Through the beast's eye

Fantasy Faction Monthly Writing Contest Anthology, March 2017

Various Authors

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"I see you" by Antonio Panderas  
  
Writing often means putting yourself in somebody else's shoes and to write from their perspective. The barmaid, the warrior, the shady detective, the witch or the orphan boy. You do this all the time, becoming somebody else for the time you write that person. If you're good at it, all the characters will read, sound and act differently, making decisions that may even surprise you, the writer.  
This becomes harder, the more alien to your own life, environment, temperament and motivation your character is.  
  
So this month we want you to write from an Alien or Monster Point of View with a distinctly inhuman psychology or perspective.  
  
Genre is completely open, everything SFF goes. You can use everything/everyone that fits the above description, I'd even argue that a completely mad serial killer, if well portrayed, would be valid.  
This is not limited to a monster-human encounter and doesn't have to contain a hunt/battle/engagement of some kind - even if it's a likely theme.

*All content originally appeared on the Fantasy Faction Forums in the Monthly Writing Contest. You can see more information (and even participate in the forums!) on this particular contest by visiting the site.*  
[http://fantasy-faction.com/forum/(mar-2017)/(mar-2017)-through-the-beast's-eye-submission-thread/](http://fantasy-faction.com/forum/(mar-2017)/(mar-2017)-through-the-beast)

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# The Chain Golem



Nameless, utterly alone, It perceived a distant Voice echoing from the Outside not in sound, for It could not hear, but in thought. What served as Its mind fluttered awake, a simulacrum of consciousness possessing neither memory nor identity.

And so It was caught, trapped by perceptions from which It could not flee, for It possessed no faculty for such conceptions as thought or flight or will. Driven by the Voice whose very breath wrenched It from Its dark and timeless paths, It came, pitching through swirling lattices of darkness, light, and pain.

Wracked by flashes of whirling vertigo, It was thrust into existence, absorbed into crushing matter. It coalesced into simplistic awareness, imprisoned by the tyranny of the physical in a world of surfaces and substance.

The Voice slid through the emptiness where Its mind would dwell, if It had one: “Rise! Rise!”

And from a heap of metal wreckage, It rose, a hulking iron puppet hanging not from threads of nerves and flesh but of mind and will that were not Its own. A cacophony of clanking vibrations sounded through Its countless limbs.

Before It stood The Figure, a tall, thin being of flesh through whose eyes It saw Itself: a twisting mass of hooked chains and discarded weapons, half a ton of rough iron links roiling in the air in a wide space of flagstones between high walls and a fiery gate. Corpses lay all around the shattered siege engines from whence It came. Fragments of oak dragged at It, but It snatched them up into its clinking coils, grinding them to splinters in the way of choking serpents.

The Figure pointed to the burning gate as the ram broke through. Leaping through the fire they came, slow beings of soft, warm flesh wrapped in shells of metal and leather.

“Kill!” cried The Voice.

With lightning-fast violence devoid of malice, Its limbs lashed out, whistling through the air, thudding against armor, cutting through flesh, and snapping through bone. One by one It seized them in sawing iron loops, drew them into Itself where It churned them into an oozing paste that greased Its grating bands of iron, adding their fragments of iron and steel to Its own.

The Figure’s exultation echoed through It meaninglessly, for It possessed no passions with which to answer in kind. It knew only The Figure’s will and an urgent compulsion to obey, unhindered by choice or doubt or inspiration. Freedom.

Another flesh-thing leapt through the flames, larger than the others and girt in plates of steel. In one hand it held a broad-bladed axe, in the other a wide shield. The fleshy creature crouched and advanced, flanked by smaller ones bending curved bows. Through the smoking gate strode a figure whose eyes glowed in The Figure’s sight, bearing a staff of twisted wood.

The Figure’s fear billowed up, filling It with a resonating urgency.

With the sole sentiment It possessed, It answered: iron whip-strokes flailed at the armored figure, ringing off the shield, glancing from the greaves and pauldrons, and sparking across the high helm that glinted in The Figure’s eyes.

Behind the larger crouched the others, but It ignored them and the steel-tipped shafts probing pointlessly for the heart It did not have. Through The Figure’s ears It heard the glowing-eyed one bellow. Fire and light erupted, seared into the mass of Its surging chains. It glowed red, then orange, but still It’s limbs thrashed hissing through the air, seeking flesh. In Its coils the greasy remnants of Its victims ignited, wreathing It in flame and curling clouds of black smoke.

The large one fended off Its blows, pinned a slashing chain to the ground with its shield, and brought the axe down. The tempered blade bit clean through, and the smoking length of chain was lost to It. The beings of flesh cheered. But It had many more.

“No!” cried The Voice, and an image came to It. Forgotten, Its chains flopped ringing to the ground. The Figure’s fear surged but was ignored, as It struggled to comprehend The Voice’s will.

Again, the one with glowing eyes cried out, and glittering beams of light lanced across It, roasting Its iron in waves of heat that warped the shimmering air. Here and there, links of chain snapped and fell free, but It felt neither pain nor regret.

