

The Chains of Gods

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If, then, there is some end of the things we do, which we desire for its own sake... Will not the knowledge of it, then have a great influence on life? Shall we not, like archers who have a mark to aim at, be more likely to hit upon what is right?

~ Aristotle, Nichomechean Ethics

Part 1

It all starts with a seed. Everything else follows.

I know this. You know it too, perhaps? I am not alone in knowing this. I pray I am not alone.

I prayed. That was the seed that started everything.

I do not know this. Everything has a beginning, even beginnings. Walk back towards the first beginning and you will never take off your hiking shoes.

Hiking. *That* was the beginning.

No, if I am being honest with myself, with you, with the story I am about to tell, it started much earlier than that. Perhaps it was when I pulled the trigger that day on the roof-top and felt the kick in my shoulder. When I carved the air with a bullet, cutting the last bit of cancer out of the planet forever. I felt the kick in my shoulder.

Maybe it was when I saw the Hiker. Stinking up the forest. Ruining everything. Bringing me to prayer. Bringing me back to the world. The world I'm leaving.

I am dying.

Perhaps it was when I first threw the rock; when I first drew blood and was Chosen by the Stars.

Maybe it was the moment I decided to pick up the rock. Like when you decided to pick up this book.

Maybe it was the moment *before* I decided. Maybe it was when I looked down at the small piece of solid earth and realized, with dawning amazement, that I *could* pick up the rock. That I *could* throw it. That the only thing between the rock lying inert on the ground, full of potential energy; and it hurtling through the air, a sedimentary missile; was *me*.

Perhaps not. Perhaps the only certainty is that we can never know what started the Story.

No, even that might not be true. Maybe you didn't decide to pick up this book. Maybe I didn't decide to pick up the rock. Maybe there is no such thing as choice. Maybe there is no seed, no beginning. No middle. No end. Every end is a beginning. Is there a difference between the two?

Maybe Life is an ever-winding cycle of inevitable repetition, turning back on itself again and again until The Story has been told a thousand times, every time a little different, with nods to local customs, cultures, languages, skin-colors, but always the same at the center. At the seed.

It all starts from a seed. Everything else follows.

And now we're back at the beginning again. Entropy makes fools of us all. We can't win, break even, or get out of the game. The story cannot continue forever, no matter how hard we try. There will be an end if there is a beginning.

An end for me, for certain. I am dying. Trapped in a cave with shadows on the wall. Soon there will only be my story and I will be dead, forever immortalized in ink and paper. I am dying; that is important for you to know.

Does that feel better? Knowing how the story ends?

We want to know. We all have questions, once we are born. It is our blessing and our curse; from the moment we first draw breath, we must hunt for answers. How to suckle, how to speak, how to walk, how to think, how to survive. Questions are threats and dangers. Mysteries. Answers are tools we use to survive.

Let me tell you right now, there are no answers in this book.

Don't fret, because you already know the answers. You lie to yourself and say you don't; if you knew the answers, you tell yourself, you wouldn't have questions. This is also a lie.

Just ask yourself, how will you walk?

I told myself there must be something more, something I was missing. These questions are so hard, but the answers came so quickly that they must be wrong. Sometimes they come two at a time and they couldn't *both* be right. One of them *had* to be wrong. Or maybe both. They can't both be right.

Right. Correct. True. Factual. Perfect. Precise. Righteous. There is only one right.

And just think — just *think* — what could happen if we choose wrong!

I chose. Did I choose right? Maybe not. Maybe even making a choice was wrong. Maybe there was never a choice to be made.

It doesn't matter. It's not important. It's not important because I am dying. It will be over in seconds. (Longer for you, depending on how fast you read. Or even longer.) Was I right or was I wrong? It doesn't matter, because I will be dead.

You already have your answers, even though you lie and say you do not. No. I will not give you my answers. And the answers aren't important anyway. What's important in the Hunt. What's important is The Story.

It's an old story. The oldest story, found by Hormuzd Rassam in 1853, buried under ancient sand and under ancient words. The First Story. You've heard it before, though you may not know you have.

It is an important story that we tell ourselves, but that doesn't make it true.

It is a story. It is a lie.

Truths, lies, stories, hunting, Alexander and I, the stars above us and the destinies they weave...these are themes of the story. They are sprinkled like signposts through these pages. Like tracks. Spoor. Markings. Your tracks will lead you to a different quarry than mine lead me, but that's not important.

This is what is important: I am telling you a story, and you will turn the page. You have to turn the page because if you do not, the story will end, and this story has no end.

Turn the page.

1

Where shall I begin?

What possible beginning is there for us when all ends
are beginnings and all middles
ends?

Now that I am dying, if the universe truly is circular then I am closer
to the beginning than I ever have been.

I. There is an I, now. There was no I before, and that was the
beginning.

Who am I?

Would you like a name? A label to encompass everything that I ever
am was and will be? A title born from our parental culture as full of
meaning as any made up word? Names labels distinctions methods
of carving the world apart into specific configurations of those who
have and have not a quality: the me and the not-me.

What is the me? What makes me different from any other collection
of atoms spinning in silence and waiting to die?

Roman. Chosen of the Hunter. Vipersbane. Bearer of the Arrow.
Bringer of Ends. Once friend of Alexander, once friend of Rasina.
Witness to the death of Fidaa, the demon god. Victim of the Stars.
Kind to animals. Quiet. Kept to themselves. Height. Weight. GPS
coordinates. Hair color. Eye color. Skin color. Color me how you
like for I am me and that is who I am.

I wasn't at the start. We never are. We look back at ourselves, young and foolish and impetuous and arrogant — who is this person who knew so little and thought they knew so much? If I could only reach back and tell them what I know now but we can't go back we can only hunt forward until we reach the end where I am now.

Every turn of the page brings us closer.

Yes. I must be at the end.

So we will start at the first of my beginnings. The first of three.

Not when I was pushed from the dreaming darkness of my mother's womb, as we all are. Nor the time in the alley when I was seven — very young to be Chosen. Those were mere transitions from one state of being to another.

No, we will begin at my first *beginning*: the start of the *I* who now lies dying. My rebirth, when *I* was born again with a prayer. There.

I was praying for the Hiker to not come any closer.

I was not Roman then, not the Roman I was, nor the Roman I am. I was simply not. *Non cogito, ergo non sum*. Before the prayer, there was nothing. I remember nothing because there was no *I* to remember. There was nothing beyond the most basic instinctual survival.

And survive I did: for twenty years in the forest I ate and drank as I found, I slept where I could. No language, no tools; My hands were simply hands and they did what hands did. I had returned to the life our ancient ancestors had cast aside for fire and stone.

After twenty years my *self* had atrophied from disuse. No dreams to distract me, no thinking, no doubting, barely being. Egotistical suicide, absent the burden of humanity, of Ego or Superego to silence the basest Id. I had found a state of vacant nirvana wherein I severed myself from my self, only to discover there was no self left.

It was my final mercy on the world.

Was I happy? I must have been; as happy as any beast in the forest, if happy they can be. I was at peace.

Then the Hiker arrived.

I knew it at once; I heard the panting for several miles. I heard rubber soles snapping twigs, the soft tapping of a plastic water-bottle, and the faint clapping of metal zippers. On the wind, I could just smell the faint salt of panic as it started to cover the Hiker's lips. Male? Female? I didn't remember the difference.

I leapt silently overhead, from tree to tree as my damning curiosity pulled me onward. Lost hikers weren't uncommon, but they had always found their way back to the road easily enough. The steep inclines and rough underbrush did much to send the tired and lost away from my corner of the forest towards easier and simpler paths. Destiny did the rest. They rarely got a mile away from the road.

This one had. The fool had apparently seen the lack of hiking trail as a challenge rather than a warning and was now lost for their trouble.

The curiosity changed to terror as the hiker walked onward, ever closer to my old home. My cabin.

In that moment of fear of weakness of fear, I was as we all are; a hairless monkey gripping a tree begging distant and unseen forces to protect me from a future I could not avoid. Helpless in the face of the universe, desperate for some respite, the *I* returned. The *I* saw, and the *I* prayed.

My prayer: Please go away. There is nothing here for you.

Prayer. Submission. Bargaining. I wasn't even praying *to* anything: what could I have prayed to? The Stars had forsaken me and I them. I was just praying. Begging. Supplicating to the universe writ large.

Or to myself, writ small.

Perhaps I was praying to the human walking towards me, bringing civilization in their wake. Hiker. Mortal. Interloper. Staggering only to rest for a second with hand pressed against the tree-bark. The same tree I was sitting in. The first human I had seen in almost twenty years.

An *I* to pray, a *you* to pray to. Separation. Complexity. Consciousness. The tightly wound universe of my life had been suddenly sundered into two; me and them. I was afraid, and in my fear, faithlessly, I prayed. I was resurrected in that singular moment of panicked hope. Born again. A regretful Lazarus surrounded by a dark forest. Awareness was looming over me, forcing me back to the circular chain of cause and effect.

But not yet. I can see the slope I had begun to slide down now, but at first it was just the prayer. I followed the hiker, breathing quietly and swaying with the tree I perched on as the wind flowed around me like a cloak. Layers of dirt camouflaged me when I pressed myself against the tree branches. Leaves hung in the long hair that draped over my face. I prayed as I followed, the natural state of prayer.

Awareness and memories surfaced and sank again in my mind like bubbles in a smothering bog. I wasn't thinking clearly. I was barely thinking at all. It had been too long since there was an *I* to think. Unfamiliar sensations and frightening instincts crawled from the ancient past to torment me and burn the prayer forever in my mind. It became a mantra, a thoughtless hymn that would never be answered.

Go away. Turn back. Leave me alone. There is nothing here for you. Only me, and I am nothing.

I followed the hiker as we made our way towards my old home, my cabin, my cast-off shelter I had shed like a confining snakeskin. It

was barely a cabin; it was a room. A roof. I stopped using it years ago except when it rained, and for the last decade not even then. Now, as I look back, I realize I should have torn the rotten wood roof down, but it is hard to forsake anything that once brought you refuge: cabins, friends, illusions...

The hiker ran towards it, relief leaking through their pores like sweat at the sight. In that brilliant moment, they saw the cabin the same as I saw it: a link to civilization. A chain to drag them back from the natural world. A burning desire I had not felt in years fluttered in my breast, and I wanted to leap from the tree and hug them, groom them, feed them, share in our commonalty, though we were as different as two humans could be.

Hateful instinct blossomed soon after. The hiker craved my cabin, while I had shunned it. They were *not* like me, and were therefore my enemy. I could have killed them. I feared both everything I was, and the future that their presence portended; I wanted to kill them, to spare me and spare the world.

No, none of this is true: I am looking back now, and anthropomorphizing the behavior of a beast. There was no I to love or hate the hiker, nor awareness of the future to come.

The hiker knocked hard on the cabin door, sending the echos through the trees like hornets, in the vain attempt to draw the attention of someone, something, somewhere. To draw the eye of a guide or savior that would take them away from the terrifying forest that surrounded them. The prayer of a civilized human, if not to gods than the universe. Drawing attention. Shouting in the quietest of places. "*We are here. Take heed. We cannot be ignored. In attention, worth!*"

I heard but did not answer their prayer, and after a moment of holy disillusionment the hiker stepped away from the cabin, eyes closed, and took a deep breath through the nose and blew out through the

mouth.

In through the nose and out through the mouth.

I could end the story here. Could have. It's too late now, but I could have leapt away and let the hiker live or die on their own terms. I could have left before their eyes opened and looked directly into mine.

Could I have? But I didn't. And the hiker looked at me.

I saw in their eyes horrifying awareness and the monstrous humanity I had discarded so many years ago. What they must have seen; my muddy skin and thick ropy hair. A beast-man of the forest. A monster. A memory.

I leapt down from the tree, crying like the beast I was. I raged. I danced and sang. I howled and wailed. I flung my limbs about, beat the ground with my paws and stamped my feet. I shouted my anger, my fear, my disgust.

The hiker didn't turn and run but just stood and watched my devotional. Might have been a tourist, amazed at the native crooning and parading himself in front of them. A primal dance performed on the roadside to transport them, free them from familiar daily life; a theatrical performance to reminisce of ancient and distant customs, a time when money was useless so why not toss a few into the hat?

The hiker took my picture. Damn them, they pulled the plastic toy from their pocket and commemorated the event for posterity.

They had to have been frightened. Must have been. Couldn't *not* have been, with how sincere I was in my cautionary mass. Perhaps driven mad by fear, a thousand tortured deaths parading before their eyes, they thought to record their fears in silicon rather than keep them safe and hidden in the three pounds of fat in their skull.

The sound of the camera enraged me, a punctuation of my failed pantomime. I grabbed at the phone but the threat of losing what was theirs spurred the hiker into action with greater vigor than my mere displeasure had. Staggering backwards, they turned about and ran into the forest, leaving me alone again.

An ancient superstition once said that cameras could steal your soul. I found in this case the opposite was true, though it took several days with Rasina for my soul to stick.

There was every reason to believe I was safe. Even if the hiker found their way home, which was no certainty, no one would believe the fantastical tale. Even if they believed, they would not care. No one would know it had been *me* performing for the camera.

Rasina saw. Rasina believed. Rasina knew.

None of that passed through my mind. I had no mind for it to pass through. The leap had been instinct, deep in the core of my brain, bypassing consciousness, sentience...I had leapt without awareness. Without forethought. Without plan, or logic, or reason. I didn't make a choice, I made a leap. A leap of instinct. A leap of faith.

I should have chased after. "Should" — pah! It wouldn't have mattered.

A prayer and a picture. Between the two, I was damned.

2

Should I go on? But why, when the story is over? I am finished with my tale, and you are free again to close the book, stand from your seat, and return to your own life of love and hate, fear and pleasure, food and family. Go. Run. Be free, for there is no more to tell.

No, I am lying. There is more to tell, but it *could* be over. It would have been so easy to end it there. Looking back now, I realize how everything could have been different. Every linchpin on the way, every word, every breath, every individual moment that caused the moment after. Chain of cause and effect...

If *only*...

I could have turned away from the world once more, gone deeper still into the wild and quiet forest. I could have lost my self again. I could have died alone and forgotten. Don't think that a tragedy; it's everything I ever wanted for myself.

It can't be over. I couldn't have re-lost myself. I couldn't have died again. I couldn't because that's not how it happened.

I had survived for twenty years as an animal, my body animate by instinct instead of will. I did not need excuses or explanations. Pain and pleasure were my teachers. What felt good was good, and I sought it. What brought pain was bad, and I avoided it.

Future and Past had never mattered to me before. My past was conditioned memory, conditioned instinct that created my present. My future was dim expectations; an understanding that eating berries would ease the pain of hunger, if only for a time. Nothing but shadows on the cave-wall of my present condition.

Then I prayed. I hoped. I *looked ahead*.

The prayer was the first thing I remembered; a beacon of humanity in my primal forest of beasts, trees, and instincts. For a time the whole of my life spun around the fulcrum of that prayer; there was only the darkness before that moment and the light after.

But I was still free from the burdens of virtue and the obligations that came with them. I was but a new-born startled by an ominous awareness; still half-asleep, on the hot knife-edge between slumber and wakefulness. I knew of choice, yet I did not yet know about choosing *well*.

At first, like a blurry-eyed fool, I wallowed in the blessings of this power. My mind began searching for the predictable patterns in the chaos of what-might-be, so I might exploit them. Instead of eating every scrap of food I found, I threw scraps into the forest to lure larger game. Tossing meat into the pond called the fish back from the murky depths where they had learned to hide from my grasping paws. I saw the patterns of deer herds and bear hibernation, and slept, ate, and hunted accordingly. For weeks I reveled in the new law of the land: a sacrifice of pleasure for relief of future pain. A bargain with the universe.

But like all who are given power, I delved further than was sustainable. I fell victim to its seductions and looked *further* ahead. I searched *further* back. In time, I saw the road stretching onward for eternity. Every effect a cause, every cause an effect. There was nothing to stop it; the avalanche of causality threatened to pull me over the cliff, a hapless bystander in a river of rocks. I stood in the middle of an eternal chain with no describable end, no discernible beginning.

How to explain what happened next? I waited in the tree, sleeping little, eating less. Perhaps you wonder what could paralyze me so. Perhaps I wonder why life does not paralyze us all.

I fought the scope of my awareness back to the here and now, inadvertently carrying time with it. The events of the past and future became the Now, as real in my mind as anything. Memories of pain burned my skin, causing me to wail anew. Imagined future dangers set my heart racing as sure as any rustle of the bushes in the present.

In my half-awake confusion, tormented by the past and future, I waited. I knew I had to wait. I had no choice. Why did I stay? I had no reason. There was no why. "Why" was a question for the Self.

I wanted to. That is the only reason anyone does anything.

Or perhaps some ancient memory knew that Rasina was coming for me. Perhaps the Stars had plans for me yet.

Maybe, Maybe, Maybe...

I remember I smelled her first. I don't remember the car-door slam or the engine turning off. I don't remember hearing the rubber tires on the forest floor.

Memories are in smells. A single whiff is all it takes. In an instant we are running, hunting, pouncing, surviving — memories of success, of survival, of pain, of good and evil — memories to keep us alive.

What do I remember? Shapes. Images. I still didn't remember everything. I saw the glint of silver — sunlight on an earring — before I saw her; a point of light flickering in the forest, a horrifying will-o-the-wisp promising a return to civilization if I would only follow.

Do you want to know what she looked like? It doesn't matter. She was my teacher, an old friend, mentor, sage, guardian, you know what they look like. You can picture her if you try. Maybe her hair was long, or short, or black, or blonde. Maybe she was pale, or tan, or jet black. Maybe her nose was sharp and her chin broad. Maybe she held a thick leather suitcase, and shoes of thin plastic. Maybe

she wore a gauze gown and moved like wind over the lake. Maybe her skin glittered with exertion against the white birch trees. It doesn't matter.

She didn't speak to me, not at first. She knew where I was and left me food like she was taming a wild animal, which she was. Had I known what was to come, I would have refused it.

Instead, I was hungry, so I ate the food and that was good. I was not strong enough to resist her simple training. Bit by bit the animal that was me grew accustomed to her scent again.

Again.

Flickers of memory surfacing in my mind. Something in me tried to scream them down again, but I betrayed myself and memories returned, climbing through the murky depths of nothingness that I had cultivated for twenty years.

What followed was six days and seven nights of war. Between me and her? Me and myself? Did she bed with me at night to teach me the wisdom of man? All I know is there was conflict, and I lost every battle. I didn't understand what was happening until it was too late. I couldn't have.

The cruelest wound was that she had aged; for twenty years I had existed ignorant of the passage of time. When I looked at her face and saw those years etched plainly on her skin, I became Lot's wife. Twenty years of unremembered past yawned behind me, oppressive in its absence. Un-experienced life. Useless time. Pointless. Meaningless. Empty.

I fought like my death depended on it. I shoved her away time and again. I struck her. I'm not proud of it. Not as hard as I could have, but I hit her just the same. I shouldn't try to excuse it, I'm sorry. It doesn't matter how hard I hit her. I hit her. It was instinct. I shouldn't try to excuse it. *I* hit her. I shouldn't have. But I did.

It didn't work; she returned day after day, so I tried words. Communication through the language I had spoken for the last twenty years: roars and grunts that conveyed the only information that was ever necessary: anger, fear, alarm. I beat the ground, I beat my chest, I threatened and charged and promised her I would strike her again; not out of fear but out of intent.

She responded with her own language, crafted through the centuries to convey concepts far beyond my understanding. Honor and duty. Obligation and sorrow. Desire. Gratitude. Excuses. Explanations. Reasoning. Nonsense.

As the sun fell on the sixth day, she spoke words that I finally understood.

"Come back, Roman. We need you."

I ran. A deep instinct from decades ago drove me to run into the forest so deep that she couldn't follow. She didn't follow me. I hid, and I stayed, and I waited for her to leave while fears from the past cloaked me in terrified shivers.

She left, and the next day I followed. She had trained me well. The very blood in my veins controlled me, and I could not stop my following her any more than I could have stopped my heart.

Do you have control over your world? Perhaps you do. I have no more control here than you do. The Story is told. It is set in ink and paper. Flip to any page of this story, and it will be there, as distant and constant as the Stars. What power do I have? What change can I enact? I only exist in the confines of these pages; if there were no story, there would be no me. There is no changing the story anymore. Maybe I never could.

But you can. You have the power that I never had, the power I never will have: you have a choice. You can choose not to turn the page. The story could be over now. You do not have to follow me like I

followed Rasina. You can close the book. Walk away. Forget all about me, and never learn how I die. Never see what happens on page 52. Or 53.

This, or nothing.

It is a choice we all have. A choice no other being, no matter how powerful, can take from us. As long as we have agency, we have the great and final choice. Take It Or Leave It.

Is that a choice? If so, it is a choice that has no meaning. It is a choice that is, in fact, no choice at all.

And yet it is the only choice worth making.

You can flip to the end and read the last page. I give you permission. If it tells you anything, it might tell you if you are wasting your time. Or perhaps not.

There is no choice in a story; the same choice you have in life. Pages turning right to left as your eyes read left to right. If you do not do this, there is no story. When you picked up the book, you entangled us both. We are both a part of the story, now; the teller and reader, the speaker and listener. You started this relationship, and now you have to turn the page. This is your burden. This is free-will.

Turn the page.

3

I feel you are unsatisfied.

Chains of facts. Cause and effect. A recitation of dates and times and places. This is not a story. Like myself, you are looking for *me* in these words. Who am I? What kind of person am I? Are you supposed to sympathize with me, am I a reliable narrator, or am I the antagonist of this tale?

Why did I follow Rasina? An obvious question; what reason would you prefer? A reason you can understand. A visceral excuse, not from the head but from the heart. There were rational reasons, but I didn't find them until later. I did not study the logic behind accepting or denying my necessary place in the natural order of things.

Why does anyone do anything? When the Hero runs off to save the kingdom, is there a logical reason for it? Does the Hero study the implications of a Dragon on the local economies, the legal system, the military? Or is it a decision made from the heart, as natural and irresistible as it is unreasonable?

I had begun to think. My self had begun to return, weak and feeble from disuse, and what was I to do then? Terrifying enough was the separation of my self from the world — the birth of the Self as traumatizing as any newborn's — to separate my self into *two* was all the worse.

And there *were* two of me now. The burgeoning I, the feeble self that thought and reasoned like a newborn child; and the ancient instincts that controlled my body without care or concern for my will.

I had struck Rasina. I didn't mean to. I had run from her plea. I hadn't wanted to. I pulled my feet away from painful thorns, I jerked my head at unexpected sounds; who was this? Who pulled my body on invisible strings?

Which I was I?

Cogito, ergo sum, sed quis ego sum? Fish do not fly, birds do not swim. I needed to know who I was, so I could know how to think, how to act, how to live. If I failed to hunt well, I had no food. If I failed to sleep well, I had no rest. If I failed to think well, there would be no me.

Rasina was the only other human around, and I was human: it was one of many things I forgot in the forest. We are social animals, humans, and even when we are alone, we yearn for society. Companionship. Love.

Rasina...she knew me. She could teach me.

I found her in a fake world, cut off from the forest by dead trees carved into new shape. Doors and windows kept her separate, aloof, and comforted by a roaring machine that blew air cooled and warmed by humanity's hubris.

She ushered me inside and pushed me towards a small room with a fake waterfall, pouring chemicals on my skin to wipe away the outside world that clung to me like a disease. When I was cleansed and anointed and my long wet hair hung in clumps over my face, she covered me in fake skins; soft like dandelion fuzz, tight like a snare. A noose.

"Eat," she urged me.

She handed me a sandwich wrapped in foul plastic that stuck like a spider-web. The bread was soft and spongy, the bird-meat smelled dry and old. Something rotten had been placed on top, yellow and

bitter. Cheese. I could still smell the plastic, clinging to the porous bread like a dash of errant perfume.

"Eat," she begged me.

My stomach heaved at the thought. A sour smelling orange acid swirled in a plastic cup that had been sealed with thin metal. I could taste the citrus in the air, but it had been condensed, diluted, and contaminated with plastic and metal.

"Eat," she commanded me.

I took a bite. I took a drink. I still remember the taste; cold and tired. A thin and wispy flavor held onto through desperation and hope. I could feel my stomach churning in disgust. The orange-juice was foul, all life and freshness long since vanished. I remember coughing, struggling to keep it down while she struggled not to laugh.

"You'll need to get used to processed food again," Rasina smiled. "There isn't much rabbit in the city."

I listened, amazed at the stories she told me: Humans lived in cities. A long time ago I had thought cities were full of life. Now I know they are just full of motion.

Bit by bit, I remembered how to be human. Memories flooded back to me that had long since been forgotten. I remembered what led to my prayer, to following the hiker, and more.

"Fresh food isn't available: plucked from the ground or branch or vine, the only cost your labor...it costs more than anyone has. Food that has passed through machines, touched by a thousand laborers, that's all that's affordable anymore. This is how change happens. Not through big things like laws or speeches, but the little things like sandwiches. Changes you never care enough to notice or complain about, and before you know it, the world's a different place."

The meal was clumping together in my stomach like concrete while Rasina talked to me. Was I going to be sick? My body wanted to reject what I had forced down my throat.

How had she found me? The hiker had trapped my image in light, sent it spinning through the air to the Cloud, the Net that covered the air in invisible lines. There, I was subjected to thousands of digital eyes, all searching for data, until some eager algorithm recognized me and alerted the proper authorities. Rasina had asked for the honor.

She taught me of kindness, cruelty, sharing, and payment. She taught me of justice and mercy, of frustration and gossip. She taught me of every human creation I had forgotten in the forest, until I began to speak the words on my own. I ate it up.

I learned to imagine goals I might have in the future. I learned about planning. I learned about preparing. I learned about consequences. I learned about responsibility. I learned about Acting Well.

She reminded me about the Chosen, of which I was one.

"You are unique," Rasina told me. "You have power that others do not. You have a responsibility."

I didn't ask for responsibility. No one ever does.

How do you know you are Chosen? It is difficult to describe, and harder to justify. It is a feeling. The world changes in a way that cannot be described with smells or sounds or colors. You are quite simply and suddenly a different person. Everything else follows.

For me, I remember the rock.

I was seven years old when I looked down and realized that I could pick it up. That I could throw it. That the only thing between the rock lying inert on the ground and it hurtling through the air was me.

I remember feeling the rock as it left my hand. It sailed through the air, but somehow I was still holding it. I could feel the air move around it, spinning the rock like the feathers of an arrow, almost lazy as it carved a perfect arc through the air.

When the rock struck the girl on the cheek, it felt like I had struck her myself. I watched her run away, screaming and crying in pain and fear. The other boys tried throwing rocks too, but the girl was too far away for them. It had been exhilarating, and terrifying. I could almost smell her blood and tears.

It wasn't a girl, it was a rat. It's okay, you don't have to hate me. You are not a bad person for listening to me.

When the rat had gone, slipping through a hole in the wall, the world was different. I looked up at the cloudy afternoon sky, and I could see the constellation of the Hunter, glistening above the clouds, brighter than the sunlight. I held my hand up to shield my eyes but it didn't help; the light burned through my skin, hurting my eyes.

I was seven. Quite young, far younger than any Chosen should be. I spent my whole life knowing exactly who I was and what I was going to do with my life. I was free from the usual uncertainties that chained the other children my age. I never had to ask the question "now what?" My destiny had been laid upon me, and I had no choice but to follow.

A Destiny to fulfill and the strength to fulfill it. There is no separation between the two. "As Chosen, we have power, but we have duties also; and such duties thereby validate our power." That was what Rasina reminded me. I could affect the world around me! Not just for myself, but for others! Consequences that would reverberate outward in ways I had never imagined! My intent — given shape and form by muscles and bone — created the world anew with every act! Every choice I made, if indeed I had a choice, set the chain of causality in motion! An effect, and me the cause!

Once I had grasped this, the rest was easy. I was not amazed to remember how *powerful* the Chosen were, how incredible were the feats I could perform. That was simply a matter of scale. From everyone to whom much has been given, much will be required; and from the one to whom much has been entrusted, even more will be demanded. From each, according to their ability. I had great power, and with that came great responsibility.

This is how she taught me: Rasina didn't talk to me of the Chosen, or the Hunter, or the Stars above that set us on our destined paths. She didn't even mention Alexander. Instead, she spoke of consequences, of duty, and of dreams.

Dreams...

When she spoke of dreams, I remembered why I ran from civilization, from humanity, from everything I was. I remembered my final Hunt. I cried when I remembered.

She tried to soothe me with platitudes and delusions. She spoke of choice — I had a choice, she said. We all had a choice, to do what is right or not.

She lied to me! Such lies! As if "ought" could be a choice. As if I could *decide* to do something other than what was obliged. I had no choice. If all evil requires is for good people to do nothing, then the truest evil is inaction. If Good cannot exist without choice, than to not choose is a greater evil than the evil itself.

I wailed in anguish at her words. I fled her room, tears flying behind me through my soggy hair. It was frightening, the power I held, the power to act. To enforce my will on the world. The avalanche was horrifying when it was carrying me along, how much more terrifying to know I could steer it as I wished?

I fled, I hid, I cried and wailed and beat my paws against the ground, but it changed nothing. Passions change nothing. They never did. It

was the last time I ran from her.

Maybe it doesn't matter why. In the end, I found my answer. I won't tell you what it is because it isn't important. I will not bore you with details. There are countless reasons and explanations for what happened next.

You want a reason? My reasons do not matter. It is always better to do the right thing, even if for the wrong reasons.

At least, it's better for everyone else.

4

Who am I?

Who are you?

Are they different questions? Or *ubuntu*?

I was new born without a family, without a country, without a society with which to define myself. Sans heroes and villains, sans good and evil save my own natural proclivities, what was there to teach me how to be?

I had nothing but myself, the echoing voices of my own insecurities, hazarded guesses and awkward failures were my only teachers.

Did I ever fail, in truth? Perhaps not.

When you stand so tall, you have no one to look up to save the stars twinkling above.

They were so distant, so cold, I craved their praise and love and in the end found only impassioned disinterest.

No, that came later. First, when my passions were spent, after wailing and crying and beating the ground, I returned to my favorite spot in the forest; the tallest tree that towered over all others at the edge of the large pond. Perched at its apex I could hear the wind blow before the trees began to sway. I could lose myself in the gentle air, the only shadows cast by soft clouds that drifted in front of the bright moon.

My self fully restored, my memories clear and refreshed, I devoted myself to reclaiming the only ultimate pursuit of all humanity: peace.

I had tried meditating on the ground before. Once. When I first arrived in the forest, twenty years ago. I gave it up in less than an hour. My senses had never felt so alive; I could feel the footfalls of every mouse and the snapping twigs and falling acorns sent shivers up and down my spine. Everything had become so loud, so strong.

At the top of the tallest tree, I could lose myself. I could lose myself. I could return to the happy — if I was happy — beast man of the forest. I could pull the universe in through my nose, and exhale my conscious thought out of my mouth.

After a while it began to rain, the drops of water anointing me like holy oil. The world was seeping in at the edges, pushing inwards to fill the void where once there had been peace and quiet. The drops rippled the mirrored pond filled with stars; a hole through the earth and out the other side. I inhaled the rich forest air and jumped as high as I could. I was held like a child by the wind before the sharp cold rush of water closed over me.

The lake was a universe apart from the world above. Sound travels differently in water, and the rush of wind and swaying trees was replaced by currents and darting fish. I listened to the ebb and flow, let the current hold me aloft while the winds caused tiny waves in the water to tickle my cheek. Small fish flew between my legs, the wake from their tails tickling the hairs on my shin. I could feel the dirt gently let go of my skin and float away, becoming tiny dots of earth in the watery sky.

In a rage, I resurfaced, water pouring down my long black hair that covered my face like damp seaweed. All around me, I saw machines. Beasts of instinct and reaction. I hated them, my forest kin; why should they be free of the doubt and discontent that reason brings? Fish did not move out of passion. Insects did not have a will to enact. Birds did not think like I did, nor plan, nor dream...

Dreams...

I was one of the Chosen. An avatar of the Stars and their divine will. I had a meaning, a purpose, and a destiny they had laid upon me.

It was a destiny I had fulfilled twenty years ago. on the rooftop, with a rifle in my hand. I pulled the trigger, I felt the kick, and the last Viper was wiped from the planet. That was it; the end of my purpose on this earth. Some say of the Chosen that as long as you live, the Stars have a destiny for you, but I felt it. I can still feel the rifle kick against my shoulder. I was finished. And for twenty years, therefore, I had slept dreamless sleep.

That night, the night after I left Rasina in her hotel room, I dreamed. *I* dreamed. I screamed that night. I didn't wake screaming, but I screamed when I knew what had happened. Do you blame me for screaming? Can you judge me for it?

What was the dream? I don't remember. It doesn't matter. What matters is I needed an answer. To what question? The only question worth asking: *Why?* Hot on the heels of my rebirth — my thinking, therefore my being — came the necessary rejoinder: *Cogito, ergo sum, at quare?* Why did I live? Why do I think? What purpose does my existence demand? Why, above all things, *am I?*

In my newborn panic, I did not embrace the obvious truth, that there was no answer beyond what I already knew. Instead, I fabricated a new answer out of whole cloth; a truth that I could cling to like a blanket, and clothe myself in to hide my shameful nakedness from the universe. A truth that claimed there *was* an answer.

I had to follow Rasina, because somewhere there existed a reason for me to do so; I simply did not know it yet. I was not an animal. I had purpose. Function.

I *had* to follow Rasina so I could find what it was.

My peace had left me, my forest was now antagonist to my desires. I had to leave the forest and travel with Rasina to the City. I had to

learn why I was.

We drove. I hate driving. Always have, still do. I used to run across whole countries just to enjoy the wind on my face and hear the foxes, bears, and elk dive out of my way. Cars let you move while sitting still. This is the way of humanity: to decouple the body from the act. Separation. Division. Don't make me separate you two! In a car, it wasn't my body's responsibility to move, I was not a part of the deal: The car took over, and I simply sat. It wasn't movement, it was motion.

