HIT THE SKY

in an explosion of shattering glass and rushing wind

and I felt pain again for the first time in what felt like eons

consuming

burning

gashing

pain

although I couldn't say whether it had really been eons, or not

and then it all faded to grey,

faded to nothing,

faded

away

Philip.

Philip.

Philip.

Hey.

Philip.

Can you hear me?

“Philip!”

That was a voice.

A voice called my name and echoed around me, dancing in a hollow space.

I knew the voice. It was comforting and familiar and friendly.

How did I know that voice?

“Please, Philip. Wake up!”

Right. Of course.

It was Wilson’s voice.

I opened my eyes to his heavily bearded face. His caked-on sweat, and that dirty, wiry beard bragged loudly about his poor hygiene. He smelled horrible, which was as a decent wakeup call.

I sat up, groggier than I ever remember feeling.

“Philip! You're alright! What happened? The world disappeared.”

I rubbed my neck, gritting my teeth through the rising, pounding pressure in the back of my head. It was piercing--as bad as a hangover. Maybe worse.

“Ah.” I covered my eyes.

Everything hurt. My head was so saturated with pain that it almost felt wet.

“I, uh--” I tried to focus. “I had to do some shit. It’s fucked.”

“What did you do?”

“I...”

It all came tumbling back.

I walked to the center of Polo’s world. I met a dying vo vella--the last of its kind. I killed it. I gutted it with my bare hands.

And then the place fell apart.

“Long story.” I pushed back and leaned against the cave wall. “Couldn’t fix it.”

The wet, thumping pressure was spreading, slipping up my neck, down my spine, even rattling around my teeth.

It had been so long since I felt pain.

And it was unbearable.

I took a deep breath in, and then exhaled, and the tremors began to fade.

“What is that?” Wilson’s face was all scrunched up, and he was pointing at me.

“What’s what?”

I followed his finger down to my chest.

“Oh, god--”

My shirt was saturated and sticky with orange slime, and I reeked like cat piss.

I was still covered in bug blood.

God dammit.

No.

No. Why? Why the hell?

What could I even do?

Could I clean myself?

I could try.

Would water work?

Could I even find water here?

Wilson had water! That could--

No. We drank it all.

Oh, god dammit.

Fuck.

What could I do?

What could I do?

My skin was crawling.

I shivered, wanting more than anything to rip it off and slam my head into the wall.

“Hold on.” Wilson held up a finger, seeming to sense my panic.

“I have some leaf paper--here.”

He rifled through his shelf, pulled a green, string-wrapped bundle free, and held it out.

“Well, it’s not actually paper. But close enough.”

I grabbed the bundle and pulled on the twine, unfurling a long green tapestry of leaves.

“Oh, thank you.” I smashed my face into the cloth. “Thank you.”

“What did you do, though?” His voice was muffled. “What is that gunk?”

I pulled the cloth free and ran it along my arms.

“Bug blood.”

“Bug blood?” He raised an eyebrow.

I cleaned what I could, until the leaf cloth was so wet with slime that it wouldn't soak anymore, and then crumpled it and tossed it to the ground.

“Again, long story.” I said.

“We have time.”

“Ahh. Okay. Listen, don't take this the wrong way, but you really don't want to know.”

He drew back like I reprimanded him--like I hurt his feelings.

“What did you do?” His voice was firm.

He wasn't going to let up.

“I did what I had to do. Leave it at that.”

“Philip.” He put a hand on my shoulder. “Please. What did you do?”

“Wilson. Trust me. I know you pretty well, and I'm making an executive decision here. You don't want to know. I know that you don't want to know. It won't help anything for you to know. In fact, it'll probably make everything worse.”

“But you're wrong.” He squinted. “Because I do want to know.”

“No, man. You don't. I'm sorry. You have a habit of... well, you have a tendency to beat yourself up for no god damned reason. It's done. And it's been done since Polo died. I didn't do anything that want going to happen anyway. Just, please, recognize your mistake for what it was and move on.”

He slouched down, seeming to take that as an answer, and ruminated in silence, wearing a deep scowl.

After a moment, he looked up.

“Well... alright. Thank you for whatever you did. It worked. The yellow is gone. I'm dead again. Or a ghost. Or whatever. No breathing.”

“Really?” I asked.

I noticed for the first time that the cave wasn't tinted yellow anymore.

“Yes. So, thank you for that. But now I'm back where I started. No way home.”

“I mean, you can't go home, but you could try to leave. That's always an option.”

“But I can't.”

"How do you know? Have you ever tried?"

"Well, no, I haven't, but--"

I stood and walked to the cave wall, "Just try it. You'll sink into a wall and fly away."

"But... how? I just do it? And where do I go?"

"No idea. It's just black, empty space. A lot of space. But you just walk into it. Think about it, and slip in. And then you're gone."

He nodded idly, lost in thought.

"Hm. Interesting. Could you show me?"

"Well, if I do, I probably won't be able to come back. It's... hard to navigate out there. You should leave first. I'll coach you."

"But we can't go together? I'll be alone again?"

"Ah. Yeah, that's the caveat. I've been alone for a long time. But you said you hated this place. Being alone beats an eternity in hell, right?"

"Hm." He held a knuckle to his lips.

I went on, "One thing to keep in mind out there: look for stars. They're not stars, but they look like stars. Like the balls of fire we saw on the Network. You find those, and fly toward them. That's how I ended up here."

Wilson bit his lip.

"I... I don't think I want to go, Philip."

"What? Really?"

"Well, what are my options?" He lifted his hands, palms up, and then raised the left.

"Wander into the dark alone?"

He switched to his right hand, "Or stay here alone? Two evils. But, faced with it now, I think I'd rather have a home than walk away from one."

"I get that. I think. I wouldn't, personally. I'd rather experience new shit."

"Ah, so you wouldn't..." He shook his head and smiled. "Never mind."

"Uh. What?"

"I just... well, I was going to ask if you wanted to stay with me for a while, but as you said, you'd rather see the new. I get that. Completely."

And there were the unbearable, swollen pangs of guilt.

I wanted to leave. I wanted to get the hell out of this place.

But I didn't want to leave Wilson alone.

And I liked his company. I liked being with him.

Plus, I didn't really want to be alone either.

What was right?

What was the right

THING TO DO

“Well, I’m open to it.” Wilson leaned back in his chair.

“Cool. After lunch, then. Hey, pass me the wibblers, man.” I poked Yubu, who was slumped over and snoring. “Yubu! Come on! You’re literally on the bowl.”

He choked on a snore but didn’t move a muscle.

I lightly punched his arm, and he screamed and scrambled up into his chair.

“Philip. Celium, please. Don’t do that.” Yubu wheezed, clutching his chest.

“I’m sorry, man. You were on the wibblers.”

Wilson laughed, “I don’t want a wibbler, just for the record.”

I reached forward, grabbed a wibbler from the basket, and slapped it on my plate.

“I... it’s okay.” Yubu tried to catch his breath. “But don’t punch me, please. I’ll have a coleuryism.”

Wilson perked up, “A coleuryism? What’s that?”

Oh boy.

I was hoping to get to the soilyard before sundown, but it looked like we were in for another two hour ‘Wilson learning’ session.

I sighed and stabbed my fork in the wibbler, but I couldn’t hide my smile.

This was nice. It wasn’t a life I expected, but it was one I could see myself enjoying.

For a while, anyway.

Thanks for reading.

One head is better than none.

And two heads are better than one.

But twenty-three?