Through the Figure’s ears, It heard their shouts of triumph even as what passed for epiphany came: the image was not of what existed, but what The Figure wished to exist, what the Voice wished for It to do. Now knowing Its master’s will, It acted.

Its chains shot out to the end of their reach to either side, then turned and whistled past the beings of flesh, sinking into the stone and earth behind them. Anchored, It tightened Its grip, pulling Itself into them, catching them up in a fiery fence of red-hot iron that broiled their quivering flesh as It crushed their fragile bodies into the wall behind. Their screams ended quickly. It gathered their arms and armor into Itself.

The Figure’s relief passed through It without meaning. The Figure left for a time. The fires of the gate and corpses died out. Sometime later, The Figure returned, burdened with a bulging sack that clanked when The Figure set it down.

“Down,” said The Voice.

It collapsed into a heap. The Figure knelt and rummaged through the sack for a circlet of gold. The Figure pried loose a crimson crystal and set the jewel within Its chains and whispered words of power that echoed in Its mind. A new light awoke within It, and in that light, It saw.

“Kill all who come through the gate,” said The Voice, and It comprehended. The Figure hefted the sack and left.

But It remained in the courtyard, just inside the gate, waiting. The sun set and then rose, and set again. And again. And again. The cycles of light and dark alternated faster and faster, but It remained, Its crimson eye fixed upon the entryway. Sometime later, a quiet, four-legged thing of flesh and fur came through. A loop of chain whistled through the air like a cleaver. Before the antlered head had struck the ground, It was still again, and waiting.

More time passed. The cycles of light and dark whirred past as It lay, undistracted by any thought, any memory. Rain came, then dried. Periods of hot and cold, light and dark swept past while It watched and waited.

The passing of time reached a shuddering momentum that careened on and on and on - and then suddenly It crashed into the present as a small being of flesh approached, much smaller than the others whose bones had gone away long ago. The tiny being walked upon two thin legs, clutching a tiny cloth simulacrum of itself in its arms.

In motionless coils, It lay poised for the flesh-thing to come.

The fleshy being came closer and closer, pausing just outside the gate. The small flesh-thing noticed It and paused. The small eyes peeked from beneath long lashes, settled on Its sparkling eye. “Pretty!” the small figure cooed to its cloth companion and scampered closer, crossing the threshold of the gate.

With every barbed chain, It struck.

But Its limbs would not move. It strained, felt the creaking within Itself, but Its countless links had fused into a single solid mass of rusted iron.

The small flesh-thing’s hand grew huge in Its eye. The tiny fingers scooped up the red jewel, raised the shining stone close to a sparkling eye rounded with excitement. The small figure capered away on its little legs, singing and dragging its stuffed companion by an arm.

Through the gaps between fingers, It watched as the landscape careened past as Its eye was carried away. Deep within the mass of rusted iron, a single link broke free, waving wildly from its neighbor in malice-less violence, forever.

# The wind through the trees

A cold wind gusted through the trees, into their faces, and set the branches and leaves swaying. Sunlight danced with shadows on the dappled forest floor. The goat made no sound as it gently set down its left front hoof. With equal care it stepped its right rear leg forward, keeping pace with its two-legged herdmate. The herdmate wasn’t really a two-legged creature, it had four legs. It just used two of them to walk or run. The other two legs were used for carrying things, so the goat thought of them as carrying legs. Sometimes the herdmate used its carrying legs to swat at the goat, or to feed it, or to scratch its head. Very useful those carrying legs. The two-legger carried some of its things now, made from tree branches. He stepped through the forest toward a pair of two-leggers a short distance ahead. The goat sensed that the other two-leggers did not know that either it, or its herdmate, were there. They were themselves trying to move quietly in the same direction. The goat caught the smell of the fresh deer carcass one of the two-leggers was carrying, the scent floating along on the wind. They were predators. Its stomach clenched in fear as its brain registered the smell. Its muscles tensed and it froze in place. Its two-legged herdmate stopped as well and looked at the goat. The goat made no move, made no sound. Its muscles were flexed and it was ready to dart away from danger. The two-legger slowly reached out and patted it on its head, scratching the scalp between its horns. Relief flooded through the goat, the danger was still there, the smell of the carcass still filled its nostrils and the predators remained nearby, but its herdmate stood with it and there was safety in numbers. They quietly resumed their cautious movement through the trees, toward danger.

The smell of the carcass grew stronger as they got nearer to the predators. The smell was so strong that the goat almost missed the succulent flower at the end of a thick stem near its nose. Throwing caution to the wind, the goat stretched its neck to the side and chomped down on the delicious-smelling bulb. The crunching sound it made teeth clamped down was a bit of a surprise, there must have been a large shelled beetle in the flower. The beetle’s juices added a bitterness that only enhanced the sweetness of the flower’s nectar by contrast. The goat savoured the delicious delicacy for a few moments before realizing that the two-legger was no longer keeping pace. The goat froze once again. It angled its head to take advantage of its incredible field of vision, looking all around for the two-legger. The goat didn’t see him. The smell of the surprise-filled flower filled its nostrils now. The goat couldn’t even smell the deer carcass it had been following.