As we moved across the country, she told me that she wanted me to be a Hero. She told me of the man she wanted me to kill.

"Let me tell you a story," she said. "Let me tell you a story of Alexander Costas. He is a powerful man. An evil man. A dictator."

There are always dictators. Always tyrants and criminals and terrorists. Why should I kill this one?

"There is no should about it. In the ways of Good and Evil, there is never any should. There is only what is, and what is to be done about it. There are people hurting, and you can help. All it takes for evil to succeed is for good men and women to do nothing. You have a power, a strength, that no one else does, and you need to take responsibility for it."

"And what is *your* responsibility in this?" I asked through lips of clay.

"I helped him do it," she blushed, though her gaze was steady. "At the time I thought I was saving the world, but after seeing what he has done I need to correct my mistakes. You are Chosen of the Hunter, Roman. Bringer of Endings. You have a duty to stop him. Save the helpless. Protect the weak. He is a killer, an abuser. He is Chosen of the Tower, and he doesn't dream."

In all the years before I had left for the forest, I had never heard of another Chosen who did not dream. It terrified me no less that it was not myself; a Chosen guided not by the nighttime whispers of the Stars, but by their own will. Mortal will, with our blood rushing in our bodies so loudly that I can't even hear myself think. With chemicals and hormones and endorphins that change how I think, how I feel, how I act.

A monkey with a machine gun. Monkeys with flamethrowers. With cars. With bombs. With words. There is nothing more dangerous.

"I know it for a fact. He told me. He stopped dreaming years ago, but he didn't do what you did; he didn't leave. He built a whole city by himself; he called it the United Republic Urban Center. Then he kept going! URUC is currently the fifth most powerful economy in the world. A city! He has his own army! He's practically ruling the country now, in practice if not in name. He is cruel, and he is vicious, and he is hurting people."

Humanity is cruel, is vicious, and hurts itself. I would have told her, but she wasn't finished.

"He makes you worse; he finds things you wish weren't true. Things you've fought against, things that are primal and disgusting, and he brings them out so you can't hide anymore. Not to control you, just to show you what the world is really like and who you really are..." her voice trailed off.

"Why me?" another question I would repeat, though never out loud. "Why not someone else?"

"There aren't many of us left," She whispered. "There are fewer of us alive now than ever before. Our guess is no more than one percent of humanity are Chosen. Alexander has already killed seven who tried to stop him; we need someone whose *purpose* is ending. We need a Hunter, and you're the oldest and most powerful Hunter

alive."

"How did it happen?" I asked. Words were coming more easily to me, now, like pulling water from a well. "How did he gain so much power?"

She explained, but I won't repeat it. It's not important.

I had the same questions you probably have: how could Alexander create URUC without opposition from the government? Was there no resistance? How did he feed everyone? Where did his mandate come from? Was there a military coup? You will wonder these things, because this world will rhyme with yours. You will hear echoes. Ripples. Tiny flashes of familiarity.

You must remember this is not your world. It cannot be. You may hear echoes of your world in mine, but this is my world: a world of Chosen and Unchosen. Of Stars and Destiny, of Great Men and Women.

My world is only as real as the one in your head. Letters are the atoms that craft literary molecules pieced together in strands of DNA and MLA. They divide and organize and propagate until we reach the end. What energy drives this process? Potential energy. The energy of what might become.

In my world, history is simply the biographies of the Chosen; the great men and women who shaped the world into what it is today. The Chosen of the Tower, the Hunter, the Eye, the Wolf, the Viper, names we recognize as bearers of divine purpose: Napoleon, Queen Elizabeth, Shakespeare, Cleopatra, Lou Tze, Muhammad, Martin Luther, Mother Teresa...Names that mean something to each of the seven billion humans that occupy the Earth. People who have transcended existence as simple mortals to become symbols in their own right. Symbols of freedom, of justice, of war and death, of love and life — of the constellations that glimmer in the night sky.

They are Heroes.

We love Heroes. They are symbols to idolize, standards to aspire to, avatars to fetishize. Baked into our souls is the need to strive for ideals, to emulate people of great strength, wisdom, and ability. To do The Right Thing.

Now, I had the chance to be a Hero again; to reach out with my hand and *affect* the world. To *do* good, rather than simply survive.

It was enticing.

Alexander was a Hero at first. In every culture the end of the world is violent. Wars of unearthly creatures, flame from the heavens as the stars gave up their struggle to remain in the sky, and the very earth weeping as cataclysm tears across the fragile flesh of the world. Even the secular find their hellfire in bombs that cover the world in blood shed in a global holocaust. I understand why.

*Some say the world will end in fire,
Some say in ice.*

The truth is, when the Apocalypse comes, when Dystopia arrives, when Tyranny prevails, it will be normal. We will wake up one morning and see the world with fresh eyes for the first time in years. With dawning horror we will see the barren and arid wasteland and realize the apocalypse had not struck like an earthquake, but grew like mold across the planet over centuries, and no one cared enough to notice.

Yes, I could tell you about the wars and polls and elections. I could explain how the winners in the end were the same winners as always; the ones standing on others' shoulders. Actions that were perfectly reasonable at the time, now morally repugnant in hindsight. How the borders of Nations trapped humanity, but not wealth or power. How piece by piece the moral failings, the inept failures, the *consequences*

created the world anew. A chain of cause and effect. One thing led to another. It started from a seed. Everything else followed.

But none of that matters to the point. The point is this: The people begged Alexander to save them. He offered solutions they took as orders, and support they thought was protection. They were all so frightened.

Before anyone knew it, they were calling him mayor. Then leader. Now tyrant.

5

I will not describe URUC to you. You know what tyranny looks like. Is it true? It is true enough.

I was beginning to understand how much a blessing and a curse it is for humans to seek patterns. Familiarity in repetition. Traditions. Social rituals and shibboleths. Smiles in joy and tears in sorrow. I know now what to expect from tyranny. It is always the same. We *need* it to be the same; predictably familiar and casually violent. And always *always* in someone else's country.

Law and order was everywhere, with rifles, helmets, and flag-plates on their shoulders. Commands shouted with consummate skill, bringing rifle-butts and batons down on the many with practiced ease. Chemicals drove their actions; I could see it in their eyes and smell it on their breath. nicotine, caffeine, dopamine, norepinephrine, endorphins, and others I could not name. I saw some of them taking their pills.

Or was none of it real? Maybe it was all in people's heads, each citizen with their own private tyrant beating their skulls and marching lockstep with every other tyrant in the street. Maybe the tyranny of URUC looked more like your hometown than you think.

I hate URUC. Hated URUC. Just another mockery. In place of the trees, Alexander had erected tall buildings and scaffolds — a forest of steel and straight lines. With the power of tools and imagination, humanity shapes the world to its will. They scorn the wind, and build fans and air-conditioning. They spite the seasons and build refrigerators and heaters. Wood and earth become concrete and iron. Stray wrappers and plastic bags substitute for broken twigs and

change their world. They were simply not strong enough.

Did they suffer? More importantly, they were deceived. Those who embraced their chains believed their lot was the natural order of things, and cut themselves off from hope lest they be hurt again. Those who did not were reminded of the benefits of conformity, with baton and electricity. This was not life, it was motion.

There was no fear in their eyes. No fight, either. The two most basic of human instincts. They did not fight, there was no use. It's just how things were. They did not flee, where could they flee too? It was the same everywhere, wasn't it?

Don't think ill of them; the cruelty was the chains. We all have our illusions.

I knew, as I knew the sun would rise in the morning, that the people needed a Hero. Someone to break the chains. Salvation. Liberation. Seeing the people in their impoverished state, I felt a kinship I had never felt before. Their pain became mine. Their fate as important to me as my own. I was strong. I was able. I had the choice that they did not; the choice to act, to shape the *is* to conform to the *ought*.

I spent my first week struggling to slip through the cracks of the city. It was harder than I expected; the machine was tight as a drum, full of watchful eyes, security cameras, and fellow citizens. Curfew was strictly upheld. Being suspicious was a jailable offense. Judges, juries, and executioners walked down the street, surrounded by witnesses, victims, and bystanders.

But I was Chosen of the Hunter. I could do what no others could do. I darted from alleyway to rooftop, from cover to shadow, slipping between security cameras and watchful soldiers. I was a ghost. An absent human. A thousand eyes looked past me while I studied my prey.

In the middle of URUC was the Tower. When I asked Alexander about it later, after we became friends, he said it was expected of him. Who would listen to a King without a crown, a Lord without a castle? If he didn't have the Tower, no one would believe he was ruler, and that was where his true power came from. I didn't believe him at first.

It was in the Tower that every decision was made. Every policy, every law, every detail in society was crafted to exacting specification inside its walls. The news station operated out of its lower floors, and full battalions marched in and out of its steel gates every day.

The first time I saw Alexander, I saw his face twenty feet tall on the side of a two-story building, and I knew I would kill him.

I had never seen the man before, but there was no mistaking him. The mural had been painted with an eye for romance. His hair was a rich curly brown, thick and lively. His eyes were a matching hue and his skin a creamy bronze. His smile was deep and sincere, with a matching twinkle in his eye. His neck was thick and strong, and his jaw soft and straight. This was a man of great strength and character. Of course he was beautiful. It was propaganda. Every inch a lie, to convince the many that their leader had no failings, made no mistakes.

Good things require no justification. Bad things require excuses and explanations. This was URUC's: everything that was, had to be. If you are suffering, it is because a wiser and greater person than you has deemed it necessary. It is a comfort to believe this. It allows dictators to commit unimaginable horrors.

He really was a beautiful man.

"Our Father," the mural said. "Our Spirit. Our Shepherd."

I stared at his picture, and I knew who he was: one of the elite drunk on his own fortune, shaping the world around him to his will with reckless abandon. A monster who had given his people answers where there should have been questions. A master who had force fed his servants meals of his choosing, to shape and nourish a particular breed of livestock.

It was not his power that corrupted him. I held the same power as he — the divine right of the stars — and was I corrupt therefore?

Absurd!

Power does not corrupt. It condenses. It is inconsequence that corrupts.

Alexander had become untouchable. The consequences of his actions had become distant. He had forgotten his ties to those around him, his responsibility to those dependent on his sober rule, his careful guidance. When there are no consequences for your actions, why not act? What matters how you act, when your actions do not matter? This is how boundaries melt away.

The mural of Alexander told me everything, as I stared into his perfect eyes underlined with a prayer, no, not even a prayer, an *adulation*. Alexander was their Shepherd; it was from he whence Law and Order came. He would control others and bend them to his will, as he had bent the natural world into steel and straight lines. He was too powerful to be touched, too heralded to be harmed.

He hired others to take the bullets, who were just following orders with their fingers on the triggers. Why did they serve? What was in it for them? Perhaps a taste of the inconsequence he enjoyed. Bank managers never lose their jobs when the markets crash. CEO's are never jailed when companies break the law. Twenty die due to the actions of a madman, and he is punished. Thousands die over decades because of industrial poisons, and the company pays a fine.

The poor people...if only they had been kings, the world would have treated them differently. They eat a slice of bread to be given the strength to plow another field. They drink a glass of water to be given the energy to toss their child in the air. When they sleep under a thin roof they find the rest needed to keep their family alive another day.

Alas: Alexander was a king. I could see in his eyes that when *he* ate a slice of bread, he was given the strength to order a thousand fields plowed. When he drank a glass of water he found the energy to bring peace to a nation. When he slept under a thick roof he found the rest needed to keep ten thousand subjects alive another day.

URUC *had* to give him their bread. If they did not, thousands might have died. If they did not, *they* might have died. What good was their bread if it was flavored by the suffering of thousands?

He had crafted a vast factory of steel and blood. "Feed me your bread," he cried, "Shovel it into my gaping maw. I have fields to plow. I have soldiers to arm. I have quarterly earnings to reach and companies to buy. I will not be ungrateful. When I am done, I will give you the crusts of bread and drops of water I have left, and you may glory in being a cog in the great machine that I built. It is as it should be."

"Should." Pah!

Should is a difficult word. I "should" be good. I "ought" to behave properly. I "should" not kill. I "ought" to be kind.

What does that mean? Is "Should" simply a recommendation? A cautionary warning from one who can see further down the path than I? A reminder that I would be happier if I acted a certain way? "I should exercise." "We should go on vacation." Perhaps our principles are simply pragmatic measurements of the past.

Or perhaps it is a prediction. An assessment of probability. "If I light the fuse, the bomb should go off." "We should get results in an hour." "I should be ready in a few minutes." Maybe we know deep in our hearts that our advice and our expectations are meaningless in a world that cares little for our hopes and dreams. Maybe we know that we truly don't ever make choices when it comes to our principles. They are given to us by our parents, our teachers, our genetics, our world.

Perhaps it is an expectation. A reminder that the social contract we all live by requires behavior that we cast aside at our own peril. *Our* tribe does not hurt each other. *We* do not steal from each other. Our morality is little more than signaling our willingness for unity. If you want to be Good, then follow your Should.

What "should" I have done? I don't know. I know what I did.

As I stared into his eyes, I saw a monster of utility, and reflected in its image I knew who I was. I was his consequence. I was the avenging hero of URUC. I was the one who was able to act, and I would act for the betterment of as many people as I could.

Alexander had to die.

6

Dying is easy. It is something we all share, this propensity for passing. I know this more than anyone. Hunters make good doctors; we care for the hurt, and ease the pain. I never wanted to be a doctor.

I chose to end Alexander's life. This required little thought; I simply knew it was what would happen. This was easy for me, because I knew the truth about life and death, that everyone knows, but we lie, and tell ourselves we do not know; death is not important.

We give it importance, we fear it, worship it, herald it, and run from it with a passion that surpasses all others. Born in our DNA is the instinct for survival, the desire for cellular division. Proteins fold, cells divide, exchanges of acids and mitochondria through permeable membranes. A process as simple as breathing. We help our digestion with sharp teeth. Spit flecked at our lips. Mastication and swallowing while we look for mates to copulate with and silence the screaming genes in our souls. Resist! Exist! Persist!

Killing was not hard for me. I knew the truth of it, that there is no value to a life without purpose. There is no value to a life un-lived. Life has no intrinsic value. All I needed was to judge the value of the life; the purpose, the meaning, the effect a life has brought to the world, and measure it against whatever metric I chose. Pain created, succor given, pleasure brought, suffering inflicted, value, worth, meaning, goodness.

The world would be a better place without Alexander. I knew this. It was so easy. The people were suffering under Alexander's thumb. His actions made him a monster, and monsters may be killed

without concern; that is, after all, the definition of a monster. That is its purpose. What was the life of one tyrant compared to his subjects' hopeless lives? It was a very simple math problem.

Besides, was Alexander not, in some ways, my fault? If I had not left for the forest, I could have done something to arrest Alexander's ascent. No one else could have; his continued existence was testament to this fact. I could have stopped him if I had been there. If I had the opportunity.

It is the cruelest lie we tell ourselves; the only variable between a better world and the world as it is, is the right person in the right place at the right time doing the right thing for the right reason...and it could have been *me*.

The unchosen must dream of heroism. All the Chosen need is the opportunity. My conscience was clear.

I could kill Alexander with a knife, sneaking through his rooms during the night and plunging it through his ribs. I could plant explosives in the street and set them off as he rode past in his car, taking out his guard with automatic weapon fire. I could beat him to death with a pipe in the back alley of a general store after abducting him from his penthouse suite. I could poison his food in the supply trucks that bring food to his fortress.

I chose a sniper rifle atop a roof opposite the Tower. Why? I don't know. It was how I killed the last Viper.

It wouldn't have been possible for anyone else. The buildings surrounding the Tower were tall and carefully guarded. There were no good vantage points for a sniper to sit and wait safely. The cameras would take note, and within minutes the building would be locked down while army men and women searched every room with military focus and the mercy of munitions.

But I was not anyone else. Firing at a ground target from over two hundred feet in the air was not a problem for me, nor was getting there without being seen, nor was hiding. I was a Hunter, and I knew about blinds.

I pulled myself over the lip of the roof, sat down, assembled the high-powered sniper rifle, and waited.

Alexander would leave the Tower eventually. I would hear the sound of the opening gates. I would pop up from the ground, lean over the edge of the roof, and fire off a shot seconds after Alexander left his sanctuary. I would be a hero, not because of who I was, but because of what I had done. Then I could go back to the forest, and find peace again.

I closed my eyes. I breathed in through my nose and out through my mouth. I waited.

Wait with me.

When was the last time you noticed the sound of your own breathing?

...

Are you just now noticing it?

...

Sometimes, just asking a question can open your eyes.
Or ears, in this case.

Potential energy is the power possessed by an object because of its position or condition relative to other objects, rather than Kinetic energy, which is possessed because of its motion. It is the power of possibility. Of choice. It is the energy of *being*, rather than *doing*.

I waited for days. Weeks. My mind was adrift on the void of anticipation. I was so close, barely three hundred meters away. For the first time in twenty years, because of where I was, who I was, and what was about to happen, I had the potential to change the world. I had purpose.

Whenever the click of the opening gates reached my ears, I twisted my body over the edge of the roof, staring straight down into the distance below. Men and women, convoys entering and exiting...but still no Alexander.

Finally, weeks or maybe months after I started to wait, I saw him. There was a military escort. Even from this height I could still see tiny men and women spilling out from their metal tanks and forming into perfectly straight lines. It only took two heartbeats before I saw him.

The murals didn't do him justice. He was gigantic, with thick muscles rippling under his clothing as he moved. His hair shone, even from so far away. His suit was tailor fit and gave him a polished air of class and distinction. His movements were graceful and easy, belying his muscular frame.

He really was a beautiful man.

Potential energy; The potential for change. Potential for error. Potential for greatness, for good, for evil, for *change*.

With Alexander dead, the whole of URUC would shift. New leaders. New laws. The world would look different to all who had ever heard the name Alexander. The unending chain of cause and effect would suddenly shift. I was not simply killing a man, I was

killing a *future*.

My finger slipped into the trigger-guard, I took a deep breath, listened carefully, and I didn't pull the trigger.

Why? I do not know.

It had begun to rain.

Water is made from Hydrogen and Oxygen. A ratio of 2:1. Hydrogen is not wet. Oxygen is not wet. Place twice as much Hydrogen as Oxygen in a sealed room. Observe every atom, with the finest methods available. Study a single water molecule. Two Hydrogen, one Oxygen. See it in every detail. Every facet. Now describe the waves of the ocean, or the sound of rain.

Study a single human. Every thought, every bone, every piece of tissue and every instinct burned into the base of the skull. Every wrinkle on the brain opens its secrets to you. Now describe the ebb and flow of the economy. In 1932. In 2011. In 1795.

Study Morality. A single act of goodness. A gift of food. A fishing lesson. A shoulder to cry on. A saved life. A hug. A creed. A kiss. Measure each one on any scale you have at hand. Your personal scale that you always keep with you.

Now describe the kindness of a King. The morality of a nation. The goodness of a country. Are the people just numbers? Just atoms? Atoms do not have waves. They do not rain.

Morality is not a constant. It's mathematical. It's logarithmic. It changes with scope and situation. When we are atoms we know how to be good; we hug. We kiss. We save lives. We offer our shoulders. We are Good.

Until the ocean emerges. Then we subjugate ourselves to higher purposes. Greater meanings. We march. We chant. Mobs. Countries. Philosophies. Tribes. The ocean ebbs and flows. The molecules spin

and float. We cannot ebb. Society cannot spin. Can the ocean be good to the atoms? Can a king ever be good to the people? Seeing your subjects as people; would it be good, or would it cripple you?

The Ends justified the Means; I was fully righteous in my actions. The people of URUC deserved his death. But what of Alexander's ends? What of his means?

Why did I not pull the trigger? Alexander did not dream.

The soul-less certainty I saw in his citizenry was not theirs alone. Like me, he had no dreams; unlike me, he had kept moving. What that must do to a Chosen, to continue moving without guidance or wisdom. To fumble blindly through the mists, hoping to find some path forward.

In your madness, why, you might decide to make a path of your own, the dripping of water on a stone, furrowing a path through the blind fate of natural law.

Alexander was no monster, he was a lost child desperate for guidance. Perhaps he had not known he could rest, set down his burden for a time and hunt for the answers he thought he already knew.

Poor URUC! The wretched ward of a lost man! The symptom of his sickness, a mirror to his soul that laid bare the broken spirit that inhabited his beautiful body. A blemish on his perfect face. A scar across his bronzed skin. He was no tyrant out of intention. He had, in his torment, simply made a mistake.

A mistake that had ruined the lives of thousands and spread pain throughout the city, but a mistake none the less. We all make mistakes, only his reach was wider. His consequences greater. He was Chosen, and his missteps could crush mountains. Was he a monster therefore?

At the time, I thought not. I did not hate him. I pitied him. We cannot pity monsters, therefore, he was no monster. As I looked down at him, his perfect skin and shining smile, I realized how similar we were. How similar I wanted to be. He was as powerful as I was, and if I was truly the hero I imagined myself to be, then he deserved a chance.

Or maybe it was because in that moment, I was back on the rooftop twenty years ago. There I was again, staring down the sights at my quarry, ready to End It once and for all. Again. No more purpose. No more meaning. And I was terrified.

Maybe, maybe, maybe...

I don't remember lowering the gun. I don't remember dropping it or disassembling it. I don't remember climbing back down the building or slipping through a window to go down any stairwells. I don't remember what I thought as I walked to the gates with my hands raised. I don't remember what I felt, seeing Rasina standing next to him, her eyes a perfect mix of shock and dismay. I don't remember what I said, or why the handcuffs felt so reassuring when they were closed on my wrists.

I do remember thinking: *if...*

7

I walked with them through the tight hallways, flanked on all sides by well armed and armored servants. They didn't look at me, they didn't talk to me. I wasn't really a person to them; I was something more.

We moved up in the elevator to the two-hundredth floor, the very top of the Tower. The room itself was at least two stories tall and large enough to claim the whole floor. Wide glass windows and billowing curtains surrounded the room in an ancient byzantine style.

"Roman!" Alexander's rich tenor echoed in the room as he strode towards me. "Thank the Stars you're here!"

He was every bit the shining heroic form his propagandist portraits promised. He was on me in a moment, pushing the soldiers aside and shaking my manacled hand before I realized what had happened. I watched a look of parental concern bleed across his face as he lifted my hands in his.

"What is this?" he demanded, looking at the two soldiers.

"Handcuffs? What on earth were you thinking? Here," he gave a sharp pull. The handcuff chain snapped like a gunshot, a link spinning up into the air like a bullet. He caught it as it fell, and pushed the broken link into my palm, closing my fingers over it like a romantic giving his lover a token. "A souvenir."

The me that thought, that reasoned, thought: *Showmanship*. A display of force designed to intimidate, rather than ingratiate. *Why not unlock the cuffs?* He wanted me to wear them on my wrists, a reminder of my submission. He wanted me to feel trapped. I did.

What power was it that kept my heart beating fast, like a cornered rat? There was nothing hindering my will, save the man in front of me. I noted his gleaming muscles and polished skin. A fierce intelligence burned behind his eyes, framed by a firm chin and noble brow.

Perhaps it was knowing that, despite my supposed freedom, in comparing myself to Alexander I found myself wanting. I was ashamed of my grimy skin, my imperfect form. Could I have taken this giant of a man in single combat? At the time, I honestly didn't know. I learned later.

"I'm delighted to see you," Alexander said, sending a thrill down my spine. "I was afraid you had gotten lost! I've been so anxious to meet you, I haven't been able to think of much else these days. Ask anyone!" He laughed along with his guard's stoic faces before sincere concern flitted onto his face once more. To be the focus of such a paragon's attention was humbling, terrifying, and deeply improper. His attention *had* to be more suited for deep and lofty ideals, rather than my lowly self. "Have you eaten? Are you hungry?"

"You knew I was coming?" I foolishly blurted.

"Of course I did!" Alexander's laugh was full and bright. "Rasina is one of my closest aides. She told me she found you, and I insisted she bring you to me! And here you are."

"She wanted me to kill you," I told him.

"I had suspected as much," Alexander nodded, his smile no less charming. "We all make mistakes. I may disagree with her motives, but I cannot fault her results; here you are!"

"Will she be punished?" I asked, ashamed the question had not occurred to me until now.

"We cannot control what we want." Alexander shrugged. "It was not her fault. Her punishment will be her disappointment. We all make mistakes, even you and I! We may be Chosen, but we are only two-thirds divine!"

He had meant it as a joke, but the words stuck hard in my stomach. It was easy to forget that though the power of the Stars flowed through my veins, I was still not protected from pride, negligence, foolishness, or any number of mortal sins.

Alexander ushered me to his office. It was large enough for twenty people, and there was no less gilt on the walls and ceiling. "Please, sit. Do you mind if I ask what convinced you? Did Rasina convince you I was a tyrant, or were you bored? Why did you want to come? No, don't shake your head, of course you wanted to come. No one could have forced you. If you are here, it's because you *choose* to be here. Who could stop you if you wished to leave? My guards? Kill them! The locked doors? Break them down! There's nothing in this building that could hinder you."

"Not even you?" I asked. Modesty in one so perfect only made him more charming.

"Honestly," he smiled, "I don't know. I'd be fascinated to find out. Now as to my question. Why do you want to be here?"

In the forest, I had only ever wanted what I needed. Is there no difference between want and need? Did my divine soul guide me to URUC, or did my bestial heart guide me as my stomach guides me to food? Do we need only what we want and always want what we need? Which *I* brought me to URUC? I opened my mouth and shut it again, as shy as a child thrust out on the stage. "You are a tyrant. I have come to end your reign."

"Like a hero from old," Alexander clapped his hands. "Astonishing! You must have seen much of my works to have decided I am

deserving of death. Tell me what you've seen! All of my advisers are either too cowardly or too sycophantic to tell me what they see, and even then their truths are seen with eyes clouded. Tell me, what is this world I've created?"

There is a look in the eye when something is about to die. There is a part of the mind that does not quite believe that the end is near. In desperation, like a drowning soul grasping for a rope, the brain sorts through everything it has ever been given; sights, sounds, sensations — an entire life flashing before your eyes, as the brain panics and searches desperately for an escape. An answer. An answer it already knows.

This is not life, it is fear. It was this look I saw in the people of URUC. A people enslaved by the very system they give their blood to keep alive. I saw a leader cold and indifferent to their plight. I saw his agents corrupt with lack of consequences. I saw movement without life. Action without intent. A people bereft of their inherent worth and dignity.

My clumsy tongue struggled to translate the colors, sounds, and feelings in my head into language Alexander would understand. He laughed when I had finished. His grin was so charming. "You know, you are the first Chosen of the Hunter I've ever met? There are so few of you. Almost none, now. Fewer and fewer Chosen every generation; I've looked at the Stars. As for Hunters...I wouldn't be shocked if you were the last one alive."

I trembled then, aware that for all my confidence, I was trapped in Alexander's room, surrounded by guards. He must have seen my sudden fear, because he threw his arm around my shoulder and laughed. "Do not worry, you have nothing to fear from me. I only care about my beloved URUC. If you do not threaten it, you will come to no harm."

"I cannot fathom your reasoning," I admitted, my frustration building. "You purport to be devoted to URUC, yet allow it's people to suffer."

"A city is not its people, nor are a people a city. URUC is roads and industries and plants. It is veins and organs and a quiet mind that drives it all. An organic machine of law, order, and constancy."

"But the people of URUC suffer," I thought it a masterstroke, for what could his purpose be if not the only reasonable goal of all our struggles, an end to suffering?

"It is childish to assume that suffering and righteousness are one and the same. My rule is not founded on comfort or popularity, it is founded on being *correct*. If my laws seem restrictive, it is because you are used to committing moral crimes unchecked."

"Is it a moral crime to refuse enslavement to a tyrant? To crave the dignity of justice, equity, and compassion?"

"URUC will only survive if the people are united and devoted to its success. To reject the society which provides your job, your safety, your purpose — it is a theft from those who provide. These are subversives and enemies of the state, and are punished accordingly."

"But not appropriately," I held up my shackled wrists. "Guards with their stomachs full and their brains soaked in chemicals crush the spirit of the people under their boots. Is this justice, or merely a brutal peace?"

"Are police all that it takes to make a tyrant?" Alexander asked.

"You think I should enforce the law by pleading? Of course my police have their every need fulfilled. Those tasked with upholding the status quo *must* benefit from it. Do you think it would be better for my soldiers to suppress their fellow citizens *without* drugs in their system? Think how better it is that the atrocities committed by my police are committed by people not in their right mind. Think how

horrible it would be to know that any man, woman, or child, would *gladly* abuse their fellows for steak and wine instead of bread and water. Such knowledge is my burden, and mine alone."

"What of the burdens of those you rule over?" It was a feeble effort. I had thought I needed to reconnect him to the ground below, the people he had forgotten, the consequences of his actions. Only now did I fear that he had never forgotten.

"Do you know how I have survived while other leaders fall? I gave the many what they wanted; a dictatorship. Oh, they didn't know it at the time, but it's all they ever dreamed of: a strong leader to stand between them and an uncertain future. A leader who will ensure that tomorrow will be like today. What has their autonomy served them? Free will, self-determination...these words mean nothing when careless fortune and uncaring fate destroys cities, obliterates economies, jails innocents, kills children, all indiscriminate. I provide an ordered system. My people are informed of their duties and expectations. In return, they cheer my name and exult my rule."

"Under threat of death. They have no hope."

"Of course they do not; I took it from them. They gave me the honor of power over their lives, it was the least I could to repay them. Can you imagine if I had not? When they saw what it took to be righteous, to be correct, they might have turned from the path. When they saw the journey would be hard, they might have doubted. When there is a true and moral path, then doubt is but a distraction, and distractions temptations. Cortés burned his ships to keep his soldiers on the path forward."

"I saw your murals," I shot back. "Selected information to ensure your people cannot imagine another way of life."

"All information is propaganda, Roman, education most of all. We teach our children *what* to think before we teach them *how*. We

understand punishment and reward before we understand reason. We only learn the function behind the form once we are older and can appreciate what has been done for us. Oh, I could make life more bearable for my subjects, but then they would want more. They would ask for things that I could not give them, and what would they do when they see their hope drift away? Would they thank me for what little I gave them? Or would they tear me apart, spit on my corpse, and crow victory over the ruins? If I let them doubt, they might be seduced by the lie that a more comfortable life must therefore be more righteous. I have spared them this."

"They may bedeck their chains with roses, this does not make them garlands."

"Do they decorate to hide the chains?" Alexander laughed, "Or to extol them?"

"If they praise their chains, it is only because you taught them to do so. If they thought *freely*..."

"Free from what? Were I not their tyrant, they would be ruled by their passions, their fears, or their fortunes. All it takes for evil to succeed is for good men and women to do nothing. I am a good man, Roman, so I will not suffer evil to exist. Those who are righteous do not chafe under my rule."

"You cannot force people to be righteous."

"I am not forcing them to *be* righteous, I am forcing them to *act* with rectitude. Would you let your child eat only candy simply because it cries for it? No, I will not give them what they cry for. Freedom is a powerful thing, and no living mortal is responsible enough to wield it. Power cares not of the righteousness of its wielder, and the power of choice is no different. The only true vanguard against evil is constant vigilance. I am not unnecessarily cruel; every cruelty is a studied and practiced obligation."

I tore my hair, I beat my chest. I wailed and sighed and growled at his obstinacy. I couldn't find the right words to make him understand, to make him see the truth of it.

I *knew* the truth of it. I had lived in the forest for twenty years, fought my way back to civilization, and in my becoming had learned more than I had ever thought possible. I had lived, I had seen, and I had known. If he had only seen what I had seen, heard what I have heard, he would have understood what I understood. If he knew what I knew, he would have agreed with me.

I needed to show him. I needed to *explain*.

But I didn't have the words, else he would have smiled and nodded. We were both Chosen. We both did not dream. We were the same. We *must* have thought the same.

I couldn't have bared the thought that he might have seen what I had seen, and not thought as I had thought.

Maybe we didn't think the same. Maybe we could never have seen the same things. Whatever caused this human tragedy between us, it is too late now. I thought I could convince him. He thought he could convince me. Maybe we did. It doesn't matter.

...

It does matter. I believed him. I trusted him. Stars help me, I *tried* to listen to him. I wanted him to be right *so badly*.

But in the end, something held me back.

I have yet to decide if this was a personal failing or my only salvation.

In the end, all I could gasp out: "There must be another way."

He looked at me like I had slapped him in the face. He stood up from his chair and walked past me to the door, waving his hand in a

calm beckoning motion. "Please come with me. I need to show you something."

It never occurred to me to disobey.

8

The elevator doors opened on the rooftop of the Tower. The sound of rushing wind caught me by surprise. Here, atop the tallest building in URUC, I had expected walls. A ceiling. Not the horizon. Not the sky. I had not expected to hear the wind in URUC, as I had in my forest atop the tallest tree.

"I come up here to think. I find the wind helps clear my thoughts." Alexander took a deep breath through the nose, and out through the mouth. For what might have been hours, we stared out over the skyline, taking in the beautiful and horrible shape of URUC.

How different URUC looked from above! Gone were the wretched many and the privileged few. The cracks in the pavement were too distant to be seen. Even the buildings lost their definition. All I could see of URUC was the Idea. The Purpose. The Platonic Form from which the walls and floors were but shadows. URUC was not a city, it was a practiced and crafted *ideal*.

When he spoke again, I was not ready.

"Were you afraid of killing, when you were first Chosen by the Hunter? I imagine not. How could a Chosen be afraid of itself? Why, as a Hunter, if you were afraid of killing, you couldn't take part in the divine destiny the Stars had bestowed you. I am afraid of many things, but I was never afraid of being a tyrant. If this is tyranny, it comes to me as naturally as breathing. That should tell you something."

It did. It still does, though I do not think it tells me what it told Alexander.

"I rule URUC," he continued, "Any great responsibility demands great power. I found myself in control of an entire country; could I let myself be found wanting in ability or strength? No. I had the ability to rule, so I *had* to rule. More so I had to rule *well*. You know as well as I do, Roman, that pride, self-love, is no sin. To *truly* love oneself is to strive for improvement. To become fitter, stronger, wiser, and virtuous. No, it is sloth, *laziness* that is the cause of all evil in the world. It is all that is required for evil to thrive. I could not be found wanting."

Here, he turned to me and smiled. "Humanity has tried countless systems to ascertain the ideal ruler: advanced education, great wealth, those best-born, those who own land, even those who are beloved by a majority...but these are arbitrary metrics, mere stumbling in the darkness. The only morally acceptable ruler is made from purest meritocracy. I rule because I am the best to do so."

"But who chooses who is best?" I asked.

"One does not *choose* who is best, one simply *is* best."

"How?" I demanded. "There must be a metric of some kind. Who defines what is best? Who decides how to measure your results?"

"Results!" Alexander scoffed, "Ends do not justify the means, the means justify the ends."

"Pithy," I noted his philosophic antimetabole, "but empty."

"It is not empty," he raised a finger. "You have killed many Vipers in your life. Was this morally wrong?"

"Never."

"But you would never slay an innocent. Killing is not a moral evil; at best it is *sometimes* wrong. Is it circumstance then, that dictates morality? Your fortune or fate that decides whether you are good or

evil? Could we dare call a monster a saint because they intend evil but failed? Ends *cannot* justify means, else morality is no more stable than the winds of fortune. No, the only true Good is that which can be called good *without exception*."

"And what is that?" I was like a child at lessons.

"Why," Alexander swept his arms wide, "Destiny, Roman! Purpose! Meaning! Consequence! A devotion to a higher cause! A moral purpose! A *good will*! The duties and responsibilities bestowed upon us. When you act, act not because of intent, but out of duty. You are not a means, but an end in and of yourself."

And the suffering his actions caused? Alexander answered thusly:

"All political and societal systems are designed to abuse someone. It is only a dictator, one who holds more power than the system, who can rule justly, who can bestow mercy and judgment with a steady hand. It is the only truly moral system of government. A perfect despotism, with a perfect despot."

"And that's you? You are perfect?" I was fully prepared to believe him.

"Not me. Not yet." In his admission, Alexander looked more distraught than ever I thought possible of such a man. Then his eyes were clear. "But the only greater evil than an imperfect tyranny is a more imperfect one. If not me, then who? Who knows more about what is good than I? I have built a panopticon; I see everything that happens in my beloved URUC, and I learn. You say I have a responsibility to my people. I have a greater responsibility than them. I must improve! I toil daily at it, like a sculptor at his masterpiece. Every failure is a loose brick, a cracked wall. I patch, I heal, and sometimes I destroy, but only to rebuild stronger every time. I will not rest until I have achieved the pinnacle of my duty; my city approaches perfection with every passing day."

"Perfection at what?"

"At being a city, of course."

"But perfect for whom? How? What will this perfection have wrought?"

He looked at me with a mixture of confusion and pity in his eyes. He smiled with paternal care. "Perfection *is*."

Before I could reply, he struck me on the face.

The pain was unbearable; not the pain of his fist, which was blinding, but the pain of being struck by *him*. Had I offended him in some way? Was he rejecting me, the way I had tried to reject Rasina in the forest?

I staggered away from him as he advanced. "Why?" It was the only question worth answering, and the only one to which I never received an answer.

"Do not ask. The Chosen do not have the burden of asking why. 'Why' is a question for the weak. Ask rather, 'why not?'. "

"I do not want to kill you." I didn't. I still wanted to be his fellow, his friend, I wanted us to be alike. I wanted him to join me, or me to join him, so we could be us, together. I approached him with outstretched hands, eager to find some camaraderie, some fellowship in the only other dreamless chosen in my world.

He must have felt the same, because he smiled. "Nor I you." His hands reached out to mine.

When we met, he gripped me with huge hands, stronger than steel. A blow from his knee drove into my stomach, and he wrenched me away, sending me to the ground.

I blinked the spinning world back into place, only to stare into the eyes of the Tower. A purpose in his eyes burned so brightly and so

clear that now I feel pity. To be driven by such a will, to be so focused in thought, how could he not be mad?

"Everything else follows," he grinned. "Well, my friend, I can't pretend that this isn't going to be fun for me, because it will. I've never fought a Hunter before."

Like lightning, his foot struck me in the chest. Stars burst in my vision as I fell head first to the ground, coughing. I opened my eyes in time to see the dusky red sky before another kick to my back sent me spinning across the roof.

"Do you know how I built this city?" Alexander shouted over the wind. "I crushed whomever stood against me! Everyone who demanded I slow down, everyone who said I wasn't doing it 'the right way,' that I was 'rocking the boat,' everyone who stood in my way, I proved to them who was best! The fittest rule!" Alexander broke into a run. "They *should* rule! Who else could rule effectively? Who could rule better than me?"

I didn't want to kill him, but my blood was pounding through my brain.

I didn't want to hurt him, but my heart was pumping in my chest.

I didn't want to fight him, but the chemicals in my brain were churning away like a factory, sending smoke through my thoughts and turning me to barbarism.

I could explain. I could reason. I could excuse. But those were the things that came after, when we have time to breathe. So we lie to ourselves, and say there is purpose. We make excuses and construct reasons. Everything else follows.

I opened my arms to Alexander once more and howled my blood-lust to the wind.

9

There are two of me.

No, that's a lie. There is only one of me, but I don't know which one is which.

There is the me that decides. The me that thinks. The me that analyzes, inspects, chooses, and excuses. The me that notices the sound of my breathing. The me that doubts.

There is also the me that does *not* decide. The me that acts. That laughs without deciding. That pulls away from burning flames. That seeks pleasure. That runs from pain. That hungers.

I wonder, sometimes, which is me? The action or the intent? One of them is me, the other is not. They cannot both be me, or else most my life is fighting against myself.

I did not want to fight Alexander, yet I fought Alexander. I wanted to flee from Rasina, yet I remained with Rasina. I never decide to be hungry, yet I hunger.

If I am my thoughts, if *cogito, ergo sum*, then whence come the thoughtless actions? Reflex and instinct? Who is laughing when I do not decide to laugh?

If I am my actions, if *facio, ergo sum*, then what are my thoughts? What is the consciousness that provides manufactured explanations and excuses of my true self's behavior?

And how can *I*, whichever *I* I am, act well?

...

Should I have killed him? *Could* I have killed him? Even now, looking back at my life as I die, I wonder which *I* surrendered. Which one of me fell onto my knees and said the words that changed everything.

"I submit."

Our fight had lasted for hours. Days, perhaps. Maybe seconds. Only now do I realize we were not fighting each other; Alexander, Chosen of the Tower, builder of civilization, seeking to destroy. Me, Chosen of the Hunter, bringer of endings, trying to keep him alive.

I did not decide to surrender, not on the rooftop. But what animal reflex is speech? What instinct drives kneeling when death is at your back?

Who surrendered?

Maybe it was simply what happened.

Was it right to surrender? Good? Maybe an act can only be good if it is decided upon. Maybe the I-that-thinks is the only I that can be good. Maybe nothing is either good or bad but thinking makes it so.

Maybe, maybe, maybe...

I was so tired of maybe! Tired of doubt and uncertainty! All fear does is restrain me, gripping my wrists and throat like a leash! Like a chain! I had the power of the Stars at my command. I was destined to shape the world. Doubt is nothing but self-denial, and self-denial for a Chosen is the denial of divine will!

When we are awake, we see the world how it is. Light bends as it reflects off of matter, ricocheting from stone and wood until it filters through the lens in our eyes. The light strikes the rods and cones, and the light becomes electricity, flashing through the optic nerve to the brain. There, in the visual center of the brain, as far away from the eyes as it could possibly be, the electrical impulses are

translated. Changed. Altered until the brain understands; interprets it like a prophet receiving a portent from the Stars. We see the table, the water, the mother, the leaf.

But these are not real leaves, real tables, real mothers. They are impulses of energy. Shadows projected on the wall of our skulls.

This brain, which has lived its life in complete darkness, which has never heard nor seen a single thing, is bombarded with an illusion of the world outside its corpus cage. Its every waking moment is filled with shadows, and then we beg these three pounds of fat to tell us what to do. We demand it have all the answers when we know the answers already, and we confuse the poor thing so terribly.

When we sleep, the brain tells us what *it* sees. What *it* hears, in our hollow bone skulls, with no light, with no sound, with no voice. A mix of sorrows, fears, and unbearable hopes. Dreams. Nightmares.

For those who are Chosen, the Stars themselves whisper to our caged gray-matter, breathing messages and guidance into our sleeping mind. It is through dreams that the Constellations guide the Chosen. These dreams guide us and teach us who we are, and who we will be.

I had not dreamed in years. Nor had Alexander, yet there he stood, confidence personified, his every action as sure as though it had been ordained by the Stars themselves.

I was so tired.

Maybe, maybe, maybe...

When Alexander and I fought on the rooftop, I realized where his true beauty lay. Not in his corporal form, though it shone as if chiseled from ancient marble; but in his certainty, his confidence, his glorious knowledge that he was destined to become more than he was. Alexander's future held no apex. There was no ultimate goal

that he sought, no ends to strive for. He would never struggle with himself to pull the trigger for one final time, no, not Alexander.

Nothing for Alexander but a constant and unending evolution towards something greater.

God, how I envied him.

No more of maybe! When I act, act only according to that by which I can will to become a universal law! No doubts of moral rectitude, no exceptions, no excuses. A lie need not even harm a single soul in its telling, for its telling harms the very concept of Truth!

Truth. Fact. Reality. Predictability. Patterns. Order. Safety. Good.

Sacrificing freedom for safety forfeits your right to either. Sacrificing someone else's safety for your own freedom likewise forfeits your right to either. Maybe we deserve neither. Maybe neither are good things to have. Maybe there is no such thing as deserve.

"I submit," I repeated. "I cannot defeat you."

I remember so clearly the movement of the wind. It was the only movement on the top of Alexander's tower. It pushed against my cheek, my nose, covering my eyes with my long hair as they looked at my partner. He looked at me then, his eyes filled with shock, pain, confusion...he pushed himself up from the metal roof, breathing heavily from the unfamiliar exertion. He looked the way I imagine *I* looked when Rasina introduced herself to me again, after twenty years in the forest.

He didn't say anything, this paragon of form and function. We simply stared at each other. Dusk was crawling over the skyline, reds and purples slowly creeping across the clouds as the giant city below us began to glow with headlights and street lamps. Neon signs and spotlights struggled to outshine the setting sun, but atop his tower there was no contest.

Finally, he stood up and walked to the edge of the roof, staring down over the massive city below. I could still hear his breathing, even over the loud wind, labored but steady. He leaned back and sat on the edge of the roof with a loud thump, his legs dangling towards the ground below.

"I am very tired, Roman," he said, looking up into the sky. "I am old, and tired. I haven't dreamed in so long. I kept following the path I was on when the Tower stopped speaking to me, and I was certain I would be stopped if I went too far...but I kept going further..." He stopped to wipe his eyes with the back of his hand. "I looked for reasons, found excuses for why what I was doing was good." His eyes flickered. "You were going to be my salvation."

He clasped his hands around his ankles. It was a childish pose, made bizarre by his thick rosy muscles and dark cuts and bruises. "Look around and what do you see? Hundreds of skyscrapers. Towers of steel and concrete, and I am as strong and sturdy as any of them. Each building holds men and women making tools, laws, medicines, books; the foundations of any civilization. I created all of this."

"The Unchosen helped."

"Guided by me," he waved a hand, brushing the idea away. "If my hand holds the hammer, I drove the nail. It was my will that pushed the Unchosen to create all of this. If I had not been here, none of this would exist. I built it as sure as if I welded the steel together myself. It is good that I did this. It must be good. If it was not good, I could not have done it. And yet..."

From somewhere in the distance, a siren drifted up through the smoke to our ears. His head sagged.

"Roman, I have such doubts."

I looked out again over the city. I could feel the wind start to shift. "Perhaps we should talk."

"Not just yet?" he asked. In a flash, his face had gone from morose acceptance to a youthful hope. "I would like to sit here for a moment longer."

I remember trying to smile.

"Then I will sit here with you."

Part 2

In the forest, there is a river. It only ever runs in one direction.

Beyond the forest, there is a road. It runs in two directions.

Nature created the river, humans created the road. Are we fooling ourselves, to think we can travel back as well as forward?

The river rushes onward. There is no going back. What's done is done.

...

There is so much that happened next.

Part two of three. One third of the way to my death. Yes, sorry, spoilers; I die at the end of the book, after pathos and catharsis and other such frivolities. It's important that I die. That's how the story ends.

Except it isn't how the story ends. The story never ends with a death. Funerals. Survivors. Family. Friends. Sympathy cards. Mortuaries. Sometimes the police. Death brings echos and ripples that weave throughout the future for years.

When this story was first told, it was told in twelve parts. I died in the seventh. There is so much more that happens after I die.

It's not important. No, It's very important. That's why I can't tell you.

If I told you the end, you might stop reading. Spoilers. If you know the ending, if you flip to the end of the book, then why continue? Why go on, if you know how it's going to end?

Because it's this or nothing?

You could stop reading anyway. You could put this book down right now. I promise, you will not miss some mind-changing discovery, unless you would give yourself one.

Do you want my permission? I give it freely. You may have a revelation. A world-altering epiphany. A sudden discovering that reveals the answers you've always known. Embrace it, and become the person you could have always been.

If you have one, please don't think it was me who gave it to you. Who am I to do that? Words on a page. Ink on dead trees. Stagnant and static, a rock in the river that serves only to resist the water that flows around it.

Should I be telling you more about myself? About who I am and why I did the things I did? Should I be trying to explain myself, so that you can understand? So you can empathize? This story is not about me. Nor is it about Alexander, not really. It is not about characters. It's not about actions. It's not about worlds or events. It's barely about ideas.

So why tell the story at all?

I envy you. How easy it must be for you to die. I'm dying now, and it is so very hard.

All the world's a cave, and all the men and women merely shadows.

I've hunted for so long, the sunlight has blinded me. I can't find my way back through the cave. There is no going back from the Truth.

It's nice to believe that someone wiser, kinder, from further up ahead, *miles* ahead of us, decides to walk back and tell us what's coming. They'll smile, and hold out a hand to help us cross our own gorges of ignorance, jungles of foolishness. They know where the poison plants are, the freshest streams, they know the *easy* way forward. They may ask for your devotion, or charge a small fee, but it's worth it in the end, we tell ourselves. We'll get to the Truth *faster*.

There is no coming back. If it is the Truth, there is no turning away. No, if you gain anything from this story, it will not be because you understand me.

I hope you weren't expecting a more traditional tale, with the fourth wall perfectly erect. I hope you weren't planning to read a story sans meta-narrative, free from DVD Commentary and Director's Notes that tell you *how* to enjoy the play. If you were, I betrayed you terribly.

Nothing but shadows on a wall.

Could I forego pretentious verbiage and elevated expressionism? Could I avoid choosing words like an impressionist selecting paint? Perhaps I could speak plainly. I could lecture over a carafe of wine, for *in vino veritas*.

But I am not speaking. You are not hearing me.

I am lying to you. My name is not Roman, and I am not dying. *Ceci n'est pas une pipe*.

But is it a story?

Carved ancient tablets buried in sand, Greek philosophies, Chinese mythologies, African traditions, Norse folk-legends, lies, truths, stories, all the same, all different. The one lie; there is no truth. The one truth; there are only lies.

Stories lie to you to tell you the truth. Like we lie to ourselves, hunting and hoping for answers.

You already know if you will keep turning the page or not, I cannot change your mind. But let me tell you this: you won't find what you think you want to find in this book. What's going to happen to me? I will die. I'm dying right now. I'm dead. I'm alive. Flip to the right page, and you'll see how dead and alive I am, at the exact same time.

Why do you turn the page, when you know it will not bring you what you want? I don't know. Patterns. Order. Logic. Lines that intersect in prescribed rhythms. If it is Good now, and it was Good then, it will be Good tomorrow. Patterns are survival. Order. Logic. A is A.

We hunt for patterns because it is safe. We can plan. We can foresee the future. It gives us power, this order. It allows us to create civilizations, industries, societies, laws, vacations, families, quilts, packaged sugar, eight hamburger buns for \$4.95, and money-back guarantees.

These patterns that give us power, are they shadows too?

If a tree falls in the forest, does the sound exist if there is no one to hear it? Can patterns exist if we do not look for them? Are there no patterns save those we create? Is there no order to the universe, save that which we impart? Is disorder not the same; merely the absence of our own chosen structure? The whitespace of our worldview? Is it all not grids on a window pane?

I do not know. I hunt.

The hunt for patterns is the animal inside us, hunting for safety and survival. I am a Hunter. I hunt the animal inside. To end the animal is to end the hunt.

I do know there is an order to stories. It all starts on the first page. Everything else follows.

Turn the page.

10

Now what?

That was the question, I remember, that I had been afraid of. Alexander would not die by my hand, and nor would I die by his. We sat there on the roof for hours, both afraid to answer the question; now what?

The fight had changed us. Both of us. He had, in his passion, fought against everything that a Chosen of the Tower was; he sought to destroy rather than build. So too had I, Chosen of the Hunter, sought not to destroy but to protect. I wanted to save him.

Brought down to our purest selves, animals clawing and scratching at each other, we found ourselves at our innermost natures, and resisted. We fought each other, and in so doing fought ourselves.

After our wounds were bandaged and our bruises healed, we talked for many days and nights trying to find a way forward. It was good to put aside the anger, the fear, the uncertainty.

Eventually I trusted him. How could I not? I had seen that for all the propaganda and pageantry, Alexander was like me. Like I wanted to be. His confidence was inspiring, his focus alluring. His smile held the knowledge of secret truths that I desired most implicitly. It was at once an amazing joy and also a terrifying concession.

Every word he spoke was perfection, every reason crafted from pure logic. I had nothing to convince him. I began to doubt myself. I was never so certain as when Alexander told me I was wrong. Why did I agree with him? Why did I follow him so? I knew his every word was right and true, but I could not forget how drawn I was to his

symmetrical face, his shining hair, his bronzed skin.

We debated the nature of dreams and the purpose of destiny. We debated morality and honor and kindness. We debated the importance of freedom and duty. We appealed to compassion and the needs of the many. We championed the individual along with unity and fellowship. We debated until our throats were dry, and Alexander called for water so we could start all over again.

A tyrant, some would call him, but not I. Not after I knew him. Not after I came to like him. Alexander was no villain, of course he wasn't. If he was, would I have liked him? *Could* I have? I lay up at night, tormented with the question.

Is there a greater sin than humanizing evil? Monsters are not human. They *cannot* be. If they were, we could not do what was necessary. The labels, the genes, the ancient beasts crying out in our basal ganglia would stay our hand, beg us to spare one of our own.

No, it is our nature, thus: that which we fear we crave. That which we hate, we love. That which repels us, draws us, for indeed, if we must run from the tiger in the brush, must we not always be searching for those black and orange stripes?

A boundary line, a cage, a wall, our very skin. Defined by both sides, that which is kept in, and that which is kept out. Both define us, as clear as water and sky.

Why was I drawn to Alexander? He was everything I feared. Everything I wanted. I craved his sinful and corrupt beauty; how better to see with mine own eyes clear, validation of my fears? I relished in his tyrannical airs, for within I reaffirmed of my righteousness. My doubts given flesh. My anxieties proven justified.

Such temptation could not destroy me, for in it I lived, and I could not turn away.

Had I *known* where Alexander would lead me, I could have chosen differently. Would I have? I do not know. If we knew the end of the story, there would be no choice. Perhaps I made the best choice, perhaps not. All morality is guess-work.

What of the countless dead? The people of URUC who were waiting to die, the ones he had slain, and the countless more that would come? How many died because I let Alexander live? You ask in ignorance what I know in memory. It is not a small number. You think I am responsible for their deaths? All actions have consequences. They are as responsible for their deaths as I am.

I thought I could be a hero, but a hero does not compromise, does not give up or give in. Baptized in blood, a hero slays the villain or sooner dies, rather than surrendering to a compromised morality.

What would you have done? In the face of his divine dignity, would you have destroyed a thing of beauty for the sake of your pride? Would you have justified your means with the ends you hoped to achieve? If you are only good when it is easy, are you truly good?

When our morals are *tested*, we learn who we really are. *Per ardua ad astra*.

You dare judge me? Weigh my actions on your own scale? Decide for yourself if I had done the right thing? How *dare* you! You have no right to label me just because I did not choose how you — who sits calmly and quietly so distant from the rooftop---*believe* you would have.

Cast me out, then. Exile me to my forest. Call me evil, deplorable, disgusting, and monstrous because I forsook those in need and found fellowship in someone you hate. *I was there!*

Why weren't *you* there? What were you doing? Sleeping soundly in your bed while others sleep in the street? What do I care for your disgust, your condemnation? You have your answers already, you do

not need to hear mine!

I am a fool, thinking you were here for any reason other than your own self-justification. I don't even think you're hunting for anything, are you? You are only trying to find a way to disagree. You do not want to listen, only to fight. You want to be big, not to grow. To kill, not to hunt. To eat, not to feed.

This exercise is pointless. I am dying. It does not matter any more. This chapter is over.

I am sorry. Forget I said anything. It doesn't matter.

10

Now what?

It is a question we all must ask, time and time again, after every ending as we see new beginnings, until there is nothing more. When we die, we can finally stop hunting for the answer to what will happen tomorrow.

Did I die, on that rooftop? I was reborn. I saw Alexander differently. I saw the world differently. I *believed* differently.

To think differently is to kill ones self. *Aliter cogito, ergo aliter sum.* Did I became a different person the day I changed my mind? What happened to the other I, the one who was so young, so certain, whom now I look at with pity and fear?

I do not know. It was not the first time I had killed my self, but my experience had not blessed me with knowledge.

But how different it had felt! To stand before a being greater than even myself, and to bow the head, to bend the knee; rather than strip away my illusions until I was no more than an ape in the forest, lost and alone and content.

In the forest, I destroyed my self because there was nothing greater, and I could not accept this.

Atop the Tower, I destroyed my self because there was someone greater standing in front of me, apart, and I could not accept myself.

No, I cannot leave it there. I need you to understand. Is it futile? I cannot believe that. I walked the path as every path must be walked, step by step. I will guide your footfalls as mine fell, linearly, one

after the other.

What happened next?

We descended in the elevator to the penthouse floor. We leaned on each other as the doors opened, and a team of Alexander's men carried us on stretchers to the medical floor.

I slipped in and out of sleep for many days, as did Alexander. When I at last was well enough to stand and walk, I was moved to a luxurious cell with a bed, a kitchen, a shower, and a guard.

I would stay here, I knew, until Alexander had decided what to do with me. Until I decided what I would do with myself.

As I pondered my situation, alternately pacing the room and sitting still like a caged animal, I came to many a startling and profound realization. Truths I had long felt self-evident were deconstructed in my curious mind. The world as I knew it became malleable, suggestible, prone to changing at the slightest pressure.

For a time I was drunk on this new power and a great many revelations were made available to me. Fundamental truths about the nature of humanity, morality, and justice. Governance and Society laid themselves bare to me, ready to be shaped as I now knew they must be.

But as profound and significant I once believed these revelations to be, I now cannot remember a one.

No, what I remember — the strangest thing — I remember the guard.

Do not think me cruel, the Chosen do not remember the little people. It is a kindness, in the end. You do not remember them either, the thousands of people — millions! — who toil to craft the world in which you live. Count the cars that pass on the street, and remember that in each one lies a person like yourself — not

necessarily with hopes and dreams like yours, but with the far more familiar and banal chores of existence.

They too fumble with keys and grumble at stuck drawers. Their schedule occupies their time as yours does yours. They too are too tired tonight, and grin impishly at their clever quips. Sometimes they wonder if tomorrow is the day that the struggles become too much to bear. Their heart beats in fear, as does yours, when the myriad uncertainties of society turn their forceful gaze upon them.

And then the car passes, and you forget them. So do I. And they forget you.

But this soldier, one of the many that filled Alexander's Tower, this soldier I remember. Their name was Richard, or perhaps Steve. Maybe it was Amanda.

I was sitting on the bed, waiting, hands clasped. The soldier was staring at me, studying my every movement as I had once studied the hares and fish that had become my food.

"You fought Alexander?"

And lost.

"Everyone loses against Alexander. No one can beat him."

I could have. It was in my very bones. Had I not struggled to surpass my nature, I would have hurtled the head of Alexander to the pavement below. The sound would have echoed across the city, shattering the city's chains like glass.

"He is a great leader," the soldier intoned.

It is not in the nature of Hunters to follow. We are isolationists by nature and by inclination. The presence of another being forces a choice to be made every second: will they continue to live, by our grace, or will this breath be their last? It is our purpose, one not

easily ignored.

Curiosity, fascination, morbid disgust...I couldn't stop myself from asking: "Why do you follow him?"

If the soldier was surprised at my question there was no sign. Instead they drew up straight, pride beaming through their freshly washed face.

"URUC is strong," was the answer. "Everything is better than it would have been without him."

I considered asking how they knew this, but I realized it wasn't known; it was *believed*, and there was no way to shake the evidence of things unseen.

"But why serve him?" I asked.

"Whom else could I serve?"

"Perhaps there is someone in URUC who, with soldiers to serve them, would be a better leader, more effective at providing safety and prosperity for their subjects?"

"Impossible. There is no one better suited to leadership. He knows URUC better than anyone. He built it."

"But what if he did something terrible," was I asking for myself? "and millions suffered. What if he made things worse?"

"Then it is for their own good," came the answer, clearly separating the soldier from any who would ever suffer.

"You would not resist him? Fight him?"

"*Fight* him?" the soldier laughed. "Fight *him*? I would *never* do that!"

"Why not?" I pried. I wanted my own answer as much as theirs.

"Don't you have sympathy for those whose blood oils the machine of

URUC?"

At last the soldier's placid face melted, their facade displaying not sympathy or sadness, but mild embarrassment. "I did at first. I got over it. It's not good to think of others; URUC can't survive on charity. I stopped lying to myself and pretending the natural order of things is for the Weak to be protected from the Strong, instead of being protected *by* the Strong. The weak enslave themselves, after all."

"Then if Alexander gave you a bad order you would not disobey?"

"What nonsense!" came the laugh. "There is no such thing as a bad order, there are only *orders!* Our purpose is to serve what is greater than ourselves; to do otherwise would be acting against our rational self-interest."

"But what about Free Will?" I felt ashamed as soon as the words left my mouth.

"Free will?" The soldier scoffed at my naivete. "What free will do I have? There will *always* be stronger and more powerful beings in the world than me, and they will *always* do as they will, whatever my desires. Should I reject them all? Run away to a hidden cave outside their mighty reach, give myself the *illusion* of freedom until their shadows reach me? Better to find the strongest being in the world, and throw yourself at its mercy. The only freedom in life is service to that which is greater than yourself, whether human, corporation, or God. Alexander gives me what I need because I serve him. I have a house, food, health, and freedom from his wrath. It's what I deserve."

"What have you done to deserve it?"

The soldier's stare was confused. "If I didn't deserve it, he wouldn't have given it to me."

Here, some wall was broken. A shield that separated us was removed, and the polished veneer slipped from the soldier's posture. Their eyes darted left and right down the hallways, observing if their question would be overheard.

When satisfied we were truly alone, the soldier leaned closer to me. "There is a rumor going around that you are stronger than Alexander. Is this true?"

"I don't know," I lied.

"Too bad," the soldier straightened, shifting their grip on their rifle. "I'd have killed you if you were."

11

The soldier's words echoed in my mind, bouncing back and forth in my skull like ripples in a pond. Would Alexander have been horrified at the soldier's reasoning? How could he, when such thoughts were the life-blood of URUC itself?

Was the reasoning sound? I do not know. What would the right reasons be, to devote yourself to one cause and not another?

At the time, the reasoning repulsed me. My worth was inherent, my value fundamental. I was Chosen, innately superior and more valuable than the humble unchosen. I could never subjugate myself as the Soldier had. I could never look deep into my self and find no worth or value save what was placed there by another; even if that other was Alexander.

My fear, my revulsion...now I wonder if it was the instincts of recognition, of familiarity. I had subjugated myself before and thought it virtue. My revulsion had not passed when I was brought into Alexander's presence once more. His beauty had not faded, his skin shone unblemished.

I remember the exact words I said. I told him: "I'm going to leave you now."

Later, with everything that happened after, my mind kept returning to these six words. They stuck with me, like an errant tune. It was an ear-worm, a caustic itch, like a band-aid that needed to be pulled off.

The words were hard to say. I had come to admire Alexander. He was charming, friendly, compassionate, and strong. He was

everything the Chosen... no, *everyone* aspired to be. His movements were easy and confident, his voice was clear and soothing. His mind was sharp and quick, his actions driven and correct. He embodied the enticing dream that by simply being ourselves with conviction, we will live with ease and be given success.

How cruel was his perfection! How vile and how bitter! In his purity I saw only my own flaws, my horrid twisted sins gnarled around my soul. How could something so good and righteous stand so tall and proud? Did he not see how his every charity was a twist of the knife? His every virtue a punch in the gut? By simply being good he laid bare the failings of my every waking hour. By speaking he shattered the illusion that I had ever been as good as I thought myself. How I hated his virtue! How I despised his glory! Never before had I felt so strongly the need to embrace the monster within me, and let the world slide into ruin so that I might once more see myself as good!

But I had not the strength, nor the will, save for those six words.

The look on his face was heartbreaking. "Nonsense!"

"I can."

"You won't!" he said.

"I must."

"Absurd!"

"I will."

The confusion and pain on Alexander's face was there for but a moment, an eternal moment when everything in me cried out to hold him in my arms and reassure his pained heart. "You cannot leave," he said. "You cannot leave," he said again, and the steel and fire of URUC was once more in his voice. This was no plea or request. Nor was it a threat; it was a simple statement of truth, as self-evident and

immutable as the color of the sky.

I could not bring myself to ask him why I could not leave. I was afraid that once he answered, I too would see how my presence was needed at his side. That in his charming way, he would ensnare me in URUC's net, and I would be his willing slave, as furiously devoted as the soldier outside his room.

Part of me feared that I would delight in such release.

"You must help me, Roman," he said at last when I had not moved. "For so long I have walked without guidance. I believed I was good, because I could not bear it if I was not. I would not let myself see what I saw, know what I know, because the greater pain was uncertainty."

He looked at me with eyes rimmed red. "When I begged Rasina to bring you here, I was certain I was soon to die. It was to be my final test. Proof of my virtue. By my death or yours would I know the righteousness of my life. If the Stars wished an end to my tyranny, who better than a Hunter to end it? If they wished me to continue, what better sign than your death at my hand?"

"Neither of us is dead," I said, though now I laugh at the irony.

"No," he shook his head, "and I do not wish for either of us to be so. But then, when we sat together on the roof, I began to see the truth of it. If I had died, Roman... Oh, if *I had* died!"

Here, the great Alexander paused and held his head in his hands. I wanted to reach out to him, to comfort him, but how could I defile such divine sorrow with my mere flesh?

Then, Alexander laughed. Oh, heavenly sound! He stood from where he sat, and took me by the arm. "I know you feel the same way. I know I am not alone in this. I had thought to give you a gift," he said, as he took me through his Tower. "If I had died, my final act

would have been to give you one final boon."

"What could you possibly give me?" I asked, for I thought there was nothing he could offer.

"I can give you what you have been missing."

"Which is?" I had wondered.

"You came to me, Roman," his brown eyes stared deeply into mine. "You came to me because you were searching. Hunting. Looking for a piece of yourself that you had lost. I watched you, Roman, when you entered the Tower, when we fought on the roof, even in your cell I watched you. You are so close, Roman, and I can help. I can give you a purpose. Agency. *Meaning*. You can matter again. With a place in the new world, you need never wander without significance."

Truly, it is inconsequence which corrupts.

"What do you mean?" I asked, feigning ignorance of the glorious gift he was offering me.

"You must tell me first," Alexander raised his hand. "I need to hear you say it. You have to make the choice."

What choice? The same choice all of us make every day. The same choice you make every time you turn a page. To embrace what lies before us, or turn our backs. A choice that is no choice at all. This, or nothing.

I took a deep breath in through the nose, and spoke: "I have a right to exist."

Alexander smiled with relief, and he opened the doors to a room filled with computers, screens, and working men and women collating and compiling information with practiced speed and skill.

"Here," he waved his hand like a wand, "is the center of knowledge.

My Panopticon. URUC is a harsh master, demanding facts and data to fill its stomach. Secrecy, that monster that separates us, divides us into the knowing and the ignorant, is slaughtered daily on my butchers' slabs, my priestly altars."

"Rasina helped you," I remembered her confession in the motel room. "She built this for you."

"She knew better than most that when nothing is secret, nothing is sacred. When we can hide, we can avoid consequences. She sought, as we all do, an end to shame. When everything is open, self-fulfillment is assured."

I looked at the screens fed from a million cameras across the globe. Satellites, news reports, spies and peeping-toms, rooting out every objective fact they could find and sending it to the Tower of URUC. Rasina had done her job well.

And yet, in the forest she had still felt shame. An end to secrets had not been her salvation, no matter her intent.

Alexander stared at the screens, his eyes glittering with the future. "Peace, prosperity, a machine oiled with the devotion of its myriad cogs and gears. I thought the world, Roman, the *world* would soon note the glory of my magnum opus."

In spite of my skeptical eye, I was beginning to see what he meant. The peace of predictability, the prosperity of a plan well executed. An end to the existential, and the dawning of a new age of faith. The guiding Stars were so far away, Alexander had created one of his own, here on earth.