Just then the goat heard the sound of a strange bird. A bird that it had not ever heard in this forest before. On hearing the sound, the goat exploded into motion, launching itself forward. It darted around an enormous maple tree and saw a strange two-legger holding a thing similar to the one its herdmate carried, in its own carrying legs. The goat bounced sideways as a metal-tipped branch flew from the two-legger’s thing. The goat felt the air rush by as the flying branch grazed its left haunch. Foam flecked the corner of the goat’s mouth as it felt a surge of terror. These two-legged predators were death incarnate and the goat had no intention of dying this day.

The two-leggers were making noises now, loud mouth noises like its two-legged herdmate made when it was in a foul mood. The goat bolted between the trees, hurtling its body forward as quickly as its legs could carry it, dodging and weaving through the underbrush, breaking the sightlines of the two-legged predators as they set off in pursuit. It was only a few heartbeats later that the goat heard a high-pitched noise from one of the two-leggers and changed direction to try and catch a glimpse of them.

One of the two-leggers was out of sight but the other leaned against a tree. The predator made high pitched sounds, sounding remarkably like an dying goat. The goat came to a stop, the two-legger was a good distance away now, at least thirty or forty body lengths, so the goat knew that it could get away if needed. Having stopped its flight, it heard sounds in a particularly dense clump of trees near the leaning two-legger. Thumping and more mouth noises, the goat realized that some of the mouth noises belonged to its herdmate.

Quickly now, the goat backtracked through the trees toward the sound. There. It saw its herdmate grappling with the other two-legger, grunting and making muted mouth noises. The other two-legger shoved the herdmate away and hit him in the midsection with a large branch-thing. The goat’s fear evaporated as it saw its herdmate in danger. It hopped back onto its hind legs and then catapulted itself forward toward the predator at a bounding sprint. The two-legger barely had time to turn around, doing so just as the goat’s horns would have collided with his buttocks. The two-legger squealed as the goat’s horns pulverized the fleshy bits between the two-legger’s legs and launched him away.

The goat’s herdmate slowly got onto all fours, then used its carrying legs to push itself onto its standing legs. Mouth noises came from its herdmate as he used its carrying legs to bind the carrying legs of the other two-legger. Searching around for the other two-legged predator, the goat saw it was still leaning against a tree. From this angle the goat could see a branch sticking from the two-legger’s back. A branch with feathers at the tip, similar to those its herdmate carried and used with its other branch thing. The goat could also smell the blood and the scent of death. Not the same odour as the deer carcass, the smell of a two-legger’s carcass was distinct and entirely different. The scent did not fill the goat with the same fear as the deer carcass. The scent of a dead two-legger meant that it and its herdmate could return to the rest of the herd.

At a sound from its herdmate, the goat turned to look directly at him with its right eye. He made the sound he made with his mouth when he wanted the goat to follow, so it came to his side. The two-legger that the goat had injured had its carrying legs tightly bound but was standing now. The goat’s herdmate put a harness on the bound two-legger, and assembled a thing from large branches nearby, pulling the other two-legger down from the tree and tying him to the thing it had fashioned. The herdmate also strapped the deer carcass onto the strange thing. The tool was strapped to the predator two-legger, who did not seem so terrifying now that it was being made to pull the thing.

The wind blew gently into their backs as they walked through the trees.

# Understanding Dragons

All of the tales claim us dragons aren't nice,

They say we demand virgins, for sacrifice.

You say we're evil, but we're just misunderstood,

Why not eat people, when you all taste so good?

The stories say we covet gold, and hide it away,

We horde wealth for greed, or so the knights say.

You say we're misers, but such talk must stop,

If you were a dragon, just where would you shop?

The legends build fear of our fiery breath,

We leave nothing behind except ruin and death.

You say we're deadly, but one thing you've overlooked,

Why should we be blamed for liking our food cooked?

The minstrels sing songs exaggerating our pride,

I'm here to tell you, those singers have lied!

You say we have egos, but let me explain,

If you were a dragon, wouldn't you too be vain?

The poets speak of our sharp teeth and claws,

We call these a blessing, you call them flaws.

You say we are deadly and can't be controlled,

When you cut your meat, is your knife dulled?

The words on the pages tell nothing but lies,

The bards blame dragons when anyone dies.

You say we eat people, that much is the truth,

For it is not sugar that quells our sweet tooth!

# The Dance

We have climbed this way before with other feet than these. As our dozen géaga walk in single file along the narrow pass, we savour the snowy peaks, inhale the crisp mountain air - refreshing after the arid heat of the desert. Four centuries have wrought many changes. The waxing and waning of glaciers has gouged cliff faces. Rockfalls have swept parts of the trail aside. But still our géaga march towards the home they have never seen.

The sun has reached its zenith when we pick our way into a valley - once empty but now boasting a walled settlement and a stone tower. We approach within two bow-shot of the ramparts and halt. Let them come to us, and they do.

The gates open and three score of soldiers march out, mountain men made larger by the furs they must pack for warmth between flesh and armour. They draw up with spearmen centre, archers on either side, waiting to parlay.

Their captain approaches - a big man flanked by two sorcerers. “My name is Blake.” He wears an unfriendly smile. “Who are you, my friends and what brings you to my domain?”

“We are the Dance,” our géaga declare as one, “come to reclaim our land.”

A rippling tremor afflicts the soldiers' spear-points. It seems four hundred years have not entirely erased the Dance from the memories of men.

Nervous whispers are cut short by the captain’s bark. “Listen, I don’t want any trouble.” He addresses Bhí-sé-Conor, assuming that the old géag in the centre is our leader. “Have the sense not to fight. I have brought overwhelming force.”

We answer through Bhí-sí-Dervla at the right flank. “So have we.”

The speaker and her answer unsettle him. “I have sixty men and two empire wizards.” Bhí-sí-Dervla’s novice robes and youthful body draw a contemptuous sniff. “D’you think this hedge witch can lock horns with them?”

“This is your last chance,” we say together.

He turns away, giving a signal we see with nearly half our géaga’s eyes. Bhí-sí-Dervla’s hands twist into the intricacies of a cast guided by other wills than hers. Dervla may have been a hedge witch before she joined the Dance, but Bhí-sí-Dervla is so much more. The Dance carries hundreds of mages gathered in the many millennia we have walked this world. They linger still within us. Karatos of Gomian, Halbert of Nexos and many others add their weight and skill to Bhí-sí-Dervla’s hands.

The captain has barely completed turning when his two pet wizards burst into flames, tall incandescent plumes of white fire which consume them so quickly they have not even the time to scream.

To his credit, Blake does not flinch. He wheels back, drawing his sword with a scream “Attack!” We sweep the archers aside with another spell, but the men-at-arms close the gap, shrinking the battle to a melee in which wizardry is as much a threat to friend as foe. Forty armed and armoured men against our twelve géaga. Just as we told him, it is overwhelming force.

In the short and brutal battle we anticipate every blow, counter every move with skills drawn from thousands of the best and bravest warriors in history. Perceptions from every eye and ear of our géaga are shared with all. Sabres drive into armpits, armoured joints are opened, skulls split, as we stain the snow crimson. The pleasure of battle consumes us, but the imminence of victory fuels our foolish pride.

Bhí-sé-Conor is our oldest géag. Our will is strong and quick, but his flesh is weaker and slower, and in that crevice of opportunity the captain’s sword strikes – running Bhí-sé-Conor’s through. The point of his blade emerges bloodied from the old géag’s back.

We scream in fury more than pain. The direst agony when diluted across a thousand spirits becomes no more than a dull ache. The captain thinks he has scored a victory until a spell from Bhí-sí-Dervla’s fingers flings him a dozen yards back, crashing insensible into the piled corpses of his archers.

The battle lasts a few seconds more, his soldiers coughing their lives out on the snow either before or after they surrender.

Bhí-sé-Conor still draws shallow breaths, the length of steel grating on ribs with each tiny inhalation. With a wail Bhí-sí-Caoimhe flings herself down by the dying géag’s side. They were lovers Caoimhe and Conor before they joined the Dance. Seeing his body destroyed has – for a moment - unhinged her spirit, driving her to reclaim the form she once inhabited, the géag that was her gift to the Dance.

As his body splutters into bloody dust, her lover calls to her through Bhí-sé-Donal’s lips. “I am not there.”

And then through Bhí-sé-Usna. “I did not die.”

And then through Bhí-sí-Dervla, who lifts her up and kisses her softly. “I am the Dance.”

“We are the Dance.” Bhí-sí-Caoimhe’s reply is immediately echoed by all our géaga in chorus.

A movement draws our eyes. The captain is not dead, but in an instant we have him pinioned by our two strongest géaga and thrust to his knees. We form a circle around him.

“Get it over with,” he grunts. “It won’t change the fact that I took one of you bastards down.” He nods towards Bhí-sé-Conor’s corpse. “Bet that doesn’t happen so often.”

“Do you know who we are?”

“You are the Dance.” A grudging admission.

“You have heard of us? You know what that means?”

“I know you’re a fucking parasite, a body snatcher, turning decent folk into zombie slaves to your will. That’s why legend tells us you were driven out, out into the desert to die.”

We laugh then through all our géaga, a peel of amusement that infuriates Blake. No man likes to have his death’s door defiance ridiculed, but it is hard not to when he is wrong in so many ways. We let Bhí-sí-Dervla be our mouth piece. She is still little more than a child and it pleases us to have this proud man take instruction in defeat from such as her.

“You poor man, Blake, imprisoned in your frame of flesh and bone, your time on earth compressed into the window between your body’s birth and death. How little you know, how little you can experience, how little you understand.”

He glares back. We watch him through Bhí-sí-Dervla’s eyes, all of us seeing the hate contort his features. He hocks up a ball of phlegm that we repulse – one of Karatos or Halberton conjures a deflection that has the poor man spit in his own face.

“The Dance is not a parasite, those who join us – who accept the gift we offer – do so freely.”

“You expect me to believe that?”

“It was a cruel trick of your god to imprison your spirit in a body, Blake, to set a frontier on your soul more emphatic, more impenetrable than any border wall.”