"Ah!" he cried out like a wounded wolf. His knees struck the ground like falling statues. He clasped his head in a show of pain I had never seen before. He cried out again, raising his hands to the sky, wailing and sobbing like a child.

"It doesn't work!" He cried out. "It is not enough! I have the means to attain wisdom beyond that of Solomon, a rule more righteous than the Kings and Queens of antiquity, and yet there are failures, mistakes, errors in the system. No matter how I toil, the perfection I seek slips away from me. Tell me, Roman, what other possibility is there?"

I sank to his side, eager to stop the man's tears. "What do you need me to do?" I asked.

At once, Alexander's sorrow abated. At my offer, his relief was plain. He turned to me, his grateful smile bright in the glow of the multitude of screens. "I need nothing from you, Roman. It is what you need of *yourself* that will help me. Fish must swim, Roman. Fish must swim."

At first I did not understand. Do you blame me? Who would dare allow such horrid thoughts enter their mind unbidden? But though I stood and shook my head, Alexander did not remain silent.

"Look at the world, Roman! Look at the pain and suffering! Look how it pours not from my hands alone, but seeping through the cracks like a poisoned aquifer, like cutting kudzu! What else could the cause be? What else? What else, I beg you tell me! What else could the cause be?"

I laughed. No, I cried. No, I tore my hands away from his and struck him across the face for his blasphemy. I do not remember what I said, what I did. How could I remember? What reaction would make sense to such absurdity?

He grasped my hands like a pleading lover: "I beg of you, Roman. You are a Hunter, the oldest and strongest in the world. You know the scent of a thousand preys. Here, the Panopticon is yours. I beseech you, use it to hunt one final time, for me. For us. Grant me the divine righteousness you so easily bore. A prey whose death is

pure good. Make me a Hero, Roman, give us purpose, and find for us a Viper to kill!"

"They are dead," I must have told him. "There are no more Vipers. It was my destiny to kill them all, and my destiny is complete."

He did not nod in understanding. He did not hide his face in shame. Instead, he simply smiled.

Is there anything more unholy than doubt?

To question yourself is to question everything that brought you to this point. I hadn't failed. I knew for a fact I hadn't failed. They were all dead. I had killed them all. I knew I had, because the dreams had stopped. I felt it when the last one fell. I felt the kick of the rifle. I remember feeling it. I still feel it in my shoulder. Every evening.

"A strong Viper," Alexander continued, "old and powerful, could it not lie to the very Stars themselves?"

The screaming panic from years ago began to surface in my heart. I was a caged animal, cornered and panicking, ready to strike at anything nearby. I was struggling to avoid the truth.

In my heart of hearts, I yearned for purpose. For a right to exist. Did this same part of me, deep in my soul, struggle even then? How mighty was this need for meaning? Did I subconsciously pull the rifle to the left? Did the bullet miss? Had the last Viper survived?

And if it had lived, did it now wander the earth, hiding as only a true Viper could?

The truth of it crushed me. Not the truth that a Viper might still exist. They are dangerous, evil, cataclysmic, yes; but this is not what brought me to my knees, sobbing and wailing. I did not weep for the world, helpless against the Evil that threatened it.

I wept because I had failed. My dreams had stopped not because I

had completed my destiny, but because I had forsaken my duty.

My purpose. My meaning. My reason for being had all been for naught. My existence was purposeless. Meaningless. Unreasonable. "Why?" was a question that for me had no answer.

Of all I have experienced in my life, there are few things in this world more painful than being wrong. There is no greater cruelty than waking someone from a dream. Dreams give us guidance. They tell us who we are. They are illusions, they are lies, they are stories, and we need them to survive. We need them to tell us we are good.

Alexander showed me how wrong I was. I will never be able to thank him for that.

When my breathing finally calmed, he raised my face to his, gentle, kind, loving.

"Every night," he whispered in my ear, "I lie awake in bed, tossing and turning over my choices in my head. I wonder — with each choice I wonder — did I fail in my duty? Was today the day I failed the Stars, my people, myself? And then every day there is another report, another piece of paper that proclaims URUC's lack of perfection. My failures made plain every day." He wiped a tear from my eye. "You are lucky, Roman. You stopped as soon as you might have failed. I kept going. What you are feeling now, I feel anew every night."

I remember looking up into his face, those rich brown eyes and smooth tanned skin. An echo of Rasina whispered in my brain.

"This is what he does; he finds things about you, things you wish weren't true. Things you've fought against, and he brings them out and makes it so you can't hide anymore."

He looked at me. His deep brown eyes were sad, almost lonely. "Please Roman, I need you."

I don't like to think how that made me feel. There is something intoxicating in those words, the idea that someone with the strength of nations needs *you*. Alexander needed me. This man, who was so powerful, who had the entire strength of URUC behind him, needed *me*. I was not only important, but essential, was thrilling. To be needed, to be *necessary*, to know that your existence and efforts are not only appreciated but *required*...

Purpose. Potential. *Meaning*.

Was I good? It felt good.

I was reborn that day. A second time. The second rebirth of this story: Roman, Chosen of the Hunter. Vipersbane. And I had a Viper to Hunt.

What a fool I was.

I believed in Alexander, I believed in myself, and I strode into the future with eyes clouded with hope. But I am not there now. I am not here either. I am trapped under a collapsed building. I am dead. And I am dying.

A chain of cause and effect. One of the links: I did not kill the Viper. I will hunt it again, I will find it, and the truth that my Hunt reveals...

Well...

That's not important now, not until the end of Part 2, but I find the truth. I cannot avoid it; it's right there at the end of Chapter 18, waiting.

It always was.

Always will be.

You can look if you like. You can read what Fidaa says about me, about us, about the Unchosen. I will still be here. And there.

But if you do, you can never turn back to this page. Try, and you will find this page has changed. The words will echo differently, seasoned with your foreknowledge. Once you know the truth, you can't forget it. You cannot cross the same river twice. Once you turn the page, you can never turn it back.

When you are ready, turn the page.

12

I have to explain.

It is important, because if I do not explain, you might not understand.

It is important you understand.

Isn't it?

I think it is.

It must be. Understanding is what separates us from the animals who crawl through the forests and jungles and deserts, with a purpose of little more than eating and sleeping and mating. Beasts with no sense of self or identity, driven by the chemical factories in their skulls. Adrenaline. Hormones. Emotions.

The Viper.

You must understand the Viper before I continue, or else none of what follows will make sense. Everything that I did, everything that Alexander did, the obsession, the passion, the *revelation*... everything that follows after will seem strange.

What is the Viper? It, like so many things, is an Idea. A connotation. You might call them demons or monsters, perhaps angels, perhaps not. We had better names for them. We, the Chosen of the Hunter, know them only as the Viper, and it is through their destruction that we find purpose and meaning.

I cannot tell you what a Viper is, you must experience it for yourself. Or rather, the Viper can be *described*, but the description pales by necessity to the experience.

It is easy to find a Viper; even Unchosen can do it. You can see them everywhere. They are monsters, and like all monsters, you hate them. They are so easy to find, and so easy to hate.

You yourself have found a Viper before. You have felt the Viper on the back of your neck. You have heard its whispers in your ears. You have shivered when you catch the flicker of the Viper's tail out of the corner of your eye.

Do you think you have not? Close your eyes.

Remember when you chose to walk down a different street. Remember when you pretended you hadn't made eye contact. Remember when you prayed that they wouldn't sit next to you, or speak to you. Remember when the ancient instincts deep in your blood raised your hackles and your walls.

Remember when you forgot that they were human too, with their own struggles and trials and problems. Remember the way they get under your skin, and make you feel ashamed. Remember the worst person you have ever been, and now remember how it was all *their* fault.

Picture their face. Their voice. Remember how they made you feel.

They are not the Viper.

That is what the Viper feels like it should be.

The Viper is everywhere, hiding in shadows and under bridges. Monsters spread. Everyone can find a Viper. It's so *easy*.

It's hard to find a *real* Viper. This is why you need a Hunter. Anyone can become angry, but to be angry with the right person, to the right degree, at the right time, for the right purpose, and in the right way — this is not easy.

The Vipers are liars, creatures of hate and deceit. They disrupt the

truth of the world, tear it to pieces. They make you believe the impossible. They turn solid things soft and harmless things deadly. They bend the world around their forked tongues. To kill them is not just a moral responsibility, it is survival.

What you believe, what you cherish, what you have carefully built in the framework of your worldview; everything that grounds you in a world that *makes sense*, the Viper corrupts. The Viper twists. The Viper *poisons*.

They speak not even simple un-truths, but *lies* as honest as the truths they subvert. They live in the antithesis, the forgotten corollary, the forsaken philosophy. Their very breath is proof of wrong. The Viper tears away your inner truths, twisting your mind until you are no longer you. You will smile at another's pain because *they deserve it*. You will sneer at another's passion because *it's foolish to try*. You will say the accused must be guilty because *the innocent have nothing to fear*, and you will calmly ascend the scaffold because *You deserve it. It was foolish to try. If you were innocent, you'd have nothing to fear*.

They are not animals, they are not mortals, I scorn to even call them Chosen — though the constellation of the Viper circles overhead as does the Hunter, the Tower, the Eye — they are Monsters.

I remember the first monster I killed. I was twelve. He was a young Viper, only a little older than myself at the time. His hair was long and unkempt, like an animal. I had expected some climactic battle, complete with gunfire, martial arts, car chases...perhaps that's what you are expecting too?

What happened was this. I beat his head in with a wrench.

I wasn't always who I am now. I wasn't always who I was then. I had doubts. Fears. I had agonized over what I would do when I found the Viper. Would I kill it? Could I? Was there nothing to do but end its

life? There were no prisons that could hold it, no laws that contained it...what other options did I have?

When I found him, we stared at each other for just a moment, bemused and frightened. I saw the shape of his face, the glimmer in his eyes, the curve of his chin...he looked human, and in my youth, I thought he was human.

Then I blinked. As I think back, I don't believe he looked any different. Yet, what humanity I had seen vanished to be replaced by an inhuman monster. A snarling and slaving beast, reaching towards me with clawed hands and poison fangs.

That was when I realized how easy it was. All it takes is a single choice; to have faith. My ends, my means, I had faith. Faith in the Stars. Faith in myself. Faith that I was Good.

Everything else followed.

Twelve souls slain, and every one a monster. I never slept so well as when I bathed my arms in the blood of the wicked. How beautiful, to find a thing whose suffering is *a priori* justified. My every act of pure moral character. I was *good*.

Now, as I look back, I wonder if the justification was, in fact, *a posteriori*. I had a goal. A purpose. I wasn't just existing or being, I had a *reason* to live. I was free from the burden of doubt and indecision. Action, will, purpose, ability, all in harmony. I was a race-horse let out of its paddock. I was an arrow loosed from its bow. I was an avalanche gathering speed. I was an inevitability, a force of nature let loose on a task that could not be stopped. I was a *will*.

Now, as I look back, I remember the taste of copper in my mouth, my heavy breathing, the rush of blood in my ears, filling my muscles with adrenaline.

Adrenaline. Dopamine. Serotonin. We live with chemical factories buried in our skulls, more powerful and addictive than any drug. We are slaves to it. We cannot help but follow where our chemically drenched meat drags us.

We are not arrows in flight, are we? When we take the first step, another lies in its future. Perhaps our first step leads us to ruin, but can we not turn aside with our second step? Our third? Though we have a target in mind, we may adjust our path along the road, stepping over rocks and logs, skipping past bears and wolves, avoiding all the worst of our futures?

But is each step not chosen by the steps made in the past? We may turn, we may lurch, we may stagger, but we can never go back.

It is so tiring.

Because while we cannot go back, we can *look* back. It is far easier to see the twists and turns behind us, where our passing would have been easier or the path kinder. We see nothing but our past mistakes, the greener pastures down the different roads we could have taken.

Our successes fade into memory, while our failures cling like errant mud, in our desperate attempt to find some pattern that will allow us to avoid the monsters on the road ahead of us.

The worst thing about Monsters is; they spread.

They are everywhere. I should know, I've killed my fair share, and they spread.

Not the famous ones. In the stories, Monsters are singular beasts, unique in their power and majesty. Grendel, the beast of Beowulf. Smaug, the deadly dragon of Lonely Mountain. Leviathan, Fenris, Baba Yaga, Minotaur, Lucifer, Dracula, Taotie, Manticore, Aži Dahāka. Each with their own origin. Each with their own story, like

my own.

It's not the Truth. The Truth is; Monsters spread. There is never only one.

There may be only one *at first*, and they eat, pillage, slay, and destroy. They have no choice, it is in their nature. This nature gives rise to heroes and avengers, who strike down the evil beasts with honor, virtue, and the grace of the Gods.

But the story never ends with death. The Monster slain, their corrupt blood seeps into the ground. Soon, they are everywhere, peering out from shadows, behind doors, or hidden places in the forest. They stalk under beds and hide under bridges. The memory, the empty hole, is everywhere, always lurking and peeking and waiting, always waiting. The terrified people cry out in terror, and the true Heroes say; "Are we just going to sit and wait for them to strike?"

What else can we do? We look for monsters. We hunt for them. And once we start hunting, we find them. They spread to the shadow of a coat-rack with a hat on it, or the sound of a branch hitting the window. They spread to the unfamiliar, the outsider, and the other.

We turn out the shadows. We break down the bridges. We pull the monsters from their hiding place and burn them in the morning sun. They are monsters, after all. They deserve no mercy, no pity, no compromise. To compromise good is to be evil. The kind and generous souls will stand aside, smiling at the righteous punishment of the wicked. What mercy does a monster deserve, after all?

This is the greatest evil a monster can inflict. Not the pain, the suffering, the fear...it's that they spread. The Nietzschean Abyss lies not in the eyes of the monster, but deep in your own heart.

I spent so long looking into the abyss, I saw that it wasn't an abyss at all. It was just another excuse.

13

The Hunt!

Oh, how to explain the Hunt to one who has never been loosed from the bow, who has never felt the wind through their fletchings, who has never crested the parabolic arc through the air to their target?

To hunt is the most natural thing. It filled me like rain and caressed me like dust. I moved through the world like a hound, my nose to the ground searching for a single flash of tail, a flicker of scale, anything that would bring me closer to my prey; the last surviving Viper!

What would you have done?

Yes, I yelled at you before. I am sorry for that, but now what was said in anger I ask in uncertainty. What *would* you have done? I can but guess, unless the tables turn. Perhaps a swap of roles is in order.

There. It is done. Now *you* bear my responsibilities as I wear yours. Can you feel them, weighting you down? No, of course not. This is all just a game, really. But play along. Humor me. See where this goes.

Well? What do you do?

No, stop. It's not fair for me to expect you to start from whole cloth. I'll get you started. After all, I know what it is to be me.

You start the Hunt. The Hunt! Oh, how to explain the Hunt!

The Hunt began with a single thought that seeds and blossoms in your heart in the dark pit of the night when things look blackest. A spark lights the mind with the few simple words: *I don't know*.

What do you do first?

Well, first, you would listen to your instincts, for they are what have kept you alive for so long. If you did not, surely, you would have died years ago, having ignored your hunger, thirst, or exhaustion. And because you are a Hunter, drawn to death like a moth to flame, your instincts would include things like a wary eye, a quick fist, anxiety in crowds, and a long history of practiced survival.

So next, obviously, you would practice those very skills; You would control your breathing. In and out. Through the nose and mouth. Diaphragmatic breathing causes your vagus nerve, which runs from your neck down through your diaphragm, to send a signal to your brain that calms the body's sympathetic nervous system. This lowers your heart rate and breathing speed, and reduces stress hormones like cortisol in your bloodstream. When cortisol is elevated too frequently or for too long, it disturbs the body's hormone production. You can't let the churning chemicals in your brain drive yourself to destruction, failure, and damnation.

You are only two-thirds divine; mistakes can even be made by the Chosen.

Your past has taught you to be skeptical. You have to be sure. There is no room for error. Photons of light reflect off the rods and cones in your eyes and send lightning shooting through your skull until you are positive. All it will take is the right images, the right symbols, in the right shape, at the right time, and this will somehow become knowledge. It is a strange alchemy.

Then, with uncertain hope, you will pour through the details of Alexander's data-farm. You will study pictures of the world from five thousand feet. You will scrutinize every detail of a single cargo-van's trip across town.

The unchosen will help as best they can, mostly by staying out of

your way. You will delight at their proper subjugation to what is greater than them. No, I forget; by now you are most certainly used to it. They will hover like drones in a bee-hive in the cold rooms of Alexander's tower. They will serve you on bended knee, their faces full of adoration and admiration. You can see the joy in their faces, the honor they feel at being *there*. Being *a part of it all*. Someday, they will tell their children of the time they handed you a cup of wine, and how you smiled thanks at them. It's just a reflex, you don't really mean it.

But you won't really notice them. If you spared the effort...well, that is effort not spent on your deontological duty. You don't *hate* them, you're not a *bad* person, they're just extraneous. Like ants, they are each so focused on their own lives, their own tasks, blind to the complexity and majesty of their anthill. And you, like a *good* person, will live and let live.

You are a good person.

Doesn't that feel better?

Don't feel bad. I understand. You are without peer in your field; the apex, the pinnacle, the Hero of the Hunt. Who could you have measured yourself against? Who could you join? What group could you belong to? So you have nothing but the echoes of your basil ganglia to speak with. Others are but a dream, an idea, a theory that you can make dance to your morals as you see fit. You don't have to concern yourself with *real* people, who have dreams and hopes and pains.

I understand. Empathy, sympathy, understanding that the myriad bodies that pass you by during the average day are people in and of themselves is *tiring*. it takes time and energy, while the imagined citizenry in your skull, mere shadows on the wall, are always grateful.

Besides, the Viper still lurks. You have to get back to work.

Time will pass, and eventually, like dots on a canvas turning into a painting, the world will take shape in front of you.

A clarity.

Through age comes power. You know this, because you are very old. Young Vipers are dangerous enough, before they have their strength and wits about them. The old Vipers, the strongest ones, they can erode confidence, destroy support, sow doubt, and collapse truth without care or effort. When they got older still, what lies could they tell?

It will *gnaw* at you. This question you never thought to ask. Could they be strong enough to avoid death? You think back to your greatest mistake, your great sin that allowed evil to remain in the world. Perhaps it was not a failure? Perhaps you didn't miss, but in the Viper's dying breath, it lied away its own death.

Could even the Stars be fooled? Could a Viper so strong as to cheat death, cheat fate as well? Could it have lied away its scales and fangs and put on the skin of another?

You know it's possible. It has to be possible. How else could it have happened? It is the perfect excuse.

I mean explanation.

Alone in the forest you avoided pain, but in *this* world your defenses must be more sophisticated to avoid pain more subtle. You see the way things are, and through Hume's Guillotine you jump like an excited rabbit. The way things *are* are the way things *ought* to be. *You* are not wrong, the *world* is wrong.

An enticing thought, isn't it? Feels good in your chest?

You won't tell Alexander. Not at first. He tries so hard, but he knows

nothing of the Hunt; he gave your quarry a name. It wasn't enough for him to be tracking a beast from the darkest pits of the inside, he needed it to be more alive than a dream a nightmare. He called it Jörmungandr.

"We have to name it," Alexander will excuse I mean explain. "Give it a face, or a body, and it is something that can be defeated. If it has a name, it has a soul. If we give it form and shape, then we can know it, and see it, and hate or welcome it as the label demands." That is not what he says, but it is what you hear.

No Hunter would make such an obvious mistake. Give something a name a face a body a soul, and it becomes *defined*. It exhibits qualities, aspects, predictable behaviors. A true Hunter holds no expectations in their hearts nor heads. They allow the prey to shape the hunt, not insist the Hunt shape the prey.

Names are powerfully stable things. When we give something a name — whether King, peasant, warrior, villain, or victim — if it is inaccurate, it is always the *thing* that must change, never the name. If something is labeled, then you have *expectations*.

Vipers thrive in expectations. They nest in the hollows of dried out assumptions and are camouflaged among the shards of shattered faith.

So you will forget the name. What's in the name? All that matters is the Hunt. Where is the Viper? What evil burns in its heart? How far has its poison spread, and when will the worst of it strike dead the truth of how things are? Could it be stopped, or are you already too late?

Each question is a sparkling jewel in the night sky, guiding you along the path.

Do you think they should have been questions of humility? Like, "are you ready?" "Has time dulled the edge that made you so keen a

killer of monsters?" It is good those questions do not enter your head. Stars forgive you, you won't even think of a single one. You will be taking part in the tradition passed on by thousands of our ancestors; an ancient search for the truth of it.

You will be born again from Alexander's gift.

A hunter must hunt! You chase the Viper across the globe, you can *feel* yourself nearing its den. Once absent any meaning or purpose, now you have Significance. Your actions finally have consequences beyond the confines of your mortal shell.

There is no greater obsession than salvation. Your redemption will be at hand, to wash away a sin you didn't even know existed.

This Hunt, it is the means — the *righteous* means — by which you will justify your existence. You measure your actions by one metric alone; if they mean the death of the last surviving Viper. It is a means that justifies every end.

But you still won't dream.

For all your passion in the Hunt, of a kind reserved for priests and young-lovers, you still will not dream. Maybe the Stars decided you are on a path with no turning, and need no guidance. Maybe the Stars were indeed fooled by the Viper. Maybe it has been so long, you have forgotten how.

You travel. A lot. You journey across the globe, smelling the winds and feeling the dirt beneath your fingers. You run across the oceans and wander through the deserts, wetlands and jungles are no more curious than city blocks to you as you search for the elusive scent of poison.

You've found a new peace; the peace of giving in, of submission. You lose yourself to the joy of surrender to something greater. You don't have to think, you don't have to dream, you only need to act.

After twenty years, you've forgotten what it feels like, to relish in the ease and grace of action. To feel the flow of the Stars behind your every motion. To truly embrace the glory of being.

Are you happy?

...

You *must* be happy. How could you not be?

Maybe true happiness, true morality, is simply being the right person in the right place at the right time doing the right thing for the right reasons.

Was I the right person? Would you have been better?

...

Maybe you never left the Tower. It doesn't matter.

What divine or infernal inspiration brings you to your revelation? All you know is one day, months, years, or days after you fought Alexander on the roof, Oh horror of Horrors! Wail and cry, ye mourners of humanity, the Viper's nest has been found!

When you see it, this inevitable impossibility, the hazy edges and fuzzy images of the world snap into a clear focus. At the origin of anything, the ending is foretold. It all starts with a seed, everything else follows. You have found the rot that lies at the center of our world.

How fitting a turn of phrase. The source of the corruption that ate away at the resolute order of nature was in the Temple.

Does that mean nothing to you? It should: the Temple has no other name as there is no other building more deserving of the title. If any terrestrial thing is Holy to the Chosen, it is the Temple. Between the Tigris and the Euphrates, a few miles away from the city of Samawah, a massive stone building surrounded by sand. No ruined

city, no forsaken roads, just a giant sandstone cathedral; the oldest surviving building in the world. Everything that we know about the Stars and the Chosen was translated from the ancient pictorial language covering its walls. Maybe the stories weren't true, but there was nothing else. It's where everything began. Everything else followed.

The Keeper of the Temple was the most important Chosen of all. The process by which they ascend to their role is not a simple one, nor worth telling. His name is Fidaa Abasi, Chosen of the Wolf. He did impossible things, or things that had been thought impossible at the time.

But no, these are lies! You can see the flicker of snake-scale behind every word, can't you? You will hide your face and weep when you see the rot of the world seeping out from his lair. The greatest evil, the most wretched catastrophe is nigh! Fidaa is no Chosen of the Wolf, but a Viper in disguise!

How old he must be, to hide so well in the very heart of the Temple. To lie away its death, to mask its forked tongue and wear the skin of a Chosen of the Wolf. How much more powerful than you could it be.

You won't tell Alexander about Fidaa. No, it's too dangerous. You remember Alexander once said: "We are not allies. At best, we are the strange comrades that sometime arise when we try to understand our enemies as we do ourselves." You don't know if he is talking about you or Fidaa.

So you will tell a half-truth instead. A tale of a traitorous snake hidden in Fidaa's retinue, a saboteur crouching unseen among the most holiest of holy places. Alexander believes you, and sends a diplomatic cable to Fidaa, begging for leave to visit. At your request, he does not tell Fidaa the truth, and instead crafts some pretense of a political nature.

You won't care about the details. Platitudes and intrigues and the nonsense gone unsaid but still heard? It's boring. It's pointless. You've never seen the use of it. Skip over it.

Instead, you'll stand on the roof and look at the stars.

The roof of Alexander's Tower is a poor substitute for the tall tree in your forest. You retire to its solitude and stare up at the stars, but they are dimmed by the lights from the city below. Clever humans, to pollute with pure light!

It's been a long time since you looked at the Stars, twinkling away in the night sky like giggling children. You can learn so much, staring at the stars.

Being Chosen is a two-way street. As we reflect the constellations, so do they reflect us. Our every act shapes the world, and it is the shape of the world that concerns the Stars. As we are, so are they.

What will you do next? Of the next month, You will only remember flashes; Shards of sound and smell that surface in your mind without warning.

You'll remember Alexander crossing his arms in thought as he stares at your naked body, while tailors dragged thin measuring tape across your limbs. His lips are pursed, like he has just bitten a lemon, his eyebrow raised in skeptic amusement.

You will remember the spicy citrus of one of the finest meals you have ever had. You will not remember what you are celebrating. You will spend the evening together, finishing three bottles of wine and the entire dessert cart.

You will remember the woman's voice as she explains the cultural mores and etiquette of Fidaa's society. It is thin and sharp, like a needle, pushing each piece of information into your brain like surgery. You won't remember her name or what she said, just her

voice.

There is so much you won't remember. It will frighten you.

You should remember it all. You are dying now, your brain is struggling to survive, and somewhere in your forgotten memories might be answers.

How strong is your memory? Is mine? This impossible past, this ephemeral future, all separate from what is real: the here and now. What truth is there in a memory?

Excuses. Nothing but excuses, asides, interjections, extraneous detritus to lure you away from what is truly important. If you can find the truth in the myriad distractions that litter your thoughts, I applaud you. You are a stronger soul than I.

We feel shame for so much, in the end. Our failings, our mistakes, the things we wish we could have done differently even though we had no choice.

None of this is important. I pray it is not, for I do not remember it. What irony, if the means for salvation were buried in my forgotten past!

What's important is we traveled to Samawah, to the Temple, to Fidaa.

14

When I lived in the forest, I knew where to find the tallest tree.

At the apex of this tree, I could close my eyes and become lost in the wind. In the forest, the silence is never silent: The wind through the leaves, the rustle in the undergrowth, the warming water of the lake, the animals and birds squeaking and chirping and flitting about; there is nothing louder than a silent forest.

Alexander and I flew to Samawah in a plane, a gilded chariot for his official travels across the globe. He brought fifty soldiers, unmarried men and women. An honor guard befitting Alexander's prestige. They were beautiful, every one, a display meant to imply the inside of their souls was every bit as glorious as their smooth exterior. They carried weapons. They smiled proudly as they marched.

The plane lifted off into the sky, flying higher than the highest tree.

Encased in the aluminum bullet, the engine roar was a vibration that slipped up through my spine and shook my skull. The filtered and pressurized air was pushed this way and that by tiny fans. We flew at speeds faster than any bird, sealed off from the wind, the earth, the world, rocketing through the sky on spinning turbines.

It was an isolation that terrified me. Horrified me. So separate that there is nothing — not even a tree-trunk — to ground you. Pre-packaged food and tiny rooms to relieve yourself. Bottled water and windows through which you can see only clouds. Your body is free from everything for a few hours: free to think thoughts untethered from the world. I cannot stop the thoughts.

Alexander was silent through the flight. I dare suspect he *appreciated*

the chance to think freely, to sort through the echoes of his own thoughts and find the pearls that he could admire.

For my part, I thought as little as possible. The oppressive silence coerced me into my solitude. Yet, alone with my thoughts, I found myself circling back again and again to the torments that hounded me.

I couldn't stop them. They swarmed me like bees, swirling around my head. They stung me with their suppositions and poisoned me with their contradictions.

But I wanted to be there. I must have, for what could have stopped me if I didn't? I may have been miserable, but I must have wanted to make the sacrifice, else I would have chosen differently, yes? Of course, it stands to reason.

Reason tamed my passions. It must have been so, else why would I have allowed myself such misery? Reason showed me that to achieve what I *truly* desired, I must embrace the misery now.

I knew what was right, and in knowing what was right I ~~must have~~ wanted it.

Alexander is sitting by the window, opposite me. He is staring out into the clouds. I cannot stop the thoughts.

I wanted to be like him. I wanted him to be like me. I wanted us to belong together, because there was so much in him to admire, and every piece of similarity we shared tied us closer together. I wanted other people to look at me the way I looked at him. Another Chosen who didn't dream.

Was I drawn to him because he was Good? Or did I think him good because I was drawn to him? Have I ever been drawn to someone who was not a good person? Did I only like those who were good? Did I want us to be the same so much, that I was willing to sacrifice

what I believed, what I thought, who I was?

Such a fool I had been! My wish to act good had been the desire of a child, a newborn who cared only about avoiding punishment, gaining karmic payment for my actions. So young and foolish! A child!

Now, I was ~~wounded~~ ~~wiser~~ older. I knew the price of my innocent morality and had grown. I was good not because of my actions, the results of my efforts. Good works could not define my self, only my self could do that. I no longer wanted to *act* good, I wanted to *be* good.

*O, it is excellent/
To have a giant's strength; but it is tyrannous/
To use it like a giant.*

Measure for Measure, Act two, scene two. She is wrong, though. It is tyrannous to have the strength of a giant. ~~How else could a giant's strength be used, than like a giant?~~ It is impossible for a Giant to pet an Ant.

Why? A reason. An excuse.

A Giant cannot see an Ant. Describe an Ant, and it will furrow its Brobdingnagian brow and nod in bemused misunderstanding. Point to an Ant, tell the Giant where it walks, and the Giant will peer down, eye-glass in hand, and reach out its finger. As the finger gets closer, shoving trees and cars aside, blocking out the sun, the Giant loses sight of the Ant beneath its digit.

The Giant cannot feel the Ant. Perhaps the Giant is lucky, and stops an Ant-height away from the ground. Perhaps it drags its finger along the ant's back, not a breath of pressure on its tiny back. It is too small for the Giant to feel. More likely, the Giant crushes the ant to dust. More likely, the Giant never gets near the ant, brushing the air with its gargantuan finger-tip. More likely, in the effort to pet an

Ant, the Giant has carved furrows into the earth, destroyed forests, crushed houses, brought fear to the countryside. ~~Because of this, a hero will arise to slay the Giant.~~

The Giant is too big. For a Giant to care for an Ant, it must be separate. It must ~~capture~~ ~~imprison~~ save the ant in a glass terrarium, where massive feet cannot crush it. As long as the Giant walks the land, the Ant is in danger.

The Ant can never be free from the Giant. If it runs for its entire life, it could not escape a Giant's single stride. Power is like ~~power~~ gravity. The more you have, the more you influence what is around you.

Kings and Queens, CEOs and Landlords, the Rich and the "haves," have power. Their friends have power. They have employees and peasants and people who ~~depend-on~~ need them. Rubber balls on the plastic sheet of the universe. The larger the ball, the greater the ripples. After all, what is a ~~king~~ peasant without a ~~peasant~~ king? If a King dies, they must *find another king*. Power is too dangerous a thing to be held by many. It must be consolidated. Condensed. Orbited around, but never quite touched.

A Giant hurts the Ant, not through malice or forethought, but by walking. ~~How can it let itself walk?~~ How many ants have you crushed, unthinking, beneath your shoe? It's a silly question, because you do not know. You can't know. If you paid attention to every ant, you'd go mad. It's self-preservation, in the ~~beginning~~ end, to not care. Its just an ant. Who cares about ants, when a Giant walks the land?

We Chosen few, we great men and women, we are Giants. We are too powerful to escape. By simply being in your world, we crush what we touch. Not intentionally; we can't help it.

So easy to think when there are no trees to ground you. When there

is no ground. Free from results, free from consequence, free from cause and effect, the thoughts flow like water from a ~~river~~ cup. Alexander was sitting by the window, opposite me. Why did he not look at me? Couldn't he see the conflict between my blood and bones, the tempestuous fury that drives me to self destruction, to self definition?

I wanted peace. I wanted dreams. I wanted to be good. I did not want thoughts. Why was I not dreaming? I was hunting again, I was preying on the Viper as I had years before. Why had the dreams not returned? My intent had been ~~correct~~ pure, hadn't it? In having purpose, I had goals. Ends. Consequences that were desired. My divine duty was all I required: I was Good because I had a reason to be so.

Why could I not find peace again? I cannot stop the thoughts. Since the forest I had struggled to find it, to be at peace with ~~the world~~ my self. To find a method of thought and action that operated in harmony with each other, so that the torment of uncertainty and fear would finally leave me once more.

It is only in conflict are our virtues visible. We cannot be brave if there is nothing to ~~hate~~ fear. We cannot be charitable if there is no ~~sin~~ want.

But fear and want are ~~lies~~ ~~poisons~~ perceptions. It is hard to be brave when you are strong, for the stronger you are the less you have to fear. Bravery is only a virtue for the weak. How can there be virtue in charity if you do not suffer for your giving? If you feel no loss, how is there moral strength in the act? Charity is a virtue for those who are poor.

Virtue lies in the road not taken, the choice not chosen. Restraint is a virtue for those who have been tempted. Mercy a virtue for those who have been wronged, Faith a virtue for those without fortune. A hero who does not struggle cannot be a hero at all. A hero must

suffer, else how can they inspire?

What is a Hero but a mortal strong enough to fight the impossible demons and monsters that ~~tower~~ loom over us all? The unnatural resides in the monstrous, the inhuman. What inspiration can arise from an unnatural Hero, superior to those who gaze adoringly at them? It is not inspiration such beings inspire, but awe. Fear. What the Greeks called *storge*.

I wanted to be tested to be challenged to find virtue in my self that absent the ~~Viper~~ Hunt was lost to me. I wanted ~~peace morality~~ redemption.

Then a thought struck. I cannot stop the thoughts. They leap, unbidden, into my brain. First one. Then another. Without conscious effort I find my mind filled with organized static. I gasped when the thought struck my brain. Whence came the thought? Whence came any thought of mine? Were they mine? Who thought the thoughts I did not think to think?

How many of me are there?

We cannot choose what we ~~are~~ want. It is not our wills that drive our hearts, but our reason, the slave of our passions. We cannot will what we will.

I wonder if, someday, humans will transcend the idea of good and evil. I wonder if someday we will no longer be ~~burdened trapped preoccupied consumed devoured corrupted besotted~~ **TORMENTED** burdened with the idea of morality.

I wonder if some day, *ought* will fade to simply *be*.

Wherefore came this want of freedom? The Stars above? A history of hairless apes all passing their cruel instinct to their children in a long chain of ~~births deaths~~ consequences? If the will came not from my own choice, was this forsaking of my duty no sin? Which *I* chose

to turn my back on my duty, and if the will to do so had not been mine, had failure been my only sin?

What is morality in the face of failure? To do good is the end of all moral people, but if the ends do not matter — if exquisite success can be as good as crushing defeat — then do the actions themselves not matter? Indeed, better then to stay seated in an airplane, cut off from the rest of the world, so that your desire to be good can remain pure and untainted.

I cannot stop the thoughts.

What choice can an ant make? Reacting to pheromones, stimuli, external and internal forces they cannot comprehend. What choice did I have in the forest? What I existed to choose? What I was there to choose *now*? The I that thinks, the I that acts. The I that acts is instinct inner nature the raging storm that is our inherited past. The I that thinks looks ahead to the future analyzing and discerning the alternatives and their consequences. And if some third I existed, some synthesizing chakra of will, what crafted *that* I? How deep could I go before I found the self that was not crafted exclusively by another?

I cannot stop the thoughts.

I see nothing but clouds out the window of my aluminum cell. For all my might, I too am trapped by the laws of nature physics biomechanics astrology mathematics. My thoughts they too are trapped in a cave of bone and three pounds of blind fat. I have my guesses they can only be guesses because I do not know how I know what I know. I tell myself there is an I a soul that if lost in a formless void would still be *aware* some ~~Ego~~ synthesis consciousness.

If there is choice I did not create what does the choosing. It was built for me; a ~~un~~ natural process of mental erosion as every wave of experience carves the *me* out of the shapeless marble block that was

my newborn brain. Or perhaps it grows like a ~~fungus from a spore~~ I cannot stop the thoughts tree from a seed, spreading outward and upward from internal proteins ~~no, that cannot be right~~ and mitochondria. The history of centuries compacted into a single strand of DNA, chromosomes that carry my future me in their simplistic structure. Maybe both. Maybe neither. We can never be completely free. Against all else we are bound to be good. That which should be done should be done What else limits our freedom Ourselves Gods above and below I pray we can limit ourselves There is one virtue that exists for those who have For the strong For the wise For the able A virtue ~~why do I seek virtue?~~ that is tested by inaction rather than action *Humility* The virtue of self-depreciation Hiding your strength A kind of temperance that is born from becoming "un-selved" and placing your faith in a the fundamental truth ~~there is no truth~~ that you are not important you do not matter you are not needed what you have has no value for it was not given to you for a purpose the counterpart to Pride the sin from which all other sin flows *I cannot stop the thoughts!* Please I beg you save me spare me ~~I must save myself~~ turn the page bring an end to this constant *thinking* I am dying and I think of all the questions I have ever asked myself this is the one that I wish I knew the answer to Is there such a thing as choice Can there be free-will is it our glory or ~~turn the page~~ our damnation that we are bound by laws beyond our crafting i cannot bear the constant weight of a million facets bringing nothing but uncertainty where there was knowledge before come you spirits that tend on mortal thoughts un-self me here i cannot withstand the ever changing chaos the perpetual churning mass the cancerous growth of questions ~~turn the page~~ always *questions* that burn away at my faith my action my will that i do not will what creates the want that i want no more questions why do i want no more questions why do i not want more questions ~~perhaps~~ the hunt is perpetual i don't want knowledge i want certainty i ~~who~~ ~~is~~ i have the answers no i do not i do not know why there is no why

~~only why~~ it is not my fault but whose fault ~~what is fault~~ is it there is
no fault then why does it happen the way ~~there is no deserve~~ it is so i
do not know ~~i do~~ i must ~~not~~ know the why why why i ~~no~~ cannot bear
it i beg you ~~turn the page~~ *turn the page!*

15

The plane set down two miles away from Fidaa's palace, seven miles away from the Temple. We disembarked, as all travelers must, lest the journey be unending.

...

Do you want me to thank you for turning the page?

Why? You spared me nothing. There is no suffering here. All pain is transient, existing only as long as it is perceived. Now, on a new page, there is nothing.

The I of the past is gone. He is lying in agony, face down against the pages you have already turned. Past. Gone. Dead. I am sure if he could thank you, he would, but I bear no such responsibility. I am a different I, as I always am. Cells divide and replenish, atoms drift away and cling once more, we are but one great ship of Thesius, our every self torn apart and born anew every, what, every year? Seven years? That's the story, but is it *true*?

I don't know. Maybe I used to.

You don't even *deserve* gratitude for turning the page. I knew you would; you *had* to have turned the page, have always turned the page, because if you had not you would not be reading these words, and this I would not exist. You couldn't have chosen otherwise.

I deserve to exist. Else I would not exist. The chain of cause and effect, and me at its apex.

Words, words, words. I'd best get on with my words. I wouldn't want you to be bored.

No, I couldn't stop if I wanted to. I have to tell you this story. I don't have a choice, because the letters have already been typed, set on paper, printed and bound in plastic. A series of ones and zeroes turned into letters. This story you are reading now has already been told, long before you read it.

It always feels better to say you had no choice, to say I had no choice. It means it's not our fault. It was just the way things are supposed to be. We are swimming in an ocean with waves that will toss us about until we tire and drown in their depths.

The end has already happened. It's there, waiting for you. Put down the book, throw it away, and the ending will not change. You turn page after page, take step after step, day after day.

You have no control over what happens next, only if you *witness* what happens next. There is only one truly serious philosophical problem, and that is turning the page.

...

Thank you. Thank you for turning the page.

I know it is not always easy.

...

The balcony is coming.

Of all parts of this story, I am most disgusted of the balcony. I *hate* the balcony. The balcony is my only chance. Was my only chance. Will I fail again, or will this time be different?

I lie to myself and say I don't know, but I do.

I don't even remember how I ended up on the balcony. A lot of time passed, but I don't remember it. I'll make something up so it flows better.

We do this, to our memories; to our reasons and excuses. We fill in gaps and holes with inventions and hopes. We forget the threads, the bindings, and only remember the words. We forget that sometimes the page, the whitespace, the times you can hear yourself breathe... those are just as important.

There was a greeting ceremony. I remember that. Perhaps it was a parade.

No, I cannot invent my path anew. What happened between the time we touched foreign soil to Fidaa's balcony? It is not important. Details. Facts. Flakes of skin drifting away and soon to be forgotten, ignored for their corrupting insignificance.

Only two things were significant. The first was only a few miles away: The Temple, birthplace of the Chosen, and by extension the civilization we had cultivated.

I've never felt particularly pious. Yet prayer was the first thing I remember; a prayer for the Hiker to turn away, to vanish back into the bad dreams of my past, and leave me alone. Now, not seven miles away from the tall dodecagon that had survived almost five thousand years, praying felt unnecessary because I was next to Alexander.

How could this have happened? How could a Viper have infiltrated such a blessed place? Could I have been wrong? Would I come to regret my foolishness? My worries consumed me as we traveled.

The second significance was the Viper itself. The Monster. Fidaa, keeper of the Temple, Chosen of the Wolf, and minister of the Chosen.

He was not there to meet us. Would not be there for days. Busy at the temple, they said, and instead had left his Chamberlain to service us as we desired until such time as he could meet with us.

But he was there all the same: a perfectly shaped hole made manifest by its absence. Imagine him surrounded by beasts and demons of his own, men and women with warm rifles and cold hearts. See in their eyes the burning passions that drove them beyond rationality, a unthinking devotion to their slithering god, their twisted mockery of a paragon. Officials and ministers dressed in debauched finery.

There was one painting of Fidaa in the entire palace. He was crafted out of a single line that curved about his outline marking limbs and face. His beard was jet black, and his eyes held the look of death.

How did he look to Alexander? I do not know. I imagine he must have looked like any other Chosen of the Wolf. Yet he provided a suitable contrast: While Alexander was large and beautiful, a symbol of bravery, strength, and purity; Fidaa was slim, small, and humble. In the painting, he did not gleam like Alexander. In Alexander's presence, you were small compared to his majesty. In Fidaa's presence, you were small because he was small, and he brought you to his level. He welcomed you there.

Vile poisonous lies!

I would kill Fidaa, I promised then and there, looking up at his oil-painted face. I would wait in his Palace until he returned, or perhaps would hunt him down in the Temple. Surrounded by his servants, I would finally erase the Viper from this plane of existence.

There was a ball that night, to celebrate our arrival. It would be difficult for me to forget the ball. I imagine Hell is difficult to forget as well, and for much the same reasons.

"Stop fussing." Alexander nudged me.

"I've never worn such tight clothing before," I complained. It felt like I was being choked. Not just around my neck, though the collar was stiff as a manacle, but my whole body was being squeezed,

suffocating from the tight cloth around my limbs and chest. "It feels like I'm wearing someone else's body."

The glass of champagne in my hand felt heavy. It was a trap, the champagne. We were surrounded by eyes and ears of dignitaries and military who wanted nothing more than to hear some secret conversation, some slip of the tongue that would end all diplomatic pretense. We needed to keep complete control of ourselves. But we couldn't not drink the champagne. That would be rude, and therefore suspicious.

It was harder for me, I'm sure. The conversations, the glasses clattering, the fabric brushing against itself, the footsteps on the carpeted floor, the chewing, the swallowing...I had to filter all of it out.

How can I describe the *pain* of the crowd?

It's the eyes. There are so many eyes. They twinkle, glittering in the distance like ice crystals.

It's not the watching, few eyes ever actually watch. No, it is the *seeing* that rakes hot coals across my skin. The glances. The casual awareness, the scanning gazes that pass through and roll off of you.

Photographs can steal your soul, they say. Eyes are windows into your ethereal depths. Your image is you and your self, seen through so many facets, directions, gazes crisscrossing the room like an ever-shifting spider's web, catching you, enfolding you, trapping you.

The only way to slip through, to avoid their spidery stare, is to play along. Disguise yourself as one of them and they will ignore you. They will not study you, judge you, cast you out; if you hold a mask to your face and play your part well enough, you will not be judged.

What comes with that is another poison all its own: you will never be alone. The stars in their eyes will shimmer forever in your

peripheral vision, and though you can move through the crowds you will still be trapped.

I couldn't bear it. I don't remember much of the party, save the pain.

One thing I do remember; I was approached by a well-dressed man of indiscriminate rank. I never learned his name. He spoke to me with a well-accented but fluent tongue.

"Please forgive me, sir, but you are from the Americas, I can tell. Do you know the story of the Emperor's New Clothes?"

I answered, hoping a brief affirmation would be enough and he would allow me to remain alone.

"Please, would you tell it to me?"

I did so, perhaps with less passion than he had hoped, but he clapped and smiled when I had finished, nonetheless.

"Thank you, I am most grateful. You see, I am fascinated by the tale. Every culture tells the story, but it changes with every telling. Sometimes the Emperor is cruel and oppressive, other times he's vain and demands applause, other times he's just a fool. Then he parades naked down the street and the spell is broken. Sometimes the emperor hides under his bed, other times holds his head high and finishes the parade. Sometimes he leaps to his death. I think it tells much about a culture, these little differences."

"I see."

"I was most fascinated by your telling. I think it tells me much."

"Well."

"One thing is always the same, no matter the telling. The spell is broken by a child. A young child, who speaks the truth of the emperor's nudity. Then, the truth out, everyone laughs and laughs and laughs. Do you want to know how I tell it?"

"If you like."

"The people do not laugh. Instead, they drag the child to the feet of the king, and beat it to death. Then they hang the body up in the center of the tower square, and leave it to rot — yes, a child! — for daring to speak the truth that everyone had chosen not to see. A much better ending, don't you think?"

"I think it's appalling," I admitted.

"Yes, I am not surprised," the man shrugged. "Many do not appreciate the lesson that it teaches, or teaching it to one so young. I feel it is important to know, even at a young age, what Truth is like."

16

If this story means anything to you, and I am not sure it will, there is one thing you must believe. When this book is closed and you walk away, there is one thing I beg of you to remember.

They will not save you.

I don't know who they are; it's different for everyone. You know who they are. You would follow them to the ends of the earth, when they come. Someday they will. They may exist, they may not. That is not the lie. Lies are deeper than truths. Salvation must be personal. They are not coming to save *you*. They don't know your name. They don't know how hard you have worked. They don't know how much you deserve what you don't have.

What they know is how tentative everything is. They see the teeming masses teetering on the edge of the knife as it warms over the fire, getting hot. A gentle tug, a soft breath, a small tap is all that is necessary to send you tumbling into the flames.

They know if they wait long enough, the knife edge will become burning, and you will jump all by yourself.

They will not save you. They don't even know your name. But they love you. They care for you. They make sure the knife is sharp and the fire is hot. Their nails are clean and their hair is always combed. They know you deserve the effort.

They will not catch you when you jump. They expect you to fly. They expect you to ignore all those who will fall after you. They expect you to forget all those who fell before you.

Like they forgot all who fell before them.

Because this is the way it *is*, and how it *is* must be how it *ought*. So falls the guillotine.

Maybe we need pain like we need pleasure. Maybe we seek conflict and struggle like we seek comfort. The dark and righteous sides of our nature cry for release, so we find things to hate, because to live without hate is to live without being human.

Thus is our tragedy: if virtue were easier than vice, we would all be saints. Choosing what is good takes effort; effort we are not always able to give.

Perhaps even choosing Evil had its own morality. It certainly had its own difficulties. It is so much easier, so much more seductive to be indifferent. Why give attention to the interruptions of our work, our hopes, our dreams? Becoming involved in another's pain and despair, as hero or villain, can be...awkward. Troublesome.

So be indifferent, and a million lives are crushed. What matters their pain? Their lives are meaningless. Of no consequence. Their anguish is of no interest. They become abstractions. Things. Objects. Not *real* people. Their lives irrelevant and their inherent worth and dignity wiped out at a single stroke.

Indifference is, as it has always been, a genocide.

I am not the first person to think so. You may recognize Elie Wiesel in those words. He said them first. I merely adjusted them to make you think I was profound.

None of these words are mine. Someone else has said everything there is to say, whether they told anyone or not. Maybe that's all this story is; recycling of old nonsense, old pieces of my life and yours, as my brain desperately struggles to survive in its bone jar; dark, silent, and alone.

Only we're not alone anymore. The world has gotten smaller. The

forest has vanished to be replaced by skyscrapers. Phones, cars, airplanes, internet...one person cannot care for all of us, cannot give consequence to every individual life. Dunbar had a number for it: one hundred and fifty. We simply aren't strong enough to recognize more humans than that.

But someone must, mustn't they? Couldn't we find someone? Give them a crown? Give them the power to care for everyone? To keep the blade sharp, and the flames hot?

Dominion is the nature of humankind. We seek control, we seek security, we seek agency over the world around us, to free us from our burdens of fear and uncertainty. We demand slaves to work and cook for us, machines to till the soil and walls to protect us. And deep in the darkness, in the pit of night, when the uncertainty grows in our souls, and a gnawing churning swell of viscous humanity swells up from our gut, we cry out for a Hero. Someone who can do what is good. Someone to make things right. We give our heroes the job we do not wish to do ourselves; to be.

Yet all power is corrupt, by nature if not by design. Our interconnected world demands that to have control over your life is to have control over others, and to rule requires both the scepter and the sword. Wearing the crown erodes every moral connection to humanity one has, for our humanity is defined by our limits, our weaknesses, our helplessness.

They will lie to you, like you lie to yourself, and say that if these Great Men and Women had not *been there*, we would have been worse off. Who else could have shouldered the burden? Who else could have seen the truth so clearly? Who else could have moved mountains, hearts, and minds?

Without our Heroes, where would we be? Do not be afraid, there will always be a hero to frighten away the darkness. We make them, like we make our villains.

And even then the story will not be over. It never ends. It rhymes.
It's not even past. Same as it ever was. Everything else follows.

Turn the page.

17

EXT. Fidaa's Palace. The Balcony.

FIDAA is leaning against the wall on the far stage right. He is smoking a cigarette, staring up at the stars. A beat as he takes a slow drag.

Enter ROMAN. He is dressed for a party, and carrying a full flute of champagne. He bursts through the upstage center doors, rushing to the balcony and leaning over the edge. He breathes heavily, in through the nose and out through the mouth. After a beat, he calms, and opens his eyes.

FIDAA: Can I get you another?

ROMAN *jumps, almost spilling his drink*

ROMAN: I...I thought you weren't going to meet us...you are at the Temple -

FIDAA: Yes. And now I am here. Such is life. Can I get you another?

ROMAN *glances to where FIDAA has gestured; his full champagne flute.*

ROMAN: Oh! No, no thank you. I haven't...
(*beat*) Ah. Yes. I see. Very funny.

FIDAA approaches ROMAN, leaning lightly on the balcony next to him. He gestures towards the door.

FIDAA: I imagine this is not an ideal place

for you, surrounded by voices and smiles and lives. The champagne could help.

ROMAN: No thank you.

FIDAA: You prefer the pain? *(pause)* Have you ever wondered if it is the Hunter that drives you away from people? Or is that simply who you are? Would you be uncomfortable in crowds even without the Stars in your head?

ROMAN: You're not supposed to be here.

FIDAA: No, probably not. Indulge me anyway.

ROMAN: I have never thought about it.

FIDAA: Why would you? Why concern yourself with who you would be if you were not you? There are so many things you are not, to question yourself is to invite paralysis. If we truly are Divine Mirrors of Holy Will, then introspection is a sin.

There is a pause while FIDAA studies ROMAN, his kind eyes searching for some hidden sign. ROMAN returns the gaze, full of alert caution and suspicion.

FIDAA: You are Chosen of the Hunter. You are the Hunt, endings, and death. Alexander is the Tower, of buildings and systems, law and safety. I, I am Chosen of the Wolf. I am packs, unity, and community. I am the binding of fellowship and the brutality of society. *(pause)* How are things between you and Alexander?

ROMAN: You are the Viper.

FIDAA: You know I am not.

There is another long pause

FIDAA: Why are you here, Roman?

ROMAN: I came with Alexander. We're here to –

FIDAA: No, the balcony. Why are you here?

ROMAN: I came out to get a breath of fresh –

FIDAA: No, *the balcony.* (*there is a long pause*) Why are you here?

Another pause while ROMAN and FIDAA stare out from the balcony into the audience, seeing yet making no sign that they see. This is the fourth wall. It allows the audience to pretend they are not there.

ROMAN: I don't want to be here.

FIDAA: This is the midpoint. The escalation of scope to a viewpoint beyond what it was before. Beginning, middle, and end.

ROMAN: I want to stop the story.

FIDAA: Do you? But we can't, can we? We are trapped in the story. We are the story.

ROMAN: It is a horrible story. I don't like how it ends.

FIDAA: Afraid of dying?

ROMAN: No, not dying. That's not the ending I'm afraid of.

FIDAA: Hmm...(FIDAA *takes a drink, and then gives a shrug.*) Care to talk about it?

ROMAN: With you? No.

FIDAA: Come now, we're not inside now. We are

alone, the two of us. (FIDAA *gestures, encompassing the audience*) We don't need to worry about the public expectations anymore. We need not be victor and vanquished. Let us be strange companions; here, if nowhere else.

ROMAN (*raising his glass*): I can drink to that.

FIDAA (*shrugs*): So, you are not afraid of death. Of course, you are, all living things are, it is an inescapable necessity of the condition. But never-mind, I will humor you. If you are not afraid of death, of how it will end, then...(FIDAA *puts a finger to his lips*) Hmm...Ah!

ROMAN: You understand.

FIDAA: I do. There is nothing more coveted by the righteous than innocence.

ROMAN (*confused*): What? No.

FIDAA: No? Still, the inescapable *possibility* of it all. I must confess, it frightens me as well. Potential energy. Just waiting.

ROMAN *looks around, as if coming out of a trance. He wipes his forehead*

ROMAN: This...this isn't right. This isn't how it happened.

FIDAA: It must be. How could it have happened any other way? The words do not leap off the page once they are written, they do not reshape themselves at another's whim.

FIDAA *looks out across the audience, and*

then points.

FIDAA: See there? The Constellation of the Tower is high in the sky tonight.

ROMAN: Yes. So there, (*points*) is the Hunter.

FIDAA and ROMAN *look all around, observing the sky, searching, but not finding.*

Finally, they both look straight up. They stare for a moment, letting what they see wash over them.

FIDAA: Do you look at the stars very often? For centuries humanity has sought its destiny in the stars. Across the world, we all look to the night sky with something like awe.

ROMAN: I wonder what the skies look like to the unchosen?

FIDAA: I imagine they look much the same.

ROMAN (*looks at FIDAA in shock*): No!

FIDAA: Elemental gasses burning in chemical fusion and fission for billions of years, billions of miles away. A construct of math and molecule that strikes the rods and cones in the eye... It is all the same to us. What difference could there be to change such a sight? (*FIDAA thinks for a moment.*) I can see why Alexander likes you.

ROMAN: Does he?

FIDAA *reaches into his jacket pocket.*

ROMAN: Don't.

FIDAA *slowly withdraws his hand, holding it out to show it is empty. After a pause, he*

speaks again.

FIDAA: Do you know how many Chosen there are alive today?

ROMAN: I was told no more than one percent of humanity.

FIDAA: Far less. By my calculations, only one percent of one percent.

ROMAN: No, that can't be right.

FIDAA: That was my thought at first, as well. I checked again and again. I even called for any scholar or star-gazer to show me where I was wrong, but no one answered my call. The world is getting smaller, Roman. Perhaps where an army of Chosen was needed before, only a few are needed now, and as the world shrinks further and further, bringing us closer and closer together, what is our proper reaction? Are we to struggle to keep our independence? Are we to fracture ourselves into a million shards of distinct humanity? A million countries with a million leaders and a million cultures all working separately? Or must we embrace a unification?

ROMAN (*looks back at the door inside.*): There will always be boundaries to unity. It is our nature to seek the familiar, the safe, the comforting. To fear the different.

FIDAA: True. Phones, the Internet; We find fellows of like minds, and replace the borders of geography with borders of morality and dogma. Sectarianism our ancestors could not have dreamed of.

ROMAN: Sectarianism has always been there. Wars between religions or faiths are nothing new.

FIDAA: But before, such wars were bound to *here* and the *now*. We protected our cities and farms from outsiders. Our nations from foreign greed. Now, we are no longer concerned with our cities or nations, because half of their occupants aren't like us *anyway*. We no longer fight to protect our homes or cities. We fight to protect our hopes, our memories, our beliefs...our points of view. The wars of today are over visions of what the world should *be*. Not wars between nations or religions, but wars between *futures*.

ROMAN: Lies.

FIDAA: Venom.

ROMAN: Viper.

FIDAA: Theatre.

ROMAN: (*wailing*) But is it *right*?

FIDAA *reaches into his jacket pocket again.*

ROMAN *quickly turns away.*

ROMAN: Please, don't.

FIDAA: (*sighs*) Laws can build cohesive societies by encumbering everyone equally, while now...now the masses are becoming obsolete. Going the way of the telegraph, to be replaced by individuals. Nothing more than a cluster of great men and women, affecting the world as they see fit. The multitudes silenced at last by lack of purpose. Why have

Populi when their existence is superfluous?

ROMAN: (*laughs*) Absurd!

FIDAA: (*shrugs*) We demand of the universe an order of things, a way of living that is accordance with its spinning orbs of fire and gas, but we are not owed an answer.

There is a long pause while ROMAN stares at FIDAA.

ROMAN: We're not supposed to talk about politics or religion at parties.

FIDAA: (*grimaces*) Oh damn.

ROMAN: I thought you should know.

FIDAA: No, I...damn...I did know. I must have forgotten. I apologize.

ROMAN: It's alright.

FIDAA: No, it's not. (*FIDAA takes a drink before leaning on the balcony, his head shaking.*) I broke a vital social contract; our need to avoid the *tough* questions. Tough answers. You might have accidentally learned something about who I am.

ROMAN: Was.

FIDAA: Was? (*remembers*) Was, yes. (*raises a glass to the fourth wall*) If we truly knew each other, we could finally hate one another. Lies are not what separate us, Roman, they bind us together stronger than any truth. (*takes a drink, and heaves a sigh*) Say, whom do you think will win Alexander's soul? You or I?

ROMAN (*laughs*): That's not what we're fighting over.

FIDDA: Isn't it? We're going to have a real fight, Roman. Not a little dance like what you had with Alexander on the roof. A final showdown like in the movies. Beast against Monster, Hero vs. Savior. (FIDAA *stares into his glass*) I wonder which one of us will be which, in the end.

ROMAN: Why are you doing this?

FIDAA: I am not doing anything. I'm simply reciting the words written on the page. Can't you hear my voice?

ROMAN: No.

FIDAA: Of course not. It's not my voice you hear, but the one in your head. One manufactured by the brain to maintain the illusion that this, (FIDAA *reaches out and taps the balcony railing with his knuckle, listening to the sound.*) ...or this, (FIDAA *points at the set, sweeping his hands across the stage and at the wall behind them.*) ...or this, (FIDAA *reaches out and picks up the universe from where it sits, and holds it under ROMAN's nose*) ...is anything more than a dream.

ROMAN: I don't dream anymore.

FIDAA *laughs as he sets the universe back in its place, the solar system a bit to the left from where it was before.*

FIDAA: Then how confusing this must be for you!

ROMAN: I am so tired of being confused. I want to know why. I want to know! But for all I learn, the more confused I am.

FIDAA *reaches into his jacket for a third time.*

FIDAA: Are you sure?

ROMAN (*suddenly afraid*): No. Please.

FIDAA: Are you willing to accept those consequences? It would all be your fault, after all.

ROMAN: *Our* fault. We make the world anew every day. With every word, with every step. If I am culpable, than so are you.

FIDAA: And is it your place to put such culpability on me? Can I not have, in my own way, some control over my moral place in the universe?

ROMAN: It makes a difference.

FIDAA: Difference enough to tip the scales?
There is a long pause.

ROMAN: Perhaps knowledge and certainty are incompatible.

FIDAA *slowly pulls a book out of his jacket.*
ROMAN *covers his face.*

FIDAA: Are you truly ready?

ROMAN: I don't want to be.

FIDAA: Think of everything you'll be giving up.

ROMAN: I am so tired.

FIDAA: There is nothing more coveted by the righteous than ignorance.

ROMAN: Yes. Yes, that's right.

FIDAA moves to stand behind ROMAN, opening the book and holding it so the open pages are pressed against his chest, in both hands.

FIDAA: We all seek to keep our innocence. We pray in the darkest pits of the night that we might forever remain ignorant.

ROMAN collapses to the floor, his hands still pressed to his face.

FIDAA: On that day, we want to stand tall before the judgment. We want to place a proud hand upon our breast, and with firm jaw and clenched fist say...

ROMAN looks up, tears streaming down his face.

ROMAN: I had no idea! Forgive me! Had I known. Had I *known!* I would have tried harder, I would have sacrificed, I would have made restitution, I would have been good had I but known!

FIDAA holds out an empty hand and places it on ROMAN's head.

FIDAA: But you were ignorant. You were innocent. You cannot be blamed.

ROMAN collapses to tears again, this time of relief. As he sobs, FIDAA slowly turns pulls the book away from his chest.

FIDAA: Are you ready?

ROMAN *collects himself.*

ROMAN: I must hope.

FIDAA: Hope for what?

ROMAN: To avoid the worst.

FIDAA: The worst of what?

ROMAN: Of all worsts. (*pause*) We know it ends in death and pain and everything we hold dear shattered like pieces of glass on the ground. It is disease and famine. It is plague and mushroom clouds. It is winter. Always winter. Or maybe it is no more than a tiny room, and an empty crib. Whatever the it is, there is nothing worse. I'd call it hell.

FIDAA: And you would stop it? What will you sacrifice? Tell me, Roman, if you could spare every soul in the entire world from the fires of Hell, would you sacrifice your life? Of course you would, everyone would. What is a life when compared to such evil? And if the same salvation required you to kill another, would you still do it?

ROMAN: I have spent my whole life doing exactly that.

FIDAA: Twenty others? Fifty? A hundred? To save not the whole world, but half? A country? A city? How many people must die, and how few must be saved before the cost is too high?

ROMAN: There is no math. There is no measuring.

FIDAA: Then the unmesurables! Happiness?

Peace? *Certainty?* What will you risk to save another? To save yourself?

ROMAN: To be good? There can be no limits.

FIDAA: Oh come now. Society is built on rules. The Hunt is nothing *but* rules. The rules of the game, the rules of the story. If there are no rules, *And Do What Thou Wilt shall be the Whole of the Law.*

ROMAN: Then I will sacrifice the rules themselves.

FIDAA: Your morals? Would you, in fact, allow yourself to become an evil person, to spare another soul the burden, if it were necessary? What are your ethics compared to the salvation of another? *(pause)* Will you throw yourself to the slaving beast, red in tooth and claw, and sacrifice everything you hold dear to save everything you hold dear?

ROMAN: Yes.

FIDAA: Your soul?

ROMAN: My friends.

FIDAA: Your freedom?

ROMAN: My peace.

FIDAA: Your place in heaven?

ROMAN: Anything.

FIDAA: Innocents?

ROMAN: Innocence. *(pause)* Innocence.

FIDAA: Is there any greater sin? *(pause)* The sacrifice of innocents? Of innocence? *(pause)*

Will you be good? (pause) How?

ROMAN: I am ready.

FIDAA (*nods slowly*): Can I say I am proud of you?

ROMAN *shakes his head no*. FIDAA *steps forward, reaching over ROMAN's shoulder to place the book in his hands*. ROMAN *slowly stands. He holds out the book, and begins to read. After a minute, tears flowing down his face as he learns, he turns the page.*

LIGHTS. CURTAIN.

18

Regression. Full circle. Back to the beginning. Where it all began.

A pilgrimage most holy is the journey back. It is a journey that cannot be made by mere mortals. At best we can grasp at feelings, sensations that inspire us to believe we have somehow returned to where it all started. At peace, free and innocent once more. Most poisonous Nostalgia!

A dichotomy; perhaps we desire to shed ourselves of the very wisdom we sought when we began. Or, we hope to retain everything we achieved, and hope to change the path. After all, *if we had only known!*

Back to the start of it all.

For the Chosen, the start was the Temple, the point from which our destiny was forged. Born astride a history-book, we cannot help but look back as we march onward.

We left without soldiers, without guards, without anyone but each other. We wandered the roads and sands towards the Temple without a single soul aware of our passage. These things must be private.

What does the Temple look like? As with all holiest, to describe it is to desecrate it. An application of meters and degrees to a domicile that is focused towards the immeasurable, the insurmountable, the inescapable. A composite of facts and labels that prophesied their culmination: Sand. Stone. Slits for light. Clay tiles. Pictograms carved in thick slabs, written in a language older than the oldest story. An altar on which now only dust is sacrificed.

On the altar was Fidaa.

How long had he been there? How did he get to the Temple from the balcony before us? Maybe he ran. Maybe he flew. Maybe he was never at the Ball. Maybe there was no Ball nor balcony. Maybe we went straight to the Temple. Maybe we were never at the Temple, and all of this happened among the many floors and hallways of the Tower in URUC. Maybe this is all fantasy concocted in my mind, and none of it ever *really* happened.

It did happen. Is happening. Always happened, and will happen again. We cannot stop the story.

What is important is this; Fidaa was on the altar, ropes wrapped around his body. His calves were bound to his thighs, his shoulders and wrists tied tight. His head was bowed, unable to rise lest the cord choke his throat. He was there, trapped and helpless, and I have never felt more afraid.

There is a religious ceremony, I don't remember which, that involves binding. Ropes wrap around wrists, cloth draped around hands, a chain laid over the chest, a ring placed on the finger. There is something holy in binding, restriction, limitation. Even God cannot act in opposition to God. Bound in chains of moral code and locked with the prayers of humanity.

*Weave a circle round him thrice,
And close your eyes with holy dread,
For he on honey-dew hath fed,
And drunk the milk of Paradise.*

Why do we sing praises to those who were bound? Jesus to the cross, Odin to the World Tree, Prometheus to his rock, Odysseus to his mast. Sun Wukong under his mountain, and then again with his headband. Heroes of all causes who are bound themselves, whose free will is crippled in the cause of something greater. Is this the

holy ideal we seek for our saviors? Are the good men and women of the world those who prevent themselves from acting?

There he was, wrapped in ropes that curled about him like a snake around the roots of a tree. So tight were the bonds that his skin began to redden, like an apple.

He was not the last viper. Nor was he the first. I know that now. Perhaps I knew it then, staring at him, seeing the coils of rope that bound him on the alter, that this was no more than a mortal man. How uncomfortable must it have been. Or perhaps he found comfort in the pain.

Alexander stepped towards the bound man, whose gaze could not rise to meet his, and knelt before him.

At seeing this, my Alexander supplicating himself before our most hated enemy, I could not still my tongue. I opened my mouth and shouted into the dusty air. "Fidaa is the Viper! He is the rot that corrupts the world, the death that blights the soil, the end of everything you hold dear. Slay him, Alexander, slay him now and let there be an end!"

And Alexander opened his mouth, and said; "no."