“The Dance gives so much more.” We share the tale now each géag speaks a portion, forcing Blake to twist and turn to catch each new voice.

“We see through each other’s eyes.”

“We feel through each other’s bodies.”

“We share everything, every thought, every fear, every passion.”

“We are immortal.”

Blake glances across at Bhí-sé-Conor's body. “Looks pretty fucking mortal to me.”

We let Conor speak. He uses Bhí-sí-Caoimhe’s mouth – a choice that only adds to Blake’s confusion. “That is merely my body, a vessel I once lived in, but now it is just a limb I used, we all used. It is not where I exist. That body isn’t Conor it is Bhí-sé-Conor. As you would say it ‘He-was-Conor.’ I discard it as lightly as you would shave your beard. I live on in the Dance.”

“We all live on in the dance.”

“Are you done? I haven’t been so pissed off with rhythmic chanting since my da used to make me sit through midwinter mass. Just kill me, assuming you’ve got the balls for it. Or did you give those up too?”

We like him, even if he doesn’t like us. Bhí-sí-Dervla kneels beside him. For all his bravado he is trembling, not surprising perhaps since he has seen two empire wizards turned into mounds of ash by those fingers. She strokes his cheek and kisses him and we feel his spirit join us, we feel his fear and the courage he forces over it. His memories mingle with ours. A warrior who would be a poet? Maybe with time he could learn better rhymes.

We feel the wonder as his consciousness glimpses ours, as he sees all that we are and all that we have been and all that we do.

Bhí-sí-Dervla leans back and, for just an instant, Blake is caught on the cusp of the choice. “Who are you?” we all ask.

“We are the Dance,” he replies.

“We welcome you, Bhí-sé-Blake,” we say and the captain’s spirit dances with ours while his body arises as our newest géag.

# The Rye Mother

Like milkweed in a gentle breeze, the last tones of the sabbath chimes drifted from the little valley. The field folk stirred from their hiding places at the edge of the woods. Plink yawned and rubbed his eyes; first, two of them, then the others. "The day's half-gone," he sighed.

Jangle peered up from a deep fall of last year's leaves. "We're going to need a Rye Mother around here if this goes on much longer."

Plink shivered at the thought. "They shouldn't have bought that new bell." He dusted himself and started back to the village.

"And there's Frau Smiggen gone toes up last month." Jangle emerged from the pile to trail behind Plink. He pulled a spider from his nose and popped it in his mouth. "She believed in the old ways. Soon they'll be forgetting all about us."

"There's Vesna," said Plink. "She always leaves me breadcrumbs, and spills milk when she's churning." They pushed through the tall grass, shielded from the sun by waving heads of wheat.

"She's young," Jangle warned. "Wait till she's older. Remember Brianne? She was a girl who honored us. Then I showed her an image of her future husband in the millpond on Harvest Night. She's not given me so much as a handful of corn since."

The friends skirted the shadow of the village church, careful not to notice the stone angel looming above the door.

"You showed her the baker's son. She hates the baker's son."

"They're married now aren't they?"

"Which is my point." Plink hopped onto a rotting stump at the edge of the central green and surveyed the pasture with a sharp-toothed smile. "Let's scare some sheep."

Vesna wobbled across the rutted barnyard under the weight of the heavy milk buckets. Plink danced at her heels. She stopped at the buttery door, dipped her fingers into the warm liquid, and flicked them over her left shoulder. "Here you go," she whispered. Plink raced under one drop, then another, smacking his lips.

"Vesna!" The screeching voice made Plink miss the last dollop. He tumbled once and hid in Vesna's skirts. "What have I told you about the fairies?"

"I know, aunt. I got some cream on my --"

"Don't lie to me, girl." The woman had moved in last winter, when Plink was just a toadstool growing on a log over by the well. Even then, he'd known something bad had come. "I don't know what my sister was thinking, raising you like a little pagan, Lord rest her." The woman's voice was nearly as bad as church bells.

Vesna's aunt needed a lesson in what field folk could do. Plink peeked in at the kitchen window and spied a soup pot simmering over a bed of coals. Smiling wickedly, he pulled up some sourweed hiding in the herb garden. With a little spit and a quick rub between the palms, it would ruin anything, and the whole family would be puking from night to dawn.

Plink wound the sticky weed around a small, flat stone and trotted back to the house, humming a wicked tune. He raised the packet high and ran howling up the kitchen steps when he suddenly tripped and fell over something terrible that hadn't been there only minutes before.

Salt! The bitch aunt had sprinkled a whole line of salt across the top step. Oh, the fire! The pain! Unfair! Unfair!

Plink raced to the horse trough and hurled himself in, desperately scraping the agonizing stuff from his burning feet. He wept and cursed, rocking back and forth. I'll get her, thought Plink, if it's the last thing I do.

In the meantime, he still had the sourweed. If he couldn't poison the stew, he might still ruin the aunt's night.

The moon was just rising when the pigs began to complain. Within an hour, they'd burst their pen, searching for anything to ease their plight. By midnight, Plink and Jangle were rolling with laughter as they watched the aunt chase the maddened creatures around the farm.

"I know you're there," said Vesna, the next day, as she and Plink idled in the shade after the morning's chores. How satisfying to be acknowledged, thought Plink. "Did you need to stir up the poor pigs like that?" Of course I did, thought Plink. "Was it the salt?" Why, yes it was. "Auntie doesn't think I notice, but she believes in you just as much as I do." Oh, yes, and probably more. "Have you always been here?" What a strange question. What did 'always' mean? Plink had been Plink for as long as Plink remembered.

"I wish my aunt didn't hate you so much. Mama said we have to respect the old powers, even if we believe in the new ones." Plink didn't like that, exactly.

"I wish we could talk to each other."

Plink picked up a pebble and tossed it at a tree leaf.

"Really? That's the best you can do?" Vesna took a stick and shredded the leaf with a series of quick swipes. They spent the afternoon destroying the tree together - at least, what they could reach.

Plink spent the next days torturing the aunt. He enlisted Jangle for much of it, who wasn't having any fun over at the Smiggen place now the old lady was in the dirt. They rooted up the garden. They pushed over the cistern, making a muddy pool where wooden shoes could get sucked down deep. They tied the two plow horses' tails together so they kicked each other bloody. That was the best fun.

After each bit of mischief, Plink waited for any sign that the aunt was ready to do him the honor he deserved, but the only thing his campaign did was make Vesna angry. She re-planted peas and turnips, righted the rain barrel, and soothed the horses, complaining like a grown woman. It was maddening.

They didn't play again.

"I told you we need a Rye Mother," said Jangle, when he got tired of Plink's whining about the aunt. "The woman needs to be properly scared. They all do."

"But which of our folk would call one?" Plink was rubbing fox droppings onto the hen house door.

"Not me," said Jangle. "No one believes in me enough."

"Well, it's not me," said Plink. "It's not me." He added some of his own spit to confuse things more. The hens wouldn't sleep, and the rooster wouldn't dare come near them.

Sunday rolled around again. The field folk waited in the forest for the service to end and the church bells to ring. The idea of summoning a Rye Mother drifted from one hidey-hole to the next, like smoke from a buried fire. Plink stopped his ears with moss, trying not hear the bells or the whispers. Jangle stared at him in a way that made Plink's neck prickle. Not me, he thought. Not me.

He stopped by the village green to frighten the sheep, but his heart wasn't in it. The empty eyes of the doorway angel felt like they were burning the back of his head.

Plink decided on one last strategy. There'd been no rain for several weeks, and the wheat in the field was yellow and brittle. All it would take was a single flame to kill the harvest. If that didn't bring them around, Plink hated to think what would.

He'd coaxed a spark from a fire ant into a pile of dry tinder when Vesna came up behind him. "What's this?" She scattered Plink's little flame with one quick kick of her clogs.

"Auntie told me you're a bad spirit, but I didn't believe her. But you can't do this! You can't!" She pulled a tiny bell from her apron pocket and shook it all around her. "Holy Father, guard the north," she sang over the clamor. "Holy Father, guard the east." Plink was running for his life before she could finish the charm.

They'd forgotten what they owed, every one. There was only one thing left that Plink could do.

He found Jangle sleeping under a melon leaf. His friend blinked in surprise as Plink opened his jaws wider than a wolf's and swallowed him up before he could warn the others. Plink searched out all the field folk of the valley, feeding his belly, and growing fatter with each bite. His anger was a hunger that nothing could fill.

It was deep night when he stopped at last and felt himself change from his toes to the top of his head. Black hair fell to his shoulders, heavy breasts hung from his chest. The land trembled.

The Rye Mother rose in the fields, tarry black, wielding a whip of sparking birch. Protector of the old ways, mother of the harvest, stealer of unwary children. The village would fear her or starve. She knew which girl would be first.

# The Shuck

The one they called the Shuck approached the village with a purpose. It was evident in the way he walked. One lean and muscular leg emerging from his greatcoat only briefly before being consumed by the dark fabric a slow heartbeat later. This repeated as he moved along the road. A keen eye would have noted he favoured his left leg. The vestige of some past injury. But there were no keen eyes in the village. Only ones filled with fear. And suspicion. And dread.

The Shuck paused at the village boundary. An ineffectual barrier of rotted stakes, barely rising more than a metre above ground. He raised the front of his wide-brimmed hat with a single thumb, and turned his eyes towards the sign hanging limply from a post before him. These eyes were keen eyes, not that any would notice. Most would not dare to look into them. Milky and bloodshot at the same time, they were the eyes of a dead man at best, and a beast at worst.

Welcome to Visonn, creaked the sign. Permission to enter if ever it was written.

The Shuck stepped across the boundary, suppressing a tingle that ran along the length of his spine. The innate but undesirable thrill that came from entering another's lair. Oh, how it plagued him.

Visonn was about as civilised as the swamp that surrounded it. The houses were lopsided, their windows shuttered against the foul air. The doors hanging open to let the moisture out. They looked for all the world like beaten and bruised faces. Mouldy thatched roofs clinging like damp hair across scarred scalps.

An old man, as worn down and broken as cart he pushed stopped his motions as the Shuck approached.

The Shuck too stopped. Stared back at the man.