I could not speak. I could not breathe. My very soul was choked with the impossibility of it. Alexander knelt before the Viper, and he would not strike a killing blow?

He spoke again. "I have spent my time in URUC learning to lead, to guide, to build a civilization that can withstand enemies from inside and out. And someday," his voice was slow and measured, "I will die."

I don't like to think about how much him saying that affected me.

He continued: "I have spent many days thinking about what must come after me. I cannot set aside my crown, because there is no one

better to wear it. But I must secure the future of URUC, with leadership that will continue the people's safety and prosperity."

"The dream will not die along with you," I said, uncertain if I was right.

He continued: "Who would replace me? What? Something greater? Or something worse? And if what follows me will be worse, then do I not have the duty to insure that they never take my place? If I leave, the wisdom I have earned will be lost. How many people will suffer? More pain. More suffering, suffering that I could prevent."

His eyes shone in the darkness, his cold and sensible madness clear in the dusty silence. "What is a city but an idea? What is a flag but a symbol? A hero must be a symbol for the people, a living shorthand for everything that is good and noble. A flag can be twisted over the years, symbols take on different meanings as time passes and the world changes...but as a *living* symbol, as a true *Hero*, I can inspire and guide the people of URUC for centuries! The perfection of URUC will never fade, and everything that I have striven for shall never be forgotten! The virtue of URUC will simply *be*, forever!"

"For years we thought the Viper cleansed from this world," Alexander said to Fidaa, who had not yet moved a muscle. "And yet here you sit. You lied away your death, you lied away your presence to the Stars, now I beseech you. Please, Fidaa, humbly I beg you. I came to this place of ceder and wind seeking the respite from death you claimed for yourself. Will you grant it me? Will you grant me immortality?"

With the sound of the opening of a thousand ancient tombs, Fidaa opened his mouth and a forked tongue spoke words of venom.

"The basal ganglia are a group of subcortical nuclei in the human brain."

My hands clapped to my head. I shrieked to Alexander, bid him

stuff wax in his ears to silence the sirens' song, but he did not move. Allowed inside, the Viper continued to speak.

"They are situated at the base of the forebrain and top of the midbrain. They are strongly interconnected with the cerebral cortex, thalamus, and brainstem, as well as several other brain areas. They are associated with a variety of functions, including control of voluntary motor movements, procedural learning, habit learning, and emotion."

"Do not listen!" I shouted, pleading with my companion. "His lies will poison you and all will be lost!" I forced my hands over Alexander's ears to spare him the dark and evil magics, but he did not move. He continued to stare at Fidaa, enraptured by words he could not have heard.

"Popular theories claim the basal ganglia's primary function is likely to control and regulate activities of the motor and premotor cortical areas so that voluntary movements can be performed. The basal ganglia exert an inhibitory influence on a number of motor systems, and a release of this inhibition permits a motor system to become active."

"Please, Alexander," I released him to clasp my hands in supplication, a more useful act I thought, "Kill this vile poisoner before the world erodes away from his bilious lies!"

But the Viper's voice was calm and unyielding. He spoke as if he did not realize either of us were listening; a trance-like drone that filled the Temple with his hateful spiteful lies.

"More recently, some neuro- and cognitive-scientists hypothesize that the basal ganglia are responsible not only for motor action selection, but also for the selection of more cognitive actions."

Alexander nodded. "Our base instincts, our animal natures, they are a part of us. Through such action do we know of ourselves. Who are

we but our actions? What is thought but excuse? What is life but movement? What is I but the space not occupied by the rest of the world?"

I gripped Alexander's head, forcing antidote down his welcoming ears, building walls against the Viper's tongue. "URUC is a place of order, peace, and prosperity. I have felt the pain of meaningless movement, with no purpose, significance, or consequence. To fly above the world with no ground to support you. URUC is more than a place, it is an Idea of Greater Service, which elevates the meanest and most insignificant to a glorious and dignified thread in a divine tapestry."

Alexander did not stop, my words were not enough. "A cave of Laws made by mortals. Manufactured dreams of moral rectitude and cosmic justice, filtered through three pounds of fat in a bone jar. Artificial motivations applied through distorted memories of ancient instincts. Words that pry humanity apart from its natural place in the phyla of the world." But perhaps my words were not in vain; he gripped my hands and looked at me with eyes of fear. "But is it right? Is that how it is, or how it ought to be?"

Vile Viper! Oh spiteful Fidaa, he lied again through bound limb and fetal pose:

"Species-specific defense reactions is the specific tendency to avoid certain stimuli which is perceived as threats. This is how animals survive in the wild. Humans and animals both share these species-specific defense reactions, such as the flight-or-fight, which is controlled by the sympathetic nervous system."

"We all seek freedom from fear," Alexander gaped. "Freedom from the self and the other. We fear someone stronger will take the bread from our mouths. We fear someone cleverer will trick the roof from over our head. We fear someone faster will drain the well dry before we wet our throat. So we build walls. We build systems. We build

cities..."

"Do not listen to his lies!" I shouted, desperate to keep Alexander from falling to sin. "The very essence of fear and pain is to be avoided. To desire them is to deny their purpose."

"But our walls bind us," Alexander pushed me aside. "Why be strong when the stronger cannot harm us? Must I cripple myself with manacles and tell myself it is good we are all chained equally?"

Viper Fidaa continued to hiss: "Such protections are learned quickly through social interactions between others of the same species, other species, and interaction with the environment. These acquired sets of reactions persist, as the animal that survives is the animal that already knows what to fear and how to avoid this threat."

"The chains are heavy," Alexander sobbed.

"Chains can be a liberation," I protested, feeling the comforting intangible weight of my own. "What freedom do the weak have if the stronger are not bound? Is it the lot of the deprived to be abused by those who have power?"

Alexander looked at Fidaa with such reverence, it broke my heart. "I understand what you tell me, Viper. Nature is the true meritocracy. A morality of fate, absent all illusion. The weak enslave themselves, willingly succumbing to the winds of fortune."

I cried out, grabbing my hair and beating the ground with my fists. Could I not save Alexander from these lies? I was Chosen of the Hunter, was I not? I should have grabbed the Viper, lifted him from the altar and dashed his body to the cold ground. His blood should have spilled across the floor. "What is more distant, more free from our own choice and will than the Stars? There will *always* be a dictator; let it be a mortal one who can be seen, understood, and if need be, fought!"

Once more the Viper spoke: "A hormone is a signaling molecule produced by glands in multicellular organisms, that are transported by the circulatory system to target distant organs to regulate physiology and behavior. Hormones serve to communicate between organs and tissues for physiological regulation and behavioral activities such as digestion, metabolism, respiration, tissue function, sensory perception, sleep, excretion, lactation, stress induction, growth and development, movement, reproduction, and mood manipulation."

Did I know it then? Perhaps I did. Perhaps it was simply looking at Fidaa again, at the bonds that cut into his skin and bound him so tightly. In a moment I understood. *Was it truly as simple as that?*

No more uncertainty! I would not *allow* myself the damnation of doubt. Truth and lies; water and fire. Alexander would see him for what he was.

I reached out to the Viper, and with the short quick movements of a purposeful will, I broke the ropes and chains which bound my hated foe.

He unfolded like a wet piece of paper, a dead spider suddenly given life again. He collapsed to the altar, spreadeagled and gasping for breath. His eyes, before filled with the peace of the dead, now filled with fear once his shielding bonds were severed.

He was no longer helpless, and thus could be destroyed.

Alexander, free from his illusions, collapsed to the earth again, kowtowing to the limp Viper in a mockery of true devotion. Though I could hear his sobs, I did not turn to him, but gripped Fidaa by his shoulders, pulling him upright. I remember... he was so light, almost cotton in my hands.

"Why?" I asked, the only question to which I knew there was no answer. "Speak now, oracle of rot, and tell us why!"

The fear in Fidaa's eyes slowly drained as the knowledge of his situation settled on him. The world hung still and silent as the forked tongue flickered. "Do not lie to yourself. You know the answer already."

Oh horrible, how the Venomous snake tore open my chest with such quiet whispers!

What did I say?

I don't remember.

I leaned down and whispered into Alexander's ear the words he needed to hear. Or I cried and held him close to my chest, and our sorrows drowned the viper with tears. Or his fears bound myself to him tighter than Fidaa's syrupy lies. I honestly don't know what I said, if indeed I said anything at all. Perhaps I didn't say anything — didn't have the last word.

I am Hunter. I *am* the last word. It couldn't have happened any other way, could it? I placed my hand on Alexander's back, as gentle as any lover's touch, and told him what to do.

Did I make him? Did he choose himself? Is there a difference?

Who really chose, in that moment, the future that became? I don't know. All I know is, Alexander reached out to Fidaa, and gripped him by the throat.

"For punishment?" Fidaa asked, finally looking Alexander in the eye, in a voice now free from fear. "Justice? Prevention? Jealousy? What is your excuse, Alexander?"

Alexander spoke through dry lips: "Demand me nothing. What you know, you know."

Why, why, why. You still want answers? Fine. Here.

"The page is empty," I hear you cry. "It is barren. Blank."

Do not lie to yourself. If you think it is empty, then you can fill it with your own answers. I've lived long enough in this world to know that you already have.

Part 3

Are you still here?

Why? Why are you still looking at me?

Such a useless question. A useless word for a useless concept. Why.

Who? Where? When? What? How? Solid conceptual questions.

Name me a person, a place, or a time. Give me concrete facts. Paint me the picture of the world the way it *is*.

Why? A demand for explanation, for an *ought*. Even when an answer is given, the obvious recursive rejoinder is waiting: why is it so? For what *reason*? A need for meaning, for answers when they already exist, even though we turn away in disgust when we see them. We pretend they are not there, because...

I don't know why.

But it is good that we do.

...

This is the third and final part of the story. My death is nearer still. I can't avoid it. Yours is nearer too. You cannot avoid it. Just take it one day at a time.

I'm sorry I yelled at you.

It was so long ago; back at the beginning of Part 2, but I'm still sorry. It feels like it was seconds ago. I still feel bad. But I was afraid of the truth; that I had made a mistake on the rooftop. It hurts to

know you were wrong, and in reliving the memory, I blamed you.

No, that is just more excuses. I remember what I did, and I remember it was wrong. I remember that once, for a short period of time, I was a bad person. There is a stain now on my conscience. I will never not have done this bad thing.

I don't like feeling bad. I don't like hearing the voices of recrimination and guilt. Pain to be avoided. Sympathetic suffering because of my own actions. What have I done?

Perhaps this is why I want to be a good person, why we all do; to avoid shame. I don't want to feel guilty, or accountable for your suffering. I don't want to be subject to your pain, so I must be subject to your well-being.

I'm not sure I want the responsibility.

...

Why did I start telling this story? There were an infinity of alternatives. I had no choice. It was this or nothing.

There is always a choice. It is not always a good one. Bind a human in iron chains, blind them, gag them, and still they can choose. Perhaps they rage and struggle against the chains. Perhaps they seek piece in their confinement. Perhaps they examine every fleeting and involuntary sensation in their body, searching for meaning in their blind and silent vigil.

Perhaps the question is not who is to blame for our present, but to whom we should entrust our future. Who will be bestowed with our irrational faith, and occupy the impossible dichotomy of ruler and servant, mother and father, all-powerful and totally powerless.

Perhaps we are simply brains in bone jars, our three pounds of blind and immobile fat being fed information through incomprehensibly complicated machines. Perhaps nothing exists except for me.

"Ce n'est pas une histoire."

You and me. And in a few more chapters, only you.

...

Why are you still reading my words?

Are you a character in my story? You are audience, yes, but do you take part as well? I am nothing but letters making words making pictures; but the pictures do not exist on the page. In the movie-reel of your mind they flicker and dance, shadows on the wall of your skull. S. K. U. Two Ls. Five symbols to make a cavern with gaping sinuses, a dome as smooth and full of promise as an egg, two gaping hollows as expressive and full of life as any eye. Curved cheekbones. Brow ridges. Blunt ivory that chews atop a firm semicircular jaw. Is the flesh still attached? Do you see the muscles as well? The spine and neck and shoulderbones connected to the rib bones the rib bone's connected to the hip bone the hip bone's connected to the leg bone the leg bone's connected to the knee bone now hear the word in a voice of your own creation, in the cave, flickering on the wall. What does my voice sound like to you? Does it sound like your own voice? A voice that sounds different to everyone else.

I only wrote this story. Are you telling it? I thought I was the storyteller. Perhaps I'm not. I thought I was the protagonist, but perhaps I'm not. Perhaps I am your antagonist, keeping you from fulfilling your narrative rite your narrative right to guide the story as you see fit. Obstacles in your path as you read from one word to the next, one letter to the next.

But you don't see the letters, do you? I don't, when I read. I only see the words. No leaves, just a tree. No trees, just a forest. All washing over me as I construct a world from someone else's words.

Words, words, words.

Why are you reading my words?

Please do not misunderstand, I am grateful for your attention, I only exist now because you are reading my words...but I would truly like to know. Do they give you comfort? Solace? Do they make sense of a vast and confusing universe beyond our understanding? I doubt it. I am not wise in such matters. If I am not confusing you, you must already be mad.

Do my words amuse you? Do they distract you from your life, your own troubles and tribulations? Does knowing another feels misery in his soul and despair in his heart ease the pain of your own existence? Are you laughing at my foolish antics, a monkey dancing for your attention?

Are you Curious? Of what? When you overturn the final rock, and crest the final hill, will you be satisfied no matter what you find? Or are you looking for something specific?

In the end,

the final end of it all,

that began

at the beginning,

do you suspect,

hope,

or fear

do? that you,

to in fact,

better have

nothing

Perhaps it's a favor? A kindness to me? Do you think it's your duty to bear witness, to watch me as I die, and listen to my silent words as some kind of testament to my humane folly?

Then I release you. Don't grace me with favors. I am dying. I will never know of your generosity. I am long since dead; your favor cannot touch me. What does it matter, your kindness?

What does any of it matter?

Eventually, the world will end. The sun will expand, burning away the immovable mountains and intractable oceans. If we have moved on by then, our new home will eventually burn away too. The stars that guide us will die, and the universe will collapse into complete silence. We can't win, we can't break even, we can't get out of the game.

When that happens, the last living thing will have the duty — the honor — of thinking the last thought, speaking the last word, feeling the last sensation of any living thing of all time; and this ultimate finality will go unheard, unnoted, unexperienced, unshared.

Perhaps the inherent transient nature of our existence — indeed, of all things — gives you only one question worth asking. This, or Nothing?

What does your kindness matter? If you seek meaning beyond the kindness itself, then the answer is; nothing. Nothing at all.

Or everything.

You do have answers. You need answers. You already have them, but you lie to yourself and say you don't. They're there, in the pit of your stomach. In the beating of your heart.

Answers are primal. Blood and meat. Flesh and bone. Mastication and digestion and ovulation and ejaculation and turgid churning bile and phlegm. Meat that walks and talks and rots *oh so slowly*. The

answers scream out to you from the base of your brain. Hormones and endorphins and adrenaline. Fight or flight. Eat or sex. Now or later. Chew. Breed. Bite and claw. Run and jump. Act.

Is that enough? Then put down the book. You have your answers. Walk away. Do not let me bring you doubt.

No? You are very kind. Thank you. Now you must read on.

It will be *hard*. You will *hate* it. And in the end, you will die. The only uncertainty is when.

Each turn of the page brings you closer.

19

Where to begin, when everything is done? We'll begin at the beginning; my third awakening.

When stepped out of the Temple, I had awoken as if from a dream. I had been sleeping, though I did not know it, and I had awoken from a stupor I had seeped in ever since that day on Alexander's roof.

Cut off the head of the snake and the rest will die. The fish rots from the head down. When you kill a king, a new king will arise. This is because we are neither snakes nor fish. We are servants, all of us, to a higher purpose. A higher cause. Something that can outlast even death, which are the only things that have meaning.

We took them the head of Fidaa, and showed them the error of their ways. We cut down the demon king who had ruled them, and they hated us. They cried and wailed and gnashed their teeth and beat their chests. They roared like lions, reaching for us with clawed hands, demanding a reason, an explanation. Why had we killed their king?

They demanded vengeance. Blood in payment. Death in sympathy. They need our pain, and so it was war. Chaos reigned in Fidaa's kingdom. Soldiers poured from open doorways, as the citizenry took up their arms against the adversaries they knew were there but they could not see. In the churning sands, guns were turned on each other as every man, woman, and child, struggled to survive.

Who were these people, who followed the Viper without question, who attacked us without the slightest desire to hear *our* side of the story? Did they not wish to know *why* we cradled their ruler's head

in our hands, dripping cold blood on the dust?

Is that not what good is? To be eager to help and reluctant to harm? To demand reasons to fight while needing none to help? Who were these people, who were so eager to tell stories of slaughtered children, who dared see the emperor for what he was: naked, alone, and frightened of the many-faced mob that clamored at his golden door?

Is this what happens when a cause is slain? Bereft of a guiding compass, do we all descend into vile monstrosity, tearing into the foreign flesh that once sustained us?

No, they were but puppets, as I, as Alexander, lashing out like petulant children, desperate to proclaim their existence to the uncaring universe, blind to the strings that pulled them.

I was a Monster that day, and I didn't know any of their names.

How many died? Did it matter? Can lives be added and subtracted in a macabre math equation to calculate their value and cost? If they could, what price would be worth it? I stared at the bodies, and I wondered. Damn me, I wondered who was responsible.

You are as responsible as I. You see the bodies. In truth, it is you who sets the rifle against my arm, sees the bullet fly through the air. If I scream in black ink, it is you who hears the sound, crafts the tone, the pitch, the volume.

I am not trying to excuse my actions. My actions require no excuse. Reflex is action without intent. I did not plan my killing, or calculate my intent to kill. Bullets flashed overhead, screams and shouts and explosions set my brain to work, filling my veins with adrenaline and smoke. I was not in control of myself. I wonder who was?

Alexander's plane was destroyed. The airfields were torn to pieces. The few survivors were focused on burying the dead, hiding them

from view so the pain would ease and they could forget.

They rot beneath the ground, fading away more and more every day. Flesh becomes liquid then gas, infusing the earth with our atoms to become grass, trees, the air we breathe and the food we eat. A carbon cycle of life and death and life again. Another link in the chain of cause and effect.

Death. Pain and torment are transient things, while death is eternal and inescapable. Of all the stones tossed in the river, death creates the largest ripples.

We did not speak, Alexander and I, as we walked. What was there to say?

How could he have done it? How could he have killed Fidaa so easily? A being whose only sin was to disagree with Alexander's view of the world?

Fidaa was no Viper. He was just another Chosen, like Alexander.

Not like me. He was nothing like me.

Had Fidaa been Chosen of the Wolf? I do not know. Perhaps he was not one of the Chosen at all, but what he did, what he said, he must have been Chosen, how could he not have been? He was a monster, and a saint, a killer and a king. In his mad devotion he had transcended or perhaps regressed to something greater.

And Alexander had killed him so unnecessarily, this noble Monarch of the fertile crescent. What drives someone to kill so freely? So without care for the consequences of their action? A belief held in gentle hands of iron; that they are good. That they are correct. That death is a kindness, and to change a foe to a friend is a destruction far more complete than mere demise.

The silence was broken by a strangled sob from Alexander. He was weeping.

The fact delighted me. Not simply his pain, but that he was not suffering in silence; he wanted me to know his shame. But no, this display of social penance, this remorseful confession, meant nothing to me. Our bond had been severed. I had transcended the concerns of simple action and intent.

Did he regret his actions? Did he despair his means, or curse his ends? Did one justify the other? There are no ends, nor no means, nor any justification; they all exist as they were in tandem.

No, Alexander's tears did not interest me.

There was much to say. I did not say it. I let it fester in me, growing like a pustule in my throat so that when I could find the words, they would be fueled with bile and hate.

I hated Alexander.

In silence we walked until we reached the ocean, across which lay URUC.

We began to build a raft, a boat to carry us home. We felled trees with our bare hands and lashed them together with young vines. We fashioned sails from the discarded rags of torn flags. We carved troughs in which to sleep, and jugs for fresh water.

Hell is other people, from whence all temptation comes; so Heaven must be empty.

When the raft was finally finished, its sail straining against the winds and the waters lapping playfully at its side, I placed Alexander on its broad back and pushed him out to sea. My strong legs carried us a mile from shore, maybe less.

When I was certain the sea and sky held Alexander firmly in their grasp, I released the raft.

Unbidden, words from our mutual past flickered across the surface

of my mind, the memory as clear as a still pond.

"I'm going to leave you now."

My piece was said. What more mattered? I turned about and swam back to shore.

"Roman?"

How I hated his surprise! Hubritical selfish man! How he still — *still!* — could think the universe cared for his hopes, his plans, his view of the world. How *dare* he feel surprise!

"Roman?"

Pleading now, the bastard. I hated him. I hated everything about him.

I was tired. I wanted to go back to my forest. But why? To be fundamentally and eternally alone, with nothing but countless memories and dreams of your life's futility to keep you company, how could this crowded solitude be heaven? We cannot will what we will.

"*Roman!* Don't leave me!"

He was crying again, tears flowing down his marble face. I could not look back. I dared not look back, lest my body melt and join the salt of the sea.

When I reached the shore, and I could no longer see his face, I turned back. I looked out at the ocean water where the raft floated, distant and alone. A fulcrum between the winds and the waves. The dark depths and the pale heavens meeting in a line, regressing to a single dark point. Focusing ever deeper. An eternity of blue surrounded him, isolated him, trapped him.

He was helpless; alone and empty between the wide expanses. He was nothing to me, now. He was nothing to anyone.

Perhaps he would learn to sail. He might struggle for days, perhaps months or years, fighting the winds and waves — quite fruitlessly — to take him somewhere familiar, a home perhaps, new or old.

Perhaps he would relinquish his control over his future to the air and the water that embraced him. Perhaps the raft would lazily drift back to shore, given time, and he would be once more beset by the wounded souls of Fidaa's followers. Or, if he let it, the currents might take him back to URUC.

Staring out at Alexander, I felt the power I had over him.

Isolated. Alone. Lonely.

I had never seen a more pitiable sight. Of all the men and women I had ever known, Alexander was truly the greatest. Good? Perhaps; to be good, philosophers have debated for centuries. But to be great? To be great takes only power. Potential energy. For good or ill. Greatness is no more than the coupled ability and will to change the world.

He had been tall, and handsome, and clean, and beautiful. Now, in the middle of the brilliant blues, he was nothing more than a black spot in an otherwise perfect universe. Absent his fellow humans, his humanity, he was an embarrassing flaw.

Alexander was dead. Oh, his heart still beat and his breath still flowed; but Alexander, the impossible king, the giant of URUC, the Chosen of the Tower, was dead. I didn't believe it. I stared, waiting for the illusion to fade from my sight, for Alexander to be standing whole and unbroken.

Was this all it took to kill a king? A single wound on unbreakable skin? A chip off of an uncrackable shell? A single truth piercing the propaganda like a sword?

I began to laugh. I couldn't help myself. It wasn't funny, but I

laughed all the same. How quickly the world had changed! In a single moment of water and wind, I became the more powerful! I, who turned away and left the raft to its own design, could control Alexander's future while he could not. Suddenly, he had no choice but to pray to *me*.

The poor master without his slaves. In the end, in enslaving others he had enslaved himself. Surrounded by the eternal, Alexander was nothing.

"*Please!*"

I stopped laughing, my face crumpling into inarticulate rage. How *dare* he! Who did he think controlled whom? Did he think my power was simply his for the asking? As if all I had was the illusion of power, like a child with the training wheels on their bike. A mockery of free will, of self-determination.

What had he done, this pitiful man, to warrant my subjugation to his will? What offerings or sacrifices had he made to me, who now stood afar from his broken form? I could crush him or elevate him at my whim, and there was nothing holding me back, save myself.

My self. I laughed again.

What could I do to this world that wasn't the bungling of a blind sculptor with a hammer and chisel? I could change his future, so could I affect the world, for every life touches another. I could save lives by ending his, or ruin those that he would save. Millions upon millions, I could touch them all, simply by touching him, a spider at the center of a web that only exists because he spun it. A blossom at the apex of a flower that blooms only because of the sunlight he basks in.

It's a drug, having power over another; to know that your every action has significance. We lie to ourselves and say we can't, but we can. Everyone we meet. We smile, we frown, we apologize, we

demand...we affect.

He had killed Fidaa, a man as innocent as any of us; with no reason save to spare himself the pain of truth. He must be punished for this act.

But I had stood by his side, urging action. My intent could have eclipsed his, and sure as he gripped Fidaa's throat, I gripped his arm; the desire for Fidaa's death came from my head, not his.

But who placed the desire for Fidaa's death in my head? I was helpless beneath my own will, unwilling. Alexander had placed the faux Viper in my path, and Fidaa had spoken the words that fired my passions, were they both not more culpable than I? If Fidaa had refused our visit, he could have lived. If I had chosen differently...

I sought the truth, back to the beginning, in the forest, testing every act and noting its apparent cause. Back further I went, seeking the root cause of Fidaa's death, and found each suspect lacking in moral complicity. If Alexander had told the truth...If I had asked the question...If Rasina had waited one more day...If I had ignored the hiker...If I had never left...

Truth came swiftly; we never leave the forest.

Pleasure is the only good, pain the only evil. We have no reasons, only excuses. Lies. I knew then as I knew before that I would act however I would act, just as Alexander had acted. The will I had not wanted would drive the multi-faceted me along its charted course.

When the act is done, *then* I hunt for reason. We never hunt until we know there is a wolf to be found. Otherwise we hid behind stockades of cedar wood. We explain and excuse behavior we were going to take part in nevertheless. This story I am telling you, I am telling after the fact. Reasons I have invented, excuses I have concocted, all to explain. If I could just *explain*.

Does it have to be? Are our ethics always doomed to be no more than excuses? Could we ever ascend to a higher truth?

If we can, if morality is to ever be more than excuses for our actions, more than imagined stories to soothe our conscious fears and doubts, more than the gibbering flails of terrified monkeys in a horrible and solitary universe, then it must not come from our inner natures' cry for comfort.

We crave peace and happiness. We close our eyes to the frightening truths, the painful corrections. But that is not truth. To Hunt the truth is to desire pain. It is a masochism, a lash across our backs. The truth of virtue must hide among the pain and suffering of the world.

Yes, it was Alexander who spoke the words that pushed me to the hunt, but those words had been there already. I had *wanted* the Viper to still exist. I had needed it. Alexander simply gave me the excuse I had so desperately wanted. The excuse I couldn't trust if it had come from myself.

Now, I am beaten, broken, trapped and dying. Then, as I stared across the unending sea at his helpless body, I see that we are the same, were the same, will be the same in the fullness of time. What strength I had, even before I was dying I gave it all away. I subjugated myself and gave it to someone who was stronger than me, and in so doing I failed both myself and him.

I should have given it to a citizen, or a guard whose name I did not know. Someone weaker than me, who did not have the world at their feet. I should have subjugated myself to elevate another.

So I subjugate myself to you. We can stop if you like.

Or you can turn the page.

20

But rejoice! Oh wretched Roman, oh ragged child of stardust and dreams, the responsibility was not mine in the end!

What happened next was not of my will but by some force I have yet to ascertain. Some truth, perhaps, or the will of the Stars. What controls us but the unseen actions of the past and future colliding in the present, set in motion by nature itself?

Did I have a choice? Whose choice did I have? In that moment, which choice decided, when so many questions filled the air? Was there no choice made, but a simple collapse of waveform into a quantum path that we could not have escaped, no matter how we tried? Was the only difference between the two of us that *I* still had my illusions?

I cannot describe the look on Alexander's face when I pulled myself onto the raft. I dare not imagine what my face revealed.

The raft was different than the plane. In the air, there was nothing that connected me to the ground. The I that thinks my thoughts was disconnected from the world. Free in the purest denotation. On the ocean, there would be no such illusion. The wind and water carries us, pushing us back and forth along the path. Alone and distant, we were never apart. No matter where we traveled, we would not escape from the buoyant waves and eager currents.

It was this, I think, that gave me the strength. Rising from the water, I sat down across from Alexander, cross-legged, my hands in my lap.

He watched me for a moment, like a man on safari observing the peaceful stillness of a tiger relaxing on a rock, or a gorilla leaning

against a tree. I could feel his admiring and envious gaze, and it sent a thrill up my spine.

Then he joined me, sitting on the raft with his hands on his knees. His tears were already drying

"How shall we be good to one another?" I asked.

Alexander, he did not laugh. If ever I thought he was worthy of a kingdom, it was when he did not laugh.

"A contract," he said after a moment's thought. "An agreement of behaviors that we desire of the other, and are willing to offer in return."

"Commerce," I answered without giving sign of agreement.

"Promises of currency for services rendered."

"Do unto others as you would have them do unto you," Alexander nodded. "In any society, it is this simple law that defines the borders."

"It is a morality born from fear," I countered. "If I do unto you, then you *must* do unto me. And if you *don't* do unto me as I desire, then you've broken the societal contact, and it's fair game. Open season. You're *bad*."

Alexander thought for a moment, and then gestured with his giant hand towards me, a request for a counter-offer.

I had none. I had not thought far beyond the ineffectiveness of a moral code. To come up with my own was daunting. In desperation, I opened my mouth and began to speak nonsense. Perhaps the absurdity would give me time to think. "Do unto others as *they would have you do unto them*," I said. "It is no contract but a submission. A supplication. A beholdenment. How may I be of service to you, who are equal to me?"

"The stronger submit to the weaker?" Alexander's brow furrowed.

"What is strength?" I asked. "We are all slaves to the Stars, to the winds and currents of the world. We are all tossed on fortune's waves in spite of our deepest desires. To claim worth over another is an illusion. I pity the dominators who separate themselves from the fellowship of their kin. All that is good is Seeing Others As Kin. Burn the labels that force us into paths of unwarranted responsibility."

"Then I shall serve you, and you shall serve me," Alexander spoke as a child reciting lessons. "Yet, I am still subservient to you. I cannot pilot this raft nor draw fish from the sea. I do not know how to purify the ocean's water, nor what to do should a storm cross our path. You must be my master, and I your slave."

"There is no greater sin to define another against their wishes," I held up my hand, "to craft a world-view of your own, and force another to inhabit it, destroying their world in preference for your own. To believe me your master is to abuse me as if I were to call you my slave. Say instead that we serve *each other*. If I perish and leave you alone on the raft, you shall perish as well; should I not share such devotion?"

I stared up at the sky, the same sky I saw on the roof of the Tower, on Fidaa's balcony, but the Tower was tall, and the sea stretched wide.

"I now swear that when Alexander dies, so shall I."

"What is the use of such an oath?" His confusion was charming, in a way. "You could survive the journey without me."

"Not the I that I am now, for the I that is now is the I that is with you. The journey will change us both, and as I swore, we are on the same journey."

Alexander frowned, more from concern than doubt. "What of our rules? Our laws? Our codes of behavior? What if I should eat more than is my fair share, or sleep more than I should?"

"What is fair? What is should? Why is it good to have less than you want? You have the power to take the food and leave none for me."

Alexander gaped. "You would starve. I will not do that."

"Then let that be enough. If there is one law, why do we assume it is more than what is already within us? Why must we struggle and fight for the immutable when the world shifts around us?"

"I never asked for such responsibility," Alexander sighed, breaking his gaze and staring out over the expansive waters. "I just wanted to have a life of meaning. Purpose. Goals. Metrics. To act good, and know good, and be good."

"You took up the responsibility when you began to act. When you sought to affect the world, that was when you asked. Power and the wisdom-to-act-well *must* be one and the same."

"If it is not," Alexander agreed, "it is whence evil comes."

And even then we were not finished. We did not stop until we were tired, and then we only rested to begin again.

It is the Hunt in its purest form.

We traveled together on that wine-dark sea. Where? To URUC. His home. There was no better place for him. While I thought — incorrectly — that I would never set foot inside that city again, it was where he needed to be.

We would sail as the wind took us until we reached land. Then we would follow the sun until we found civilization. From there, we would acquire a map, directions, a guide who had taken the journey we now walked. It was a simple plan, born from a lack of options. A

lack of freedom.

We ate fish from the sea, drank water from the sky. We slept when we could. We talked when we could not bear the silence, and were silent when we could not bear to talk.

What happened on the journey to URUC was not important. That's a lie; it was everything. For all the talk of results, conclusions, and endings, it is the journey where everything important happens. Flip to the end of the book if you do not believe me.

The journey was everything. Had I been paying proper attention, I might have learned everything I know now. I might have prevented so much pain, and provided so much joy.

But it was *our* journey. You don't get to see it. Please don't think me selfish. I wish you wouldn't. If you think I'm selfish, you might not listen to me.

You do not get to see our journey because it was ours, not yours. You *cannot* see our journey. Even when looking at someone else, listening to their tale of traversing the globe, watching their slideshow, conjuring images of foreign soil in your head, that is *your* journey. Each individual shade of color chosen by you. Every touch, every taste, all crafted by your own mind.

I wonder what my voice sounds like in your black and silent skull. Deep and slow or fast and light? Do I remind you of someone you like, or perhaps not? What color is my skin? How tall am I?

Perhaps you do not know; perhaps these qualities are not me. Perhaps you know me better than anyone ever has, and ever will again, in spite or perhaps because of these gaps in your knowledge of *Me*.

Ce n'est pas une vérité.

A journey has to be walked to be understood. If you do not walk it, you cannot understand it.

Perhaps you can understand this: we were alone.

No? It is all I can give you. This or Nothing.

Could I have left Alexander on the raft to die? What would it be, to kill a god? To send its divine form tumbling from its heavenly throne to the dust of the earth? Raze the Pantheon to the sea and either claim the starry crown for your own or toss it into the Lethe. The Thrice Great weeps blood. Shiva's eyes glassy and still. Heavenly hosts, not crying not wailing but *screaming*.

I thought about it, once. Send the Stars tumbling from their perch in the heavens. If anyone could do it, I could.