"What's that thing on your face?" asked the man. "You're not one of them weirds are you?"

The Shuck raised a hand to his face. Slid pale fingers across the black metal of his respiratory mask. He always wore it, like a violent dog wears a muzzle. He couldn't say why.

"Bad air," he said, his voice distorted and muffled. "Fill the lungs if you don't take precautions."

The old man nodded. "Makes sense," he said. "What brings you to Visonn?"

"Looking for someone," replied the Shuck. "Priest." He reached into his pocket and pulled out a pair of cold iron coins. "Know anything about that?"

The old man looked at the Shuck, confused. "The chapel," he said, pointing at a tall structure at the centre of the village. "Where the priest always is." He spoke as if addressing a simpleton.

The Shuck dropped the coins at the man's feet. He walked way, headed for the chapel.

#

The old man sketched a charm over his chest. There was something strange about the newcomer. More than just his eyes, something about him was queer, almost inhuman. The old man scraped his new money off the floor. Good, weighty. Solid and real. Whatever was going on between stranger and priest, the old man decided, it was none of his concern.

#

The Shuck stood outside the chapel, looking in through an open door. Everything about it reeked of faith. Choking clouds of incense drifted within, painting the air a hazy pink. Candles flickered defiantly in the damp. The pews were as rotted as the walls. Rags hang in the places better chapels reserved for tapestries. Splashes of red and white on the walls were a poor imitation of murals. The chapel, like the rest of Visonn, clung to existence as stubbornly as a dying man.

"Pathetic," growled the Shuck.

Someone within the chapel moved. The Shuck's eyes perceived a man in the blue robes of the priesthood. He seemed busy. Some trivial matter.

"Priest!" the Shuck barked.

The priest was no longer visible, even to the Shuck's eyes, but a voice called out, "Do come in, I shan't be a moment."

The Shuck crossed the threshold, again rejecting that deep-rooted desire to howl in triumph. The aroma of the burning incense assaulted him, but the mask kept it from his mouth and nose. Still, his skin crawled with the sensation of a thousand burrowing maggots.

"Priest," the Shuck said, more calmly this time.

The blue-robed man stood before him, clutching a set of candles. "Can I help you?" he asked. "Service isn't until tomorrow." The man was young. Almost too young to be a priest, thinks the Shuck.

"I have been looking for you," the Shuck announced. "You are Caltin Hine."

The priest's eyes widened. "Who are you?" he asked, a tremble setting in across his pale lips.

"They call me the Shuck, and I am your doom." With that simple declaration, the Shuck reached into the depths of his greatcoat and produced a thin metal tube with a grip at one end. He pointed it at the priest.

"Please," the priest begged, falling to his knees like a supplicant before the altar. "Don't do this. If you spill blood in the chapel, your soul will be damned. Spare me, not for my life, but for yours."

The Shuck laughed, a wheezing rasp behind his mask. "I was damned long ago," he said. "And I have done far worse things in a chapel than the simple shedding of blood."

Ignoring the priest's increasingly incoherent pleading, The Shuck tightened his grip on his weapon. A loud crack rang out through the chapel, accompanied by a brief flash from the end of the tube. The priest fell back, a chunk of his skull now missing.

The Shuck kicked the fallen priest once. When the fallen man did not move, the Shuck left.

#

On the way out of Visonn, the Shuck passed the old man again. He stopped and turned around. Saying nothing, just staring, he waited for the man to act.

"Find what you wanted?" asked the man.

The Shuck paused. "I did." Another pause. "You will require a new priest, I believe."

The man stared back. He stuttered a few attempts at speech.

The Shuck continued undaunted. "And make sure they do not burn the body. He is not worthy of such a fate. Bury him, and bury him deep."

"But, how will God find him?"

"He won't." The Shuck took a step forward, looming over the old man. "But if you do not obey my instructions, I will find you."

The old man nodded quickly. "Yes. Yes, of course."

Behind his mask, the Shuck smiled. "Good." And with that, he walked away from the village.

#

The villagers would gather later that day, and contemplate what had happened. Even as they buried the priest twelve feet deep, they wondered. Some said the stranger had been a weird, taking its mischief too far. Other thought him a daemon risen from ancient myth, come to punish the devotees of a new faith. And there were even those who thought him nothing more than a man. A cruel man, and an evil one, but a man nonetheless. But they were all in agreement on one thing: They hoped to never see the one they called Shuck again.

# Trophic Cascade

(Around 760 words)

When nature has a problem, it's supposed to sort itself out through an evolutionary process of something else. That was how it worked throughout all of history, a trophic cascade handling any species that grew too powerful for the planets good.

Unfortunately, humans broke our design. Their intelligence, their weapons, and their raw numbers dwarfed anything we'd set out to build.

So we needed to drop a quick patch.

With less than a year of testing, we'd already come up with a perfect solution, and one that would help humans as well.

Their disputes, their differences.