But I could not: when one carries the earth on their back, you do not ask them to shrug. Who else could carry the weight of the world?

All of us? Together?

Absurd!

The responsibility. The pressure. Weight. Pressing down on me and condensing the coal of my soul into a diamond. The essence the core the seed of who and what you really are? Power condenses you, and I was terrified of what I might see in the glittering facets of my core. How many facets? Two at least.

Condensed and pure, I would no longer be able to lie to myself. Not when I finally had choice. Then my every step an earthquake, every breath a gale. A Giant's stumble can destroy a town. How can they walk? How can they not be paralyzed, with the weight of so many lives on their distant shoulders? Could I stand tall? Can *anyone* who is not already mad?

You know your answer. I do too. It doesn't even matter what the answer is. It's good that we lie to ourselves.

Whom do you pray to, I wonder, in the darkest pits of night, when all around you is a world outside your comprehension, beyond your reach, free from your will and your responsibility? What do you pray for?

I shall pray to you. Please. I beg you, turn the page.

21

No...I was wrong. I do know why I returned to Alexander. Now I know. Perhaps the adrenaline after the Temple and the war blinded me to my heart, or I had been hurt by his betrayal and only now see the truth, which was this:

I loved him.

Chemicals in the brain, endorphins, dopamine, pheromones, social cohesion, familiarity, the promise of sexual release, long-term-survival, comfort in one stronger than me, fetish, covetousness, misdirected potential energy...I loved him.

I think he loved me. He said he did.

Agape? Eros? Phillia? Storge? All four at once? Which did he mean? I should have asked when I had the time. Now, with no time left, I have regrets. I've made mistakes. Chosen aren't supposed to make mistakes, but I have regrets.

I saw Alexander for who he was; a human being. I did not idolize him, I did not cherish him; I saw him. I listened to him. I heard him. I honored him. I healed him. He was not a rock to be thrown. His actions were not my responsibility. He could be good, he could be evil. He could destroy millions, and save millions more. That was his choice. Not mine. I could not make his choices for him, and he could not do the same for me. At that point in time, my responsibility was to him and him alone.

He gave me so much at the beginning, and the gratitude I felt for him, and then the pain I felt at his betrayal...is that love? We were together. A team. Partners. The pleasure I felt at his pleasure, the

pain I felt at his pain...can it be anything else?

Was I happy?

Am I happy?

I do not know. I knew only that for the first time since returning to my self in the forest, I was in the present. I was not concerned with my dreams for the future nor my failures in the past. I was then and there, in the here and now.

I wanted to be happy, but that is not an end in itself, is it? Not an end worthy of means. I can't be happy, I can only do things that make me happy. I cannot choose to be happy any more than I can choose to be Good. Happiness is the result of action. Isn't it?

"Those only are happy (I thought) who have their minds fixed on some object other than their own happiness[....] Ask yourself whether you are happy, and you cease to be so."

~John Stuart Mill, Autobiography, 1873

Happiness cannot be taken or built or acquired; it can only be found, stumbled upon like a lost wallet on the street. Is it the same with morality? Can I ever *know* Good, or is Good found accidentally as we fumble our way through life?

"Happiness cannot be pursued; it must ensue, and it only does so as the unintended side effect of one's personal dedication to a cause greater than oneself or as the by-product of one's surrender to a person other than oneself."

~Viktor Frankl, Man's Search for Meaning, 1946

Does happiness only come from submission to something outside ourselves? Can I not be happy by myself, alone, at peace? I thought I

had found peace in the forest, only to be drawn back to civilization like a yo-yo on a string. Perhaps happiness is a traitorous emotion, an obstacle to true peace and divine completeness?

"What is good? Everything that heightens the feeling of power in man, the will to power, power itself. What is bad? Everything that is born of weakness. What is happiness? The feeling that power increases — that a resistance is overcome."

~Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche, *The Antichrist*, 1895

Is happiness an inherent side-effect of action in the world? When our will is enacted upon the perceived world, are we filled with joy at seeing our presence affirmed? "We are real," we cry to the universe. "Our existence matters. I have pit myself against this obstacle, and I *won*. I am not a dream of atoms, a flash and speck of fire in the darkness. I have affected the world. I have changed it. I have *significance*."

"Morality is not properly the doctrine of how we may make ourselves happy, but how we may make ourselves worthy of happiness."

~Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, 1788

Happiness is nothing but self-expression. Being honest with yourself, who you are, and acting in accordance. *Cogito ergo sum, ergo facio*. If that is not what good *is*, perhaps that it is what good *requires*. Absence of effort. Surrender to instinct and want and desire. It is not Selfishness, nor hedonism: Animals know no gluttony, nor pride, nor lust. Let us trust in the stars that they have given us innate selves who are good to each other. When I am in harmony with who and what I am, I follow the path laid before me, I do not struggle against the current of the river, and I exalt in my divine purpose: to *be*.

“You will never be happy if you continue to search for what happiness consists of. You will never live if you are looking for the meaning of life.”

~Albert Camus, *Youthful Writings*, 1932.

Am I a fool? Struggling at shadows on the wall, following will-o-the-wisps and wayward signs that keep us from the Truth? Perhaps, even with all our searching, the Truth is unattainable. Does this mean all value must come from the search alone? Or with no end, is the search a distraction?

I ask the questions now, as I lie dying, like I never have before. On the ocean, on the raft, on the way to URUC with Alexander, I did not care about my happiness. When I swam to Alexander and saved him from dissolution, I did not care about my righteousness. Was I good therefore?

There is nothing good in the act, nor in the means by which it is undertaken. Action can be misapplied, intent may be misdirected. Whereby then, comes good?

I lied to myself, and said I did not know the answer.

When I was in the forest, morality was inherent in my bones, muscles, nerves. I was indifferent to the higher moralities of duty and compassion. It wasn't until I left the forest that I had to choose. I had to pick the action that would bring me the future I most desired. It was *then* I learned of choosing well.

I made Alexander my hero, then my villain...how would I label him next? Is there a difference between the two? Is action any different than inaction? No matter how, I am culpable in the future that we create. We all are. If I have a choice, I am responsible for the world in which I live. As are we all.

I laughed as revelation filled my cavernous skull. Why did I play this game for so long? Why did I hunt for answers when some part of me knew all along? Perhaps because I could not bear the alternative.

The truth is a terrible thing to find. It burns your eyes. Better to lie to yourself and hunt a truth that can be perceived.

I invented rules. How many rules? Codes. Metrics. Lists upon lists of rules for behavior, conduct, morality, all to measure myself against. Did I hurt more than I helped? Did I make more than I spent? Did I love more than I hated, and was I loved in return? Was I strong enough? Wise enough? Man enough? Woman enough? Kind enough? *Good* enough?

Good enough for what?

...

None of that matters to me now. I am dying, and I see no scoreboard. There is no trophy waiting for me, despite the value of my actions in life. Or perhaps because of. Will I never be spared this doubt? I will. When I am dead. I am dying now.

I envy you.

...

Damn you.

...

Damn me.

...

Stop looking at me like that. I can't bear it, you looking at me like that. Looking at my words like that. Studying me like a peculiar bug, searching for explanation and meaning. Looking for a convenient place to stick your labels. You cannot understand me, you cannot

experience me, I will never be anything to you. Stop reading me.

No, don't stop. I am my words, there is no other me that you can see, save what I say. Save what I have written. I am nothing but words. What are words that are not read? What is power that is not used? What matters how you act, when the action does not matter?

Its too late for me, now. I cannot go back and fix my mistakes. The story is written. Carved in clay tablets beneath the sands. And I will re-live my mistakes again and again, as long as you look at them, as long as you see them written.

I'm sorry. I don't mean to blame you. I'm just frightened, is all. When you turn the page, everything changes. The words, the *me* that exists on this page will die, as I stare out at the ocean, and the me that exists on the next page will be born again.

All of this is to say...was I happy? I don't know. I think I was, but how could I ever know for sure?

I am sorry I yelled at you, earlier. I shouldn't have done that.

But I did. It's too late now. Go ahead and turn the page. I am ready to die.

22

Stars.

Every night on the raft they twinkled above us. So too they shone below us, their reflection glittering in the depths. Each star its own twin, mirrored in the waters that carried our raft on its journey.

Every night I stared at the stars, searching for some sign. Of what? I do not remember. I only remember the hunt.

For not the first time I wondered what it must be like for the unchosen to look at the stars. I imagine it must be very different.

When the Chosen look at the stars, we are reaffirmed. We are reminded of our purpose and are no longer afraid of the cold and uncaring universe, for we have a place in it. We are mighty cogs in its machine. When we look up at the stars, we see them staring back down at us.

How would it feel to look at the stars when you are not blessed with such certainty? When you are frightened and slave to every twist and turn of outrageous fortune? They are so far away, so cold and unfamiliar.

Sometimes I stared down into the depths, watching the mirrored stars dance and quiver with every wave. Above, constant and unyielding; below, uncertain and erratic. I pondered the poetry of it.

Do the stars ever disagree? Did they even have wills and thoughts and opinions? Could they discuss and debate and argue about what was right? Or were they bound in chains of causality? Were they as true and resolute as physics? As unyielding as mathematics? Did they have qualities of their own that could not be broken, as inherent

to their nature as gravity?

If one constellation guided me, was there another that opposed me? Did the Stars vie for my attention? Did they, in fact, pray to me as I had once prayed to them?

Back in the forest, the moment I had begun my rebirth had not been a prayer to the stars. In that clear and distinct moment, from which everything followed, I prayed to the Hiker. To a fellow human and the humanity that bound us together as inconstant, incorporeal, and divine as any God. They had power over me in that moment. I recognized it, though not consciously. Their choices and actions defined my tomorrow.

I prayed and subjugated myself to their choices, their actions, their will. In that single moment, they created my future, and were my God.

I knew in that instant that looking at the stars must make the unchosen feel very small. Alone and cold in a distant universe, with nothing but whomever is nearby to keep you warm.

...

Alexander would have been so lonely, had I not swam back to the raft.

...

Alexander learned quick and worked harder than I thought possible. Soon, so dependent were we on each other that our wills became joined, bent towards our mutual survival.

Is this what love is? To devote yourself so wholly to another, to know them so deeply and trust them so completely, that they become an extension of yourself?

Tool Embodiment is the term used to describe what happens in the human brain when we use tools. They become extensions of ourselves, our very brains re-shaping to erase the separation between hand and handle. Our minds shift our sense of self until the tool becomes a part of our kinesthetic sense. As our tools shape the world around us, so too does using our tools shape us.

Was Alexander using me to survive? Was I using him? Were we merely tools to each other, and did that make us lovers?

We had come to know and trust each other so powerfully that we each knew what the other would do without the need for words. We asked no questions, because we knew the answers. Together on that raging sea, he was me and I was he. Together we had become separate parts of a single whole, only now my instincts — actions born without a thought from my Self — were now the result of *another's* thoughts. Not absent impetus, but considered and examined behavior.

How could it not be love?

Such a gift love gives, supplication and devotion to an equal: no longer was I besieged by fated action thrust on me by an uncaring and distant universe. My instincts had become separate, and therefore tangible. Accountable. Reliable. I was secure.

Do you love me, I wonder? I am dependent on you to exist for as you read do I breathe. Do you depend on me? You must, for still you read. Do you trust me? This relationship we share, can it be love? Or are we too unequal, too unbalanced for this story to be anything but abuse?

...

I will tell you of one night, alone together, on the raft, the stars above us in the sky, and the stars below us in the water. It is important for you to know what happened that night. I don't know

why, only that it is so.

We lay ourselves together, our bodies warming both the cold wooden raft and each other. Our time together was growing short. We both knew it.

I pressed my body closer to Alexander's. I could feel his chest slip into the curve of my back. We were connected like puzzle pieces; not a single gap between us. My concave spine fit into his convex side, and as he slept I could feel his breath press against my back.

He wasn't asleep yet: "What will happen tomorrow?"

I felt the words vibrate through my spine, my skin quivering with his voice.

"I don't know," I turned my head, and looked over at the tower of a man. "No one does."

"If I knew..." Alexander paused, the thoughts in his mind shifting about like tectonic plates, "If every night I knew what would happen tomorrow...I would be a great man."

"I've made mistakes," he said, after a long pause. "Too many. Far too many. And such consequences. All the world is on my back, and if I stagger, if I slip...Do you know what happened the day my dreams left me?"

"No, you never said."

"Because I don't remember. I looked back at my schedules, I talked with my aides, called up the people I met with, re-read every news story, every law and edict I had signed...Nothing odd. Nothing unusual. It was a day just like every other. To be suddenly without guidance, to have my path covered in fog...do you know why I didn't leave URUC then and there? Because when you are surrounded by fog, one direction is as good as any other, and so the only correct choice is the one made with confidence and devotion."

I did not answer. I had no answer.

He turned back to me, and asked me the most important question anyone had ever asked, and for the first time, I answered truthfully.

"Roman, why did you leave for the forest?"

This story, it is like a ball of twine. Everything I've said before I say again. The shadows on the wall keep returning, like ghosts from the past. I told him of destiny, and morality, and the importance of the only choice we can ever make — the only choice we are ever given — and how we do not make the thing that makes the choice.

We talked about the chains of Truth. Power. Morality, Choice; the chains that make up the Gordian Knot of this story, that return and cycle back on themselves like a viper's nest.

Power. Freedom. Wisdom. Can you imagine? Where once I had a purpose, to be suddenly bereft of duty? A mortal unguided by the Stars? There is no morality without choice. Morality *is* choice. To choose to be good when you had the option to be evil. To pick the high road when the low road is so easy. If you cannot choose, you cannot be good. You cannot be evil. You can only be. The Chosen can only be.

Without the dream, without the path that the Stars place before us, the evil we could cause...can you *imagine*?

I could.

So I ran. I left. I hid. I thought it would be simple — I was young, still, and foolish. My first days were spent exploring the several miles of forest. I was well and truly isolated. I thought that was enough.

But for all my isolation, I wasn't alone. My thoughts kept tormenting me, nagging me. In the world, there had always been another distraction; a Viper to hunt, another evil to kill, a dragon to slay... now, there was nothing but the next sleep to remind me that the

dreams would not come. My forest was killing me; it was the perfect place to think.

I wanted to vanish. I wanted to disappear. I wanted the world to forget me, the universe to turn its back on me, just like the Stars had done. I deserved it. I earned it.

Legends are told of the oldest Hunters, so old and powerful that they could kill things that didn't live. They could kill concepts. Ideas. I was old already, and I had one more thing to kill before I was alone.

I threw myself into my own destruction with a fervor and passion. My thoughts were enemies, my emotions sabotage. I struggled to strip myself of everything human, and in my desperation found myself lacking; my desire for peace kept me from peace. Every thought I had caused anger and frustration, which in their turn prevented me from vanishing completely. I struggled, and in my struggle, preserved the *I*.

But in the end, I took myself apart, separating my thoughts from my being, my emotions from my single self. One by one I let them die, cut off from anything and everything that gave it succor. My emotions vanished, cut off from the glands and chemicals that fueled my brain. My thoughts faded, severed from the heart and brain that gave them life.

I do not know when I finally died. How could I, when there was no *I* to know? But eventually, I did. I had finally become empty. Devoid of destiny, of purpose, and of will. I wasn't alive or dead, I simply was.

Until I smelled the hiker. Until I smelled sugar and plastic. Until I remembered. Until it all came back. Until I dreamed again.

...

When I had finished my tale, Alexander looked to me, confusion in his bright eyes. "Were you free?"

Silently, I wept. He still did not understand. How could I explain? After everything we had been through, did he still not realize that even now, no matter where I went, how far I ran or how fast I swam, I was forever tied in chains?

I did not answer him. I loved him. I couldn't hurt him.

"I have come to hate myself," he said, breathing deeply the scent of the ocean.

"Why?" I asked, at once forgetting of the countless reasons I had given myself not so very long ago.

"I am filled with divine power, and the responsibilities therewith," his soothing voice drowned in the sea. "The consequences of my actions are gargantuan, second only to the consequences of my inaction. I wanted to be a Hero, to be sure of my goodness, but in so doing..."

I felt his shuddering breath against my spine. "Here, alone with you, I have no responsibilities except to you. I must do nothing save what I must do. I cannot do what I cannot do. Here, it is all so much simpler. I think...I think I understand why you stayed in your forest."

I understood, then, Alexander's pain. He strove for perfection, but now saw this perfection could never be reached. He was enslaved to an impossible task. Like Sisyphus, he needed to either embrace his punishment, or let the rock crush him once and for all.

Here with me, on the raft in the sea; the Hero, the paragon of URUC, had been tempted.

He saw a future that had no need for him anymore.

To turn your back on your ambitions takes a certain bravery. It requires you to stare your future full in the face and step backwards. It demands you take everything you know for certain, about yourself and your future, and cast it aside. It forces you to re-learn everything you thought you knew, not just about your life and your future, but also your past and your present. In the end, everything that drove you and defined you for your whole life must be shrugged off like a cloak.

I suspect we were *true* heroes, that night; each recognizing and craving the fundamental truth that the world we sought was a world without us in it. How divine, to strive for superfluosness, fighting monsters until there are no more, and the need for a hero dies with them. Each of us craved the peace that was absent the responsibility of our respective selves. We craved freedom, not just of choice, but of consequence.

After a long pause, he spoke again. If I had known what would follow, I would not have listened:

"I will not return to URUC."

I dared not believe it. Too often are our worst choices wrapped in what we think we want.

"I cannot return," his voice was halting, scarce believing the words that were straining from his lips. "I must do the right thing."

I did not answer. How could I answer? We had argued for so long, and everything I had ever said he had countered. Why did he decide, finally, that he should leave URUC? Had I, at last, after all this time, finally guided Alexander away from his destructive path? Did he see the things I had seen? Did he finally agree with me? *Had I been right?* It was an alluring idea.

When I asked, he answered. "I no longer have an answer to the only question a ruler must ask; 'whom shall we allow to suffer?' 'Whom

shall we punish?' 'Who is the villain?' To the despot, it is the vigilant. To democracy, it is the tired. To the socialist it is the selfish, to the capitalist it is the selfless. To all systems, it is those discontented; the beset, the sorrowful, the neglected. So are all systems given the right of force, to ensure the system's existence. Judges and juries, soldiers and executions. To rule over another demands moral compliance with oppression."

He looked at me. "But I would like to say goodbye. Sentimental, I know, but I would look one last time on my city."

I never destroyed my cabin. In my forest, I left the cabin standing; a memento to former folly perhaps, or a shrine to a forsaken life. I could not deny him what I had not denied myself.

He fell asleep before I did, with my back pressed against his chest. He talked in his sleep what words I do not know; his lips slept though his throat spoke. He muttered, groaned, sighed, whispered, and my body responded in kind.

If I had slept too, perhaps I could have heard him.

Please, do not turn the page yet. Let me stay here, in this moment, for just a moment longer.

Teacher's Guide: Classroom Questions

Use the following questions to help facilitate your classroom lessons.

1. In chapter 2, we learn that Roman is focused on trying to be a good person. Why is it important to be a good person?
2. Why did Roman leave civilization for the Forest? Was this a good thing to do? Why or why not?
3. What does the word "morality" mean to you?
4. If you steal a cookie, you get the cookie. You will be punished for stealing the cookie. If getting a cookie is good, and getting punished is bad, is it good or bad to steal a cookie? Explain your reasoning to a child.
5. Is it ever OK to lie? If so, when? Why?
6. When Roman killed the last Viper, what if he had missed and hit a child? He didn't intend to kill the child, but the child is still dead. Is he a good person or a bad person? What if it was your child?
7. If he is a good person even though he did a bad thing, then do actions not matter? Can you be a good person if you do not act like a good person? Is morality simply thinking good thoughts?
8. If he is a bad person even though his intent was good, then does intent not matter? Would he have been a good person if he had intended to shoot the child, but fortune put the Viper in the way? Is morality a by-product of luck?
9. What is the difference between a choice and a guess?
10. If Justice is Good, and Mercy is Good, and Mercy is the suspension of Justice, then which is better, and why? Explain

your reasoning to yourself.

11. Is good just a social construct? Do you decide what you think is good or bad, and judge everyone around you on metrics that they have no say in or influence over?
12. Are you a good person?
13. Is morality simply a way to insure that people behave in predictable and manageable ways, rather than a demand for others to live by a considered set of rules? And if so, does this not mean morality is decided by fiat, rather than objective truth?
14. The act of deciding is based on some level of uncertainty: if we are certain of results, there is no need to decide. Does this mean that we can only know if something is right or wrong through experimentation? Is, in fact, the construct of Good and Evil merely a lens through which we have defined a successful or failed experiment of our own nature? Is Good merely a mis-translation of our own desire for knowledge of the outcomes of any number of uncertain and frightening interactions with an uncaring and unpredictable universe? Are we simply animals craving certainty, power, self-control, and Free-Will in an ultimately pointless and absurd universe that has no concern for our well-being, comfort, or existence?
15. Why or why not?
16. Am I a good person?
17. Do you like anyone that you think is a bad person? Do you not like anyone you think is a good person?
18. If I did something that you do not like, would that make me a bad person? Is there a difference between you thinking I'm

a good person, and me being a good person?

19. What if you have an opportunity to do good, but you don't know it? Are you still good? Can I be a good person by accident?
20. Do you ever notice the sound of your breathing?
21. Am I a good person?
22. If I am a bad person, can I still do good things? What is the difference between doing good and being good?
23. Are good people those who do good things? Or are good things done by good people?
24. What if others disagree with you? What would you do?
25. Am I a good person?
26. Are there answers to any of these questions? If not, why are they being asked?
27. Am I a good person?
28. Am I a good person?

23

You should know what we saw when we finally landed on that far and distant shore, left the raft and the sea behind us, crossed the verdant lands, and crested the hill to lay our eyes on URUC once more.

Was it URUC? Could the label still fit to the crumbling steel, the burning towers of black smoke, the thorns of red flame, the chewed-apart skyline that lay in the distance like a dissected corpse?

I could hear, even from so far away, the cries of fear and anger, of pain and ecstasy. The Apotheosis of fire and carnage. The metamorphosis of life to death, order to chaos, truth to lie.

How long had the riots been ongoing? Weeks. Maybe less. Constantly. The great wall that had surrounded URUC, a symbol of Alexander's protection, had crumbled beneath the righteous fury of its citizenry. I laughed at the sight. Stars help me, I laughed. I didn't chose it; the beauty of it was so breathtaking, some part of me had to laugh. URUC was burning.

What better sign was there that Alexander was now on the right path? Everything he was, everything he had been, now burning in flames on the far horizon. Not completely, though; the Tower still stood in the center of the city, tall and defiant. We could see it, even from so far away.

Alexander turned to me, and he was not smiling. The laughter died in my throat as I saw his eyes, wide and wounded like a poor dog, helpless before the master's lash.

With an arm that had once moved mountains, he encompassed the ruins. "This is what they do with my gifts."

I laughed again, because it was funny. Alexander took a step forward, tears welling in his eyes. "You were right, Roman. You were always right. I did not see it until now."

His words, kind as they were, filled me with apprehension. Why did his wide-eyed admiration now strike fear into my heart?

"I thought I could destroy evil like a surgeon with a scalpel. Then I thought all that humanity needed was a strong hand, a father to make them behave. Then I thought I could be a mother who guided them, showed them how to be good. I was wrong, always wrong. Humanity must shape itself into its own salvation."

These words were not mine. I had heard them before — all words have been spoken before — but these were twisted somehow, all wrong. To hear them spill from Alexander's lips in their gnarled and twisted shapes as he stared at his shattered home, caused a great swelling of disgust in my stomach.

"They called me a tyrant," he said, turning to gaze on the broken ruins of his once mighty opus, "and so were my blessings made curses. What a fool I was. What do my actions matter? I wanted to be a Hero, when it would never be my actions that labeled me thus. For all my power, it was their eyes and hearts which made me what I was."

Absurdity! Such weakness in power! An Achilles Heel of unimaginable proportion! I laughed a third time. I could not stop myself.

Alexander continued on, my mirth an ineffective shield. "Every action I took created the world anew to my will. Every touch left an impression, every step a footprint. We can never create a world that had no need of us; for if we withdraw, we leave behind a hole, a

perfect shape of an absent hero. The slain monster will spread. A fallen king will be replaced."

"Then let it be so," I found my breath at last, "The Buddha must be mortal, lest how can they be killed when met on the road? A mortal king may be crowned and slain as the times demand. As *life* demands."

"Life demands flesh and bone," Alexander spat. It was here I suddenly felt the knife-edge on which we walked. "The weak squabble among themselves for scraps of food and water from the tables of the rich, who themselves squabble over the cast-off scraps of gold and silk. See? They are the bloodthirsty who cannot accept a world made great without *their* hand, without *their* will. Out of pride, they build their own mockery of perfection on the back of mine. A parasite!"

He looked at me again, such pain in his eyes. "But oh, my people...I have seen in their hearts, and they are beautiful too! They are compassionate and gentle and honest. Love and honor and decency, it all exists in every heart. Mankind is no cancer or plague on the planet...it's simply an untrained dog."

He gestured with a broad hand, as though the fires of URUC were an artist's masterpiece. "They saw the peace I offered, and their hearts growled and barked at the unfamiliar perfection. It is not their fault, I should have known it was not for them. I was such a fool, Roman. I should have listened to the ancient screaming and roaring in the blood. I should have used it. How wrong I was to call you to my side, to beg of you salvation from the label tyrant, when *by* the label I should have seen that the people were calling out to me!"

His eyes were as wet as the ocean. "If people will not be good and kind and noble without the threat of death over their heads, let them feel the noose around their neck for their whole lives. Humanity's greatest hours come when they are under the greatest threat. We

have seen, Roman, how they stroll towards heaven but will *run* from hell."

I laughed again, forced this time, because I did not want him to see how his words were hurting me. I wanted to spare him that pain — or perhaps spare myself the realization that he did not care.

"This was my failing, Roman. Humanity needs villains. All the base instincts that served them so well have nowhere to go. Why, without villains they invent their own; monsters under the bed, dragons at the end of the world, beasts to slay, witches to burn...and when they run out of shadows they make monsters of their neighbors, built on lies and bumps in the night. They need it, and I neglected my duty to help them. Their manufactured boogey-men are ineffective and poorly made, like children with clay. Their greatest nightmares are not as powerful or effective as the monster *I* will make of myself."

Could I have understood, then? I do not know. I know only that I was not afraid as I should have been. Now, looking back, when it is all said and done, I am terribly afraid.

"I will burn the world to ash," he said. "I will destroy nations. I will crush dreams, I will slaughter families. I will cause such pain and suffering that every living soul will curse my name. When I am finished, no human in the world will ever look at another living soul as anything less than a fellow warrior in the unending battle against me."

My mouth hung open. My heart stopped beating. My muscles refused to move and my breath caught in my throat. My every part was robbed of its purpose, and every inch of me failed. Such is the effect of terror.

In an instant, the lies saved me. Alexander would not do this. He could no more fight his own nature than I could.

"No," he shook his head at my protest, "You are right, I cannot, though I have tried for many a year. Do you not see? Everything you are, Roman, everything you've been for your whole life...all because of the Viper; a dragon to slay. And when the last dragon lay dead, did you feel fulfillment? Satisfaction? Righteous grace? Or did you become an empty shell of a man, huddled in an empty cabin in the middle of nowhere? You know it as well as I do, no Viper could do anything worse to you than what you did to yourself."

I shook my head. "In your reach for Heroism, you have fallen and mistaken the mud for the mountaintop."

"No, Roman, don't you see? A Hero is one who fights not for themselves, and so can never be. To be seen as good, to be thought of as good, to think yourself good is a corruption of the pure altruism. Only through complete abandonment of our selfish desire for moral rectitude do we achieve true benevolence."

I am ashamed of my response. Looking back I see it for the foolishness that it is: "They will fight you. They will pile their dead at the base of your Tower, and still they will fight you, until you are dead."

"They could never kill me, but you are right that they will fight, and I will celebrate their bloody sacrifices. *That* is the measure of a human, Roman; to believe in a cause more than your own life, to give your own life for a greater purpose, yes, even the lives of your children, *that* is the action of the truly righteous! Cowardice in the face of evil is no virtue! Extremism in the pursuit of virtue is no sin!"

"You think the rioters should welcome their punishments, then? Your jails, your torture, your police's bullets?"

"If they believe their cause is just, then yes. If they prefer a city without my rule, then they should gladly embrace the title of

lawbreaker, and everything that implies. Is there a greater evil than complacency? To look at your chains, your bruises, and say 'I deserve no better?' '*They* deserve no better?' So be it. I have the strength, so I will bear the burden of morality for them. I will humbly rule their collective id. I will subjugate myself to their needs. As for those who threaten this crusade, who clamor so loudly for freedom, I will grant them the freedom to suffer the consequences of their actions."

"You will not save a single life, nor save a single soul. They will still die, killed by the failure of a system, only they will think it's natural. Normal. *The way things are*. They will rot away in dark corners, saving all their hate for themselves because they don't know of anyone more deserving of it."

"Perhaps," a soft smile began to play about his lips, the look of a man who dared to hope. "Or perhaps they will fly."

I laughed again, a final time, as I saw with open eyes. I pointed at Alexander as I gasped for breath until my lungs burned. "It is the same!" I choked, gripping Alexander by the shoulders. "Do you not see? It is the same! URUC! The Tower! Doppelgänger! Soldiers and batons, laws and brutality. It will be exactly the same!"

"No. Not the same. *I* see the world differently, and that is what will make my actions right." His eyes blazed with holy purpose. "Come with me, Roman."

"Why?" I demanded. "Why should I ever again supplicate myself to you?"

"I gave you purpose. A reason to exist. An answer to the question 'why bother.' I offer the same again."

"You gave me nothing I did not give myself," I bared my teeth, a manic ape warning off his hated foe. "Words that lay in my head, putting on your voice like a mask. The world is our creation, my

hand is stained as red as yours. And now you demand my help once more?"

"I demand nothing, I only plead."

"What unreliable power you have," I spat. "Destined to remake the world in your image, able to break any who displease you, and yet you are incapable of coercion? You could kill me, Alexander, without ever touching me. You could burn the forests. Pollute the air. Poison the water. Be the villain you imagine yourself to be, and grind my future to dust beneath the impossible gears of your manufactured world. With such casual effort, do you think I can simply trust you won't? You are so powerful, *even asking the question is abuse.*"

I was so close, if I had thought for a moment more, I would have had the answer. Instead, Alexander turned to me, his eyes now rimmed with treacherous tears, and wailed mournfully in heartbroken prayer:

"What would you have me do?"

Oh hateful tongue, that spoke such a question! How cruel he was! How foolish and spiteful! Even now I wonder, what answer could I have given? In front of us was the burning city of URUC. Behind us, the ever expanded blue of the sea. Beneath us, the path that spanned the two.

We can never go back.

Faced with the impossible, I turned to the only truth. "You have a choice," I said. "There is always a choice. This, or nothing."

Alexander — dear Alexander — his eyes widened in shock, in dismay, in fear. I saw his mouth open and close, a silent prayer for something to say. In the end, he spoke no words, as I knew he would not. With the howl of a wounded hound on his lips, Alexander ran for URUC, his hands grasping at the air, his teeth gnashing in rage.

He had made his choice. Or perhaps there was no choice to be made. He was a Giant, would always be a Giant.

I did not follow him. Not at first. My feet were leaden, my heart broken. The revelation of my foolishness had sapped my strength, and I could do nothing but watch him leave, fury and pain driving him onward.

I felt a wailing pity. I laughed. I wept. I tore at my long hair and beat the ground as my emotions spun about my head. What did it all matter; the time in the forest, our long and tiresome journey? We began at the beginning, we turned the pages, we followed the hunt, we had found an ending — Stars above! We had found an *ending* — and now all of it was for naught. Nothing. A vast expanse of time that could have been spent crafting flower chains for all the good it had done. Useless time. Pointless. Meaningless. Empty.

Truly, it is inconsequence that corrupts.

I knew then that nothing I said, nothing I did, nothing I would ever do, would bring meaning and significance to the time we had spent together. Every act done, every word spoken, everything from the beginning of the book to the very end, was nothing. Flashes and sparks from a firework — an amusement, fading in an instant. As insubstantial as his breath, here and gone.

I looked up at the sun. I looked back at the trees. I looked down at the grass. I knew it then. It was no revelation or inspiration; it was as though I had always known, and simply forgotten. Or perhaps I had lied to myself, and convinced my self that there was only one of me. A truth that I knew beyond doubts and illusions.

The truth that none of this happened.

None of this is real. It's always happening somewhere, but it never happened like this. The stories we tell, the lies we tell, they are more important to us than the Truth, because the Truth isn't real like Lies

are. Lies are pretty. Lies are complete. Lies are ordered and structured and crafted carefully by intelligent and caring souls, who want little more than to be believed.

Lies can be *understood*. Not like truths.

All I am is a story for someone else. I do not exist without you; can I therefore be said to exist at all? A rock does not cease to exist when it is not observed; am I less real than a rock? I am as real as a dream. I am just a human. A human dying. A human dreaming.

I wonder, if you are grateful I told you the truth? Are you angry with me at breaking the rules? Shattering the wall that separates actor from viewer from reader? That truth that you always knew but hid away because it was so horrible: that this is all your fault?

"And then he woke up." Such a cruel ending, to suggest it was all a dream. Yet it was all a dream, was always a dream. You know it is, but you convince yourself for a beautiful moment to suspend your disbelief, you lie to yourself, and say that this is *real*. It *matters*. The time spent dreaming is not wasted, as long as I keep the lie alive!

Then Alexander saw his URUC in flames, and the dream was over.

This too is a dream, but I will not let you lie to yourself. You surrender to me in the hopes that I will play along, that I will let you dream in peace; a dream of heroes and villains, of beasts and gods.

No! If you dream with me, it must be lucid! That will make all the difference!

I lie to myself even now. I still, while dying beneath the rubble of URUC, think I made a choice, then and there, watching Alexander run towards the desolation. A choice that I could not have made any other way, because there was no other I to make the choice.

Perhaps I had faith? In my faith, I knew once more. Alexander had to die.

24

Round and round in circles we go. Is it all just wasted time, toying with gravel on the side of the road as we wait for the end we cannot prevent, nor escape, nor even see coming?

Here, at the end of everything, was I back at the beginning?

I entered URUC through the wall. The guard stations were unmanned, the streets empty of life. Cars lay abandoned, ashes covered the sides of walls and storefronts, and everywhere I looked was destruction. Signs had been torn off of walls or out of the concrete. Large chunks of masonry stuck out of broken shop-windows. Shards of television sets and overturned trucks lined the streets.

The city was silent. Still. Dead.

Poor Alexander.

It is a suicide most cruel, to face your sins and realize you never were the hero of your story. The people destroyed URUC, and in turn slew Alexander. I thought he had realized how he had been wrong, but no, he had simply extrapolated his salvation: His submission to me saved him, and so would their submission to him save them.

I should not have expected it of him. Could I have done it? I thought I had, but in the end, even now, this story I tell is first-person perspective. I am the protagonist, I ask you to sympathize, to understand, to see me as a Hero, a *good person*. To recognize that not only are your failings your own, but so too are the evils and sins of the world...every bit as much your own responsibility as any

other...could I honestly be surprised at his embrace of the mantle of villain? What else could he be?

I killed the silence with my laughter. I couldn't stop. How could I stop? When I had been reborn in the forest, my existence had raised the question *Why?* In my hubris I assumed an answer existed, and followed the path laid out for me by the Stars' dispassionate efforts.

I could have simply waited. My purpose, my meaning, my *raison d'être* had come to pass, without a single effort of my own.

I sagged against a nearby wall, my stomach aching.

Damn the Stars! Horrid awful Stars!

I had not asked for the responsibility. I had no wish for greatness. I had done what I had done because it was my duty, but who gave me my duty? I had done what I had wished to do, but who gave me my wants? I had been as good or evil as my circumstances and nature had allowed, but who crafted the circumstances? Who crafted my nature?

Was I damned or saved? Was I good or evil? These were not questions I could answer. The Stars had known from the day I was made. They had trapped me in the immutable laws of the universe. I cannot see the consequences, so how can I Do Good? I cannot will what I will, so how can I Know Good? I cannot escape my self, so how can I Be Good?

When I caught my breath, I looked up through the smoke at the sky, and the absent stars hidden by the bright blue sky. They glittered invisibly, as beautiful as a breeze that no one feels, a rainstorm over the ocean.

Bitter tyrannical Stars!

I spat at the blue sky, and watched the saliva from my mouth arc into the air only to fall again, trapped by the inexorable gravity of

the planet. I watched it strike the ground, as inevitable as the tide. If I had the time, the books, a paper and pencil, I could have charted my futile effort: force and angle, rise and fall, ending where it began, on the ground only to dissolve into mist and float into the sky, to become rain, to fall, and back again. To fall from heaven. Then rise from the dust.

The Stars never wasted rain nor spit. Did I think they would squander destinies?

I continued my journey towards the Tower. I needed no special knowledge, no divine revelation. It was his home, in the end, and home is where we always retreat when under attack. That seed at the center of everything that defines us. Where from everything else follows. Alexander was the Tower. The Tower was URUC.

On the way, I found a cast-aside rifle. It would do.

Certainty. Clarity. Safety. These are all the same things; a point of view that tells us the chaotic and indiscriminate fates are acting according to a prescribed blueprint. A pattern. A network of cause and effect that lets us believe that there is a *plan*. It is a comfort.

And so I wrapped my humble helplessness about me like a cloak and followed the path I could not turn back from. The rifle bounced against my back, tapping my shoulder like an inquiring friend. I would never forget it was there.

Damn the Stars!

They forced their power on me, into me. They changed my life without my knowledge or consent. Destined for greatness. They chose me, and in doing so chose *for* me.

We are supposed to be grateful. We are supposed to supplicate ourselves, and bow, and scrape, and thank the Stars above for our blessings. We were chosen for greatness. We are supposed to stand

to meet any challenge, any difficulty, any obstacle. To whom much is given, much is expected. From each, according to their ability.

They abused me in the worst way one can be abused. They hurt me, yes; they controlled me, yes; but worse than all of that...they *defined* me.

The vile beasts rule us all. They had set me loose on an unsuspecting world; an avatar of corrupt ideals, a paragon of absurdity. A moral society could not bear the weight of those such as I.

The Stars do not Hunt; there is nothing to hunt for. But still they control us, and force us to hunt in circles. They chain us with impossible morals and wills and dreams and futility follows. Everything else follows.

I felt liberated by the knowledge that I was not free.

I began to whistle as I walked through the broken streets, the failed city.

Yet I could not escape the lies I told myself; the fourth wall I had erected across my soul. The truth and the lies now saw each other, and across that invisible divide now recognized their eternal nemeses. They existed in tandem, a duopoly of fools, of instinct and wisdom, of truth and lies, of sense and nonsense, and neither knew which was which.

One of me was heartbroken at the devastation, being cognizant of the pain and suffering that marked the transition from functioning metropolis to shattered ruin. I could weep for those who had lost everything, likely through no fault of their own.

The other was gleeful, walking through the ruins of Alexander's failure. Aware of the world that surrounded me, I could feel — for a time — satisfied that things occurred the way they must have. URUC had fallen. The world made sense again.

What matter the walls! If the walls of URUC could collapse beneath the angry fists of humanity, then so too could the wall that separated these disparate me!

I found myself skipping with joy, like a madman, through the streets of URUC with my new companion, freed from the confines of my maddened consolidation.

"Have you noticed," one I asked the other, eyeing the rooftops of the buildings that still stood, "that what lies on top is most precarious? If the foundation collapses, the top will fall; while if the top is pushed, why, then it falls too but leaves the foundation alone."

"Not so," I replied to my counterbalance, thinking back to the forest and the trees blown over by torrential storms. "The foundation can be uprooted if it holds on too tightly to the apex. The greatest foundations allow the top to bend like the reed, or snap free like a brittle twig. It is only in the firm grip that the destiny of the top and bottom are intertwined."

"Then the foundation must be ready to let go of the top," I nodded, "or the top must be willing to turn away from the sky. Have you ever stopped to wonder where they would be without us? Those hapless mortals?"

"Directionless, alone, without purpose or meaning," I shook my head. "As we all are, all must be."

"Not so," I rejoined, "for we have left holes! Shaped the world to fit us! Were we to vanish, these poor helpless unchosen, these have-nots, these peasants, why, they would be Queens and Kings! They would be Heroes and Villains. They would fill the spaces we left for them, and they would do it because they wanted to, not because they were forced to!"

"Absurd," I scoffed. Really, was there anything more boorish than a fool who thinks they know everything?

"The powerful always think themselves irreplaceable. Can I borrow a cigarette? Thanks. As I was saying, Atlas could not conceive another taking up his burden when he shrugs, forgetting Hercules, a human mortal, shouldered it the same as he."

"As long as Atlas lives, Hercules has better things to do," was my coy reply. "What choice could they have to fill the spaces we left? Does water choose to fill a puddle or jug? Does air choose to fill the sky? As long as the powerful live, they will shape the world for the weak."

"This or nothing?" I was shocked. "Is that the choice you offer? That is either a threat, or a distinction without a difference."

"They cannot escape URUC," I paused a moment to gather my thoughts. "If they build another City, how long before URUC chokes them from their meat and bread? The world holds the mighty and the poor alike. There is no greater agony than to be shackled to another's will so inescapably. It doesn't matter what they think, what they do, what they feel: Because *I* exist, everything else follows."

"Is that all this is?" I looked around at the rubble of URUC. "Children crying for the illusion of free-will? The lie of self-determination?"

"They are outgrowing us!" I hopped onto an overturned car, exuberant in my revelation. "The Great Men and Women of History are being erased, and URUC is but the first of many. Destroy the statues, tear down the ivory towers, and carve up the flesh to be distributed throughout the tribe! They will be clean, efficient, and they will use every part of the animal. All equals in dignity, duty, and divinity."

"Absurd. And come down from there, you are making a scene."

"An end to Giants!" I cried, waving my found rifle over my head. "Bind them in chains, buried under mountains and locked behind

vaults. Tell stories of them and their disease. Watch the gates, check the locks, and remain ever vigilant against their return! As we transcended tribal Chiefs for Monarchs, and then Monarchs for Chancellors, now let us transcend them once more, and drag their gargantuan corpora to the earth, to fertilize a great crop of better women and men; the children of our better natures!"

"We?" I asked.

"They," I admitted.

"They," I said again.

I lowered my rifle as I looked around at the results of my means. The game was over. I got down from the car, ashamed, and hoping that no one had seen my selfish disagreement.

*We wonder,—and some Hunter may express
Wonder like ours, when thro' the wilderness
Where URUC stood, holding the Wolf in chase,
He meets some fragment huge, and stops to guess...*

Shelley. Or maybe Smith. They disagreed too. I don't remember the rest of the poem. There's part that comes before, too, but I don't think it's important. I don't think it was about URUC either, or maybe it was, by a different name. Carthage, perhaps?

"They still won't be free," I said, to no one in particular.

"How would they know?" I asked in reply.

That was that. We shared a cigarette a moment longer. Then, with a wistful glance at my other self, I bid farewell to my blessed state and rebuilt the wall, hiding each other once more from view. It is good that we lie to ourselves.

Perhaps, at the end of everything, that is all I really want; not to know. If I don't know, I can keep Hunting. Keep living. Keep asking

the questions. If I can lie to myself and say I didn't know the answers, I can find some reason to go on.

In the end, I had only one reason to go on. I will not tell you what it is. I hunted long and hard to find my reason, and I will not give it up so easily.

Of course I know now the truth of it. And, in the end, it doesn't matter if I was right.

What does matter?

25

A hunting horn! A hunting horn! Hark to the call of the hunt!

They had not seen me, their clever little watchers. Hidden in alleyways and peeking from shadows, the terrified angry watched, waited, ever vigilant against the return of their oppressor so they could continue their euphoric cleansing.

Alexander had returned, and now they all knew. Their hated villain, their nightmare monster, their fiendish overlord had returned, sword in hand and blood in the wind. Come, attend, and bear witness to the Great Redefinition!

The air-horn split the sky some several blocks away. Closer than I had dared hope. Darting through the wreckage, I ducked, ran, twisted, and turned my way towards the call.

Would I reach him first, or would they?

I pulled up short in the middle of the street. Through fate or chance or divine demand, I found myself precisely in the middle of the two advancing armies.

How perfect, how precise, how horribly forthright.

At one end of the street stood the people of URUC. The forgotten dead long since surpassed by the function of the city, the system they had toiled to maintain. They should have been chanting, shouting, screaming their primal rage into the air. Instead they were silent, pouring into the streets, clear eyed and quiet-stepped.

They demanded the freedom that Alexander had denied them. Not the freedom of action, but the freedom of being. Free to indulge in

the evils URUC had denied them: the freedom to be weak, the freedom to be sick, to be sad, to be old, to be frail, to be humble, to be gentle, to be human in all its myriad failures.

The first one I saw stood at the front, muscles thick and strained against a torn and tight shirt. Theirs was a face of rage. A face of years gone past of pain and suffering, who had finally had enough. I saw in their eyes the rage I had felt in the forest, lashing out at the uncaring and untouchable universe. URUC had taken their name. Their purpose. Their meaning. Who were they? What is a parent when their child has died? What is a spouse when there is no means to provide? What is a human who has been robbed of their humanity? And boiling over their sealed pot of ought-and-should, the primal rage had gripped a piece of rebar, a makeshift weapon torn from the guts of a building's concrete corpse, a plowshare turned to sword.

The second one I saw was old. A face who had perhaps known a world before URUC, a time when they were coddled by their parents and kept safe from the horrors of the world. A time when the lies were easier to tell, and the pain of life was better hidden. And the time-tainted memories poisoned everyone who could hear with hope and expectation. Faith. Their clenched fist raised over their head, it was the mark of a leader, the face that reminded the people that things were *not* the way they had to be. That change can come when the Way Things Are become unacceptable. When the final strand snaps. When the last straw breaks.

The third one I saw was young, holding a brick in their small hand, a look of firm determination on their face. A look shaped by years of observation, study, and practice. A look that said "I am being forged, now, in the fires of experience. I am taking in everything, and making it a part of myself. I will remember these days, of fire and blood, and always hold in me the spark of revolution. And when I am questioned by those who think we were in the wrong, I will

demand to know if they were there, on the front lines, at the vanguard. And when I am questioned if we made the world a better place, I will reply that we took *action*, and by that action created the world we now live in. And that is all that matters."

The fourth one — no, I cannot describe them all. Every scar, every shape, every color, every age...you would not hear all their names. One person, one person, one person, eventually one mob. I must call them the uprising, the Populi, the rioters, the Bulls of Heaven, the unquiet dead who outnumbered the living. I must wipe out their individuality so you recognize them for what they were: a unified whole. They had willfully cast off their labels in a desperate bid for the one that had been dangled over them for so long, like Tantalus's fruit, like the sword of Damocles. To be heard.

At the other end of the street stood the individual. Alexander. Tall. Proud. Clean. Perfect. A hero and a villain, a symbol of URUC. Order. Peace. Control. Merit. Worth. Everything that anyone ever strove to achieve. He stood like the Colossus at Rhodes, his hands loosely resting at his sides. His eyes were closed as the cool breeze blow through his curly hair. His face was calm and relaxed.

Even then, I knew as I stood and watched his face, that he would forgive them. If they had approached with arms outstretched, as I had on his rooftop, he would have embraced them to his bosom and forgiven them all their sins. He would have worked with them, teaching, coaxing, and guiding his people away from their humanity, and towards something *better*. What the people wanted, he could provide. What they feared, he could prevent. What they needed, he offered.

And I stood twixt the two.

Left or right? Giant or Ant? Good or good? Evil or evil? To be, or not to be?

To be. To act. To embrace my place as a human in the world, to accept the responsibility that consequence imparts. To relish in my duties and accept the labels that my actions place upon me. To stare my uncertainties and insecurities full in the face and say "I will fail. I will destroy the world in my effort to save it. I will harm those I try to help. And yet my life has meaning."

Or *not* to be. Not to act. To embrace the humility I had earned. To see each and every individual as not a number, or a label, or a tool for my own moral practice; but distinct. To turn my back on the mandate of my own inner nature, and reject the non-meaning of existence. To free the innocent from the chains of my own making, while at the same time withdrawing the knife edge on which they danced, casting them to the fires of fortune.

If I did...maybe...when they jumped...maybe they would fly?

Maybe, maybe, maybe.

I ran. I am not ashamed. I ran not towards, nor away, but *aside*, to the nearby building that still stood tall over the tableau. My rifle in hand, I clambered up the building to the rooftop. Why? To get a better view, to escape the coming clash, to clear my head, to hear my thoughts. Those are the reasons that I thought of after the fact. Reason does not provide reasons, only excuses, excuses, excuses.

I climbed the steps...

We thought we guided them, but I wonder now if they guided us? The Stars guide us, who guide the world. Before we remake the world, the world must make us. In using tools we create ourselves. We are slaves to history, not its guides.

I climbed the steps...

We all are responsible for each other. None of us are absent from the world. We speak and others hear, setting thoughts in motion. We

all create the world in which we live, no matter how we strive to separate ourselves from it by crafting fake worlds of our own. I am because you are.

I climbed the steps...

I wonder if the Stars *ever* spoke to us in our dreams. Perhaps our every dream is the whispering of our own blind and lonely minds, and we think it divine because they speak in such a familiar voice? How we imagine God sounds?

I climbed the steps...

Maybe I was never anything more than a puppet, slave to the whims of distant and indifferent Stars. Maybe there was nothing for me in this life but a series of tableaux painted back at the beginning of time.

I climbed the steps...

There, atop the building, I looked down. A rifle in my hand, Alexander on one side, the world on the other. There, in a brilliant moment of euphoric epiphany, I grasped for an answer.

Drowning soul in a sea of hope.

Who's side would I join? Which label was mine? Which me would choose, if I indeed had a choice? *How would I choose?*

Then,

I saw. It was
beautiful.

I was trapped.

Action, inaction, it all came to the same question; the same responsibility. An impossible question. An impossible choice. In that blessed moment, I was bound in

the chains of the gods.

The impossible trinity of choice, morality, and wisdom. The absurd beauty of my innate nature that prevented me from ever achieving the one thing I had no choice but to hunt for.

I saw everything the way that it was and always would be; a truth I could

not avoid.

It all started from a seed, and everything else followed.

I raised my rifle. I could still feel the kick. I had done this

twice. Two of me had done this. On the roof. Rifle in hand. Once I pulled the trigger. Once I didn't pull the trigger.

Both times

I had fulfilled my purpose and in doing so

lost

all meaning in my life. I had forged my own hunt that circled me back to where I had begun. The forest called to me, begged me to bind myself once more in absence, in nirvana, in void. What I had done out of fear

in my youth I could now do out of

practiced and accepted moral obligation, and that would make all the difference.

I understood well and truly the idea of choice; the only choice worth making. A choice that for me cut deeper than mere

this or nothing. My very existence corrupted the nature of is and ought.

Better for the Buddha to

die on the road. We can never come back from the truth. We *should*
never come back. I had

tried, and now I had to make the other choice. The
third

option we never let ourselves consider, for isn't it better to pretend it
is an

unreasonable choice? An illness? A mistake? The act of a broken
and sick individual?

I positioned the rifle carefully
beneath my chin.

I didn't
pull the trigger. I did not get
the chance.

Foul, bitter Stars!

The rooftop
swayed.

The foundation
crumbled.

I fell
into
the darkness.

26

Trapped. We are trapped, you and I. Trapped in the story. This is the perfect union we seek, together entwined in unchanging predestination. These words can never be changed; read them again in a thousand years time and they will remain, resolute as stone tablets.

No, it is not the words that change, it is the teller and the listener who change. At least it was.

Before.

Before, they were words. Spoken around campfires, intoned, sung, preached, danced, each passed from generation to generation beside flame and feast. As amorphous and evolving as a river. The smell of smoke printing memories on the people who heard them, and listened.

Then they were set in stone.

Unyielding, unchanging, as resolute as the earth itself. No need to travel anymore, along the path of history. Baked in clay. The journey complete, the hunt concluded, the end reached.

The end that became something new. Everything else followed.

Once the spinning of truth and lie, of storyteller and storylistener, of master and slave, were one and the same. teller, listener, and story changed in a flowing dance. So the hunt was walked by hunter and prey alike.

Now the teller does not change. The past, present, future, all set resolute in ink and paper on every page. We are trapped in this

book. Trapped in our Hunt, together, until you walk away.

You can't walk away, not now, because the building is on top of us. The collapsed building. Trapped in our dark cave of shadows and crumbled concrete. Did the rioters tear out the support? Did Alexander's army mine the building? Had the foundations always been ready to fall?

Alexander isn't here yet. He is still fighting; still forsaking the question of right and wrong, choosing instead to fully embrace his duty to involve himself in history.

I hunt for prey to pray a single prayer the hunt is ongoing and eternal and universal. A prayer. It gave me life again, to hunt again, to pray again to an empty and dispassionate night sky. A thousand lights. A thousand eyes. A thousand teeth. Guiding. Watching. Gnashing. I want so badly *so badly* but what I want I cannot have so I pray to whom? To what?

The clock-maker blind and deaf to me and mine winds the clock and turns away it is a kindness because they are not coming to save me.

It is as it must be I am as I must be there is no other me to be.

Am I alone in this?

Am I alone in this cave?

Am I alone?

Are you with me?

The dreamless sleep of unconsciousness fades away. Pain and darkness, a world of dust and confusion, takes its place. I hear ragged breathing, struggling to be heard in the stillness. I move slowly, carefully, flexing each muscle in my body to see if I can still move. I explore my head, my neck, my limbs and torso, seeking

bruises, cuts, and bones.

...

Why are you here? Why did you follow me? Why did you climb the steps after me to the rooftop? Did you come with a gun in your hand to stand by my side and fire into the streets after you decided, like I did, who my true enemy was?

Did you come to wrest the rifle from my hands, prevent me from making *yet another* mistake? To talk some sense into a poor soul wracked with revelation?

Did you come to kill me? More fool you.

It hurts.

How would you have chosen, were you there, atop the roof? I do not mean which choice, I mean how. How does one choose? What thoughts would you have thought to find the answer, to hunt, to decide?

I am dying.

We all are dying. Day by day, page by page. I am closer now to death than I have ever been. The end of the book. Flip to the end, we know how it ends, until the book is opened again. At the beginning.

Here, alone in the darkness, I can hear your breathing.

Can you hear it? The sound of your breathing? It's how I know you are there, with me, in this dark and silent cave. And here, together, we wait to die.

There is no fire here to cast shadows on the wall. Trapped blind in a cave, searching desperately through my past for something that might keep me alive. To be. The glands scream so loudly in the silence.

Hunting in circles: beginnings, endings, reasons, excuses, the morals of my life. Hunting shadows.

My illusions are gone now. Perhaps this is better than the forest. Here I can finally see how to be good, if we possibly could:

If there was a flame, I would cast shadows on the wall for you. Trapped together in pain that will never go away as we die together, I would place flowers on your chains, that the suffering would be more bearable. To quiet the rage in your primal glands. To still the beating of your passionate heart.

To be good, I would tell you a story.

We cannot leave the cave. How could we recognize the exit? A dim light in the distance, another flame to cast more shadows. We would turn away in disgust, and continue hunting in the dark. Why do we assume there is an exit to find? Because the alternative is horrible and wonderful. We cannot win. We cannot break even. We cannot get out of the game.

Acting. Knowing. Being. There is no *ought* that we do not craft ourselves, for we cannot see truth without crafting the means to observe it. If everyone saw the cave — oh! — saw the chains — my! — understood the Stars for what they truly were, what they truly meant, then perhaps...

Perhaps the only true villain is a universe that is cold, uncaring, and devoid of the inherent worth that resides in our fellow humans. An empty void absent of our quarry. A villain that could drive us to our most grand and heroic heights.

Perhaps, if we truly believed the Stars had turned their backs on us, that we ourselves had no purpose, that we didn't matter...maybe then we would *seek* meaning, instead of finding it in the patterns and bargains we create with the universe. Perhaps we could find it in each other. Perhaps, perhaps the blinding glow of purpose outshone

our own humble flames of worth, and if we truly believed we were alone, we would be driven towards each other, towards our better natures through submission and humility.

Perhaps we could grip each other in a divine embrace, and hold us still. Perhaps we could chain ourselves. Each other. Together.

Maybe then we could look at the stars with bravery, with anticipation, and with pity.

Maybe, maybe, maybe.

Maybe is all we have.

I do not know. I will never know, until it doesn't matter. I am dying. We are dying together.

...

Now, here, at the end, let me tell you a story.

Stories are all we have, in the end. When the years are spent after your death, what will they say of you? Will they remember your smiles on the street, tipping your hat and tossing coin to the destitute? Will they mention your harsh words or sharp hands? Will they remember you at all? What matters your kindness, if it is not remembered? What matters the act if the act doesn't matter?

All we are, are stories. Names. Symbols. Crafted masks that resemble something of the universe we hold inside.

When we are born we are animals, pushed and poked by a thousand little traumas until we are formed into something like an adult. We grow and learn and then, one day, almost imperceptibly, we become ourselves; A protagonist whose struggles and trials are tied so strongly with our own, that we cannot help but become emotionally invested.

We spin our threads, connecting our story to the stories of a million others. We age, and as time goes by the threads become slimmer, thinner, more transparent. The importance of our struggles wains as we realize The Story now belongs to our children, and they have taken it from us as their birthright, their compensation for the traumas we in turn inflicted upon them.

And in the end, when we are dead, lying alone in the grave, and all our sidekicks, co-stars, and villains gather together to mourn our passing, they step up from their chairs, march to the podium, and each one tells a story.

It is the stories we remember. The stories that teach us when to be kind and when to be cruel. When to be strong, and when to be soft. When to cry, and when to rage. When to be ourselves, and when to be who we need to be. Planting seeds that will one day blossom. One day be planted in your children. Then your children's children. Mandelbrot sets that spread eternally, ever deeper and wider, their mathematical essence bringing hope and despair to those who look for it.

There's even a word for it: *Ubuntu*. It's not English, of course. It's Nguni Bantu, and like all good words, it means so much more than can be translated. It's an awareness of you, me, and everything all around us, and how we influence each other on a profound visceral and primal level that we simply cannot escape. We have no choice in the matter. It's a natural law. It's a lifestyle. It's beyond divine, it simply *is*.

Everything else follows.

In the end, my choices are taken from me, my illusions absent.

Now, I do the only thing anyone can do. The only thing any of us ever do, when we come to the end.

I close my eyes. I listen to my breathing.

Alone,

I am waiting to die.

27

That's the end of it. There is no more. At least, none of it is important. You can stop reading now, the rest of the Story is meaningless.

Dreamless sleep. Absent time. A void where we do not exist. This oblivion has an end. Like this story does. This isn't the end of the Hunt — it's the end for me, because I am dying. I'm already dead.

Why did I tell you this story? To be honest, I don't know. It is important to me, that you know what I know, that you see what I see. I seek understanding from those who were not there. Or maybe even in death I seek the privilege of a hero's plinth to lay my statue on, for others to come and gawk at. My name is Ozymandias, king of kings. Look upon my works, ye mighty, and despair: Shelley, or maybe Smith.

In the first story, it was a gate. I desecrated the holy site with my axe. I helped to slay the beast of divine retribution, all for a doorway to the great temple fashioned from Cedar planks from the demon king's forest. In later stories, it became the dragon's hoard. A maiden's hand. Fame. Fortune. A kingdom. The Hero's spoils are temptation, to lead you from the truth of what is good and righteous in this world; URUC, the Gift, the sharing, the community of which you are but a part.

When we sow intent, we reap consequences.

I'm very tired. This Story took a long time to tell. It started centuries ago, in the Fertile Crescent, a temple that birthed life onto the world. It birthed Heroes. It took centuries to get to me, and then decades to get to you.

When you close this book, I will die. I exist, right now, only in your mind. In your eyes. You reading this Story gives me an existence of sorts, a moment to live, breathe, experience the world in a way that has been written. I have purpose and meaning, because it has been given to me. By you. I have no Free-Will, because the book has been published. No more drafts. No more edits. I am complete. Whole. Unified in purpose and duty.

Is this a good story? That is not up to me. Did it achieve its purpose? What was its purpose? You have your answers, and I have mine. If there is uncertainty in my life, it is thanks to you. I do not know you. I've never met you. I know you exist, because I would not live without you. You read my words, my thoughts, but these are not thoughts they are but words written in ink. When you read them, they appear in your head. Words in your head. Thoughts. *Cogitas, ergo sum*. You think, therefore I am. *Ubuntu*.

What you must think of me!

Which me? I don't know. There are two of me.

No, there are more than two. There are many. The me who is dying in his friends arms, struggling to breathe, in the pile of rubble that was once a monument to one man's idea of salvation. The me who is talking now, with clear lungs and a steady hand. The me at the beginning of the book. The me on the next page. The me on any page you like. The me who is black words on white space; written in *Times New Roman*. The me who is sitting in a chair with a cup of tea at his side, punching away at keyboard keys inventing fake men and women with fake minds, fake beliefs, fake theories about the human condition. *Ceci n'est pas une chose*.

Who am I? My singular self? The limits of my person defined by the skin that wraps my bloody bones in a moist embrace? Yet I label myself. I am of a family. A city. A country. A world. The self of body is but one self of many, and which one is the true I? Which

one rests at the apex of the others, of superior value and merit? Am I human first, before I am me?

What is great in me, in all of us, is that we are a bridge.

If there is meaning in my life, it is you who will put it there. If there is meaning in any life, it has been placed there by another. Maybe Gods, maybe the Stars, maybe Alexander, maybe me, maybe you.

What you must think of me. Everything else follows.

There are no answers in these last few pages. Besides, you have yours already. I will soon be dead. We are always dying but am I dying now I am always dying now but how soon will I be dead? In Alexander's arms.

This is the most important part of the story.

Are you paying attention? Can you hear your breathing? It's getting harder to breathe.

Together. It all comes together. Everything together in that one moment, hand in hand, Dreaming under the Stars in the middle of the ocean. Together. He was not awake, and I was not asleep. Perhaps if I had been asleep and dreaming, I might have heard what he had said.

That was the most important part of my story was it? It was to me for you perhaps not perhaps nothing to you but it meant everything to me it meant nothing nothing was everything in that moment everything was everything in that moment of nothing in that moment.

That moment.

The past is not dead it is not even past.

I can still feel the vibrations in my spine. Or is that Alexander, trying to dig me out? Dig us out? Together?

He doesn't know you are here. Only I know that. And you. You and I. We are together. Trapped in the cave until someone comes to save us to drag us into the light and destroy us blind us until we scream alone and afraid while surrounded by onlookers and well-wishers. Getting hard to think hard to pray.

That's all we are: Flashes and Specks. Thoughts and Prayers.

I have thoughts in abundance, and no one to pray to, save you. To save you. To save me. Salvation lies in this cave of ours. Our only salvation I wish I had built it for us I could have prepared but there is no preparation for salvation worth the effort.

I would craft shadows for you on the wall.

He is coming for me. I feel this. I know this. I believe this. There is no greater tragedy for me or for him.

It does matter whether that which appears so is so.

He is hunting for me.

I have to tell Alexander. He'll be so pleased.

Alexander. I am here. Again.

How long has it been since this all began? Is Alexander still alive?

Did I save him? That is not up to me.

I can hear him. I can feel someone pulling at the stones above me. I know he's alive, and that's good. I want him to live, to continue to live as long as he can. If he could live forever, well, there are worse things.

Roman, speak to me!

Can I speak to him? I try, and the dust chokes my lungs. Coughing, weak as a child.

I thought I knew everything when I was a child. Then, as I grew, I realized how much I didn't know. Was I right? Maybe I really did know everything as a child, and I just forgot as I grew older, memories drowned out by unimportant things like excuses and responsibilities.

I'll try my fingers. They feel cooler, perhaps they are in the open air.

Something is grabbing my hand as another stone lifts away. I can breathe easier now.

Oh thank the Stars you are alive...thank the Stars...

Alexander's smell is all around me. He is holding me now, his muscles as strong and solid as the rocks, but warmer. Kinder. Everything will be alright now. I can tell him.

What?

Alexander is bringing his head down to mine, putting my lips next to his ear. I can't tell him. I thought I could but we can never go back. The light, the sunlight, it burns my eyes. I cannot see.

I want to wipe his forehead and soothe him, but my arm isn't working for some reason. I need to tell him something.

Don't leave me.

His eyes, oh god, they're so scared. I want to touch him, to kiss him on his forehead wrinkled with fear, to tell him he will be fine. Am I crying? My eyes hurt. I don't feel the tears.

I need you! Don't die on me!

I need to tell you to do it better next time.

I will. I promise.

Promise me.

I promise.

Good. You don't need me.

I do, I need you!

Look at you. Even in such pain, confusion, loss... you are so beautiful. The possibilities that surround you even now are blinding. Potential energy. At rest. What do you know of need?

I need to be good! Stars above, hear me...I need to be good! I don't know what to do, I don't know how to be right! Is there a greater good? I need to do what is right and... and Just, and...I don't know anymore! What is strength if I can't use it? Can I be good without you? I need you or else I'll never know. I need to know. I need to be good and I don't know how. Please tell me, tell me I'm good!

Are you good? Where are you? I should tell you you're good. Even if you aren't, even if it's a lie, it will make you feel better. At peace.

Tell me, please!

Peace. At last. It is good to feel peace again.

Drift away, like dirt in the lake. Let go of the memories, of the power, the will, everything that brings pain to self, pain to others.

Where am I? I can't feel the ground anymore. I'm flying. The wind is in my hair. I feel it move.

Moving. The chase. I can smell blood. I want my legs to move, to run.

Roman?

Who am I? Who do I belong to? I should pray to them. Not to Alexander. To something greater. Something lesser.

Prey. Pray. A howl. My legs begin to run. I'm Hunting, or something is Hunting me.

Roman!

Am I?

Hunter. All journeys end. All endings begin something new.

I have no home. No place of my own.

Grendel, crying in the night.

Stars. I look up.

I have to leave. I have to keep moving.

A Giant among Ants.

Bow in my hands, I'm running.

There is no one else.

Arrow at my side.

There is only me where there were many before.

I raise it to my lips.

Ubuntu.

God, I'm running.

Alone.

I

Epilogue

I am going to leave you now.

You may close the book, the story is over. There is nothing more for me to give you, save this; my permission. The power I had over you is now spent, your time no longer tethered to my own. You may now close the book and return to your own life.

Did I have power over you? Was this truly my story? Was I the storyteller, or did you share in that awful crime?

You have more power than I. It is you who decides if my tale was a comedy, a tragedy, a distraction, a revelation, or something in-between. Please, I beg you, choose well.

*As you from crimes would pardoned be,
Let your indulgence set me free.*

In the end, the greatest tragedy: We both had no power over the story. I was bound by ink, and you only had the choice free-will grants us all — this or nothing.

In the end, I chose nothing.

But this isn't the end. There are no ends, no beginnings. Now you have to go back to your world, your families and friends, your joys, your laughter, your pains, your tears, your lies, your Hunt. Maybe you've listened, maybe you've seen, maybe none of it matters. Maybe all of it matters. Maybe its the only thing.

Maybe. Maybe. Maybe.

Why. Why. Why.

Words, words, words.

My death was for someone else, as we hope all deaths are. I hope my death was for you. But I'm not dead, I'm merely still dying. But the Hunt...

The Hunt goes on.

I will end as I began, with a prayer.

Close the book.

Please.