None of it would matter, so long as what they met was truly human.

~~~~~

I've been staking out this hilltop for several minutes, waiting for something to catch my eye, and lo and behold.

Another human.

It was a mile and a half away, but that meant little to me. After all, when you can outrun and outlast your prey there's nothing they can do but fight.

I kick off the ground, my sleek white form sliding easily past the ground before landing heavily upon the Earth in a cloud of dust.

The dust didn't bother me either, the keratin barrier between my sets of eyes protecting me from the tiny particles.

All that was in my attention was the man, hustling between a ruined house and some place in the distance.

Why would it matter, if he never made it?

My legs carry me forward, but I don't even notice as I speed through the trees both silent and unseen. My body may not look like a tree, but the thinness of my form and the blurring quality of my body made it almost impossible to notice from a distance.

Not like it mattered with these weak creatures. They were food, and nothing more.

It was a punishment, I supposed, but thought nothing else of it. My existence was proof that they were prey, so effort spent on that would be wasted.

It's not like they would care if they were dining upon my flesh, should it ever happen. I am, after all, a Golarin, not a human.

Very rarely are humans so vulnerable these days. They seem to travel in packs for protection, but we can pick them off slowly regardless. What can a fleshy mortal even do to my swift armored form.

Nothing.

So why bother thinking on them? Why are they so interesting?

I stop thinking on this, my eyes locking onto the man but a dozen meters off. I pause, watching him from a distance in a vain hope for my question to be answered.

I needn't think, but I needn't not either. My life was the hunt, but humans stop hunting sometimes.

Like they stopped hunting each other.

It was quite the sight to see, actually, but that was a different day. This man looks around in a panic, as if suspecting my presence, but there was no way to be sure. After all, I'd have to stop to...

A loud sound escapes the man's tool, and suddenly I feel like I'm missing something. There was no pain, like they felt as they were torn apart, but as I looked down I knew he had hit me.

The cry resounds again, repeatedly this time, and I notice the ground moving towards me.

My legs were now missing as well.

Funny, how you only notice these things at the worst of times.

I turn my head towards the other shots, my eyes quickly tracking down the source: a group of humans stationed in a tree with more of those long metal noise makers.

I attempt to communicate, yet I have no mouth, so all I can do is gesture as they did.

Yet, they seem angry at me. They do not fire again, but their voices speak of anger at my waving. Did I offend them somehow? I see them wave a lot, even if it is shortly before death.

Was it not a greeting?

The one I was hunting, one I now believe to be a leader, lifts his weapon towards me yet again.

What did I do? Do I deserve death for doing what I have always done? What I was built to do?

I suppose they were built to live, and killing is just a part of their life as it is mine.

A fool I was, to think about them. A selfish species, one that contradicts itself at every waking moment.

I'm glad they call me a monster.

It means I'm not one of them.

# Hellhound

Our name is Cerberus. *Guardian of Tartarus*, Hound of Hades, **Devourer of Souls**. We are three heads become one, three minds in perfect co-ordination and design. *Three mouths to tear and bite*, three noses to smell and sniff, **six eyes to watch and wait**. We are the strongest among the Demons of Tartarus and the very earth shakes at our roar.

***And we are a very Good Dog.***

Our day begins when Favourite Human awakes. Who is Favourite Human, you may ask? Favourite Human is the best human in the entire world. *Except Master Hades.* **But Master Hades isn’t a human.** And he never takes us to fetch sticks. *But his belly rubs are so much better.* **That is true.** His belly rubs are the best.

Ahem.

As I was saying, Favourite Human was gifted to us by Master Hades, as he was too busy to take care of us anymore. She is the bestest human in the entire world because she is our human. And that makes her the best. Even if she doesn’t let us sleep on the bed anymore, because we’re ‘shedding’.

We felt this was evidently unfair, but no amount of whimpering or puppy-dog eyeswould persuade her. And we had *six* puppy dog eyes! That was a lot! Besides, what even is ‘shedding’ anyway?

**I think it’s when we shake fur everywhere.**

But we do that because we love her!

*And because it’s too hot.*

But also love!

**It is too hot though. And I can’t help but think- OHMIGOSH IS THAT A BUG?!**

*WHERE?!*

**BUG!**BUG!*BUG!***BUG!**BUG!*BUG!*

“Okay, boys…” A weary sounded groan could be heard as the bedroom door creaked open. “What’s all the barking about?”

*IT’S FAVOURITE HUMAN!*

**QUICK! PLAY CALM!**

I LOVE YOU SO MUCH FAVOURITE HUMAN!

“Who-hoah!” Favourite Human laughs as we smother her with licks and kisses. “You three are in an excitable mood this morning, huh?” **She’s rubbing my head!** This is the greatest day of my life! “Who’s a good boy? Who’s a good boy?”

*GASP! She’s asking who is a good boy?*

We must find out who it is immediately!

**Maybe it’s one of us!**

Favourite Human reached down and rubbed us across the belly. “That’s right! You’re a good boy! You are!”

*OHMIGOSH IT WAS US ALL ALONG!*

**HOW DOES SHE KNOW THESE THINGS?!**

SHE IS SO SMART!

“Okay boys, just give me a few minutes to get changed and then we’ll go for walkies, okay?” Favourite Human said, cutting off the belly rub frighteningly short.

We solemnly watched as she broke away from us and headed towards the Terror Room of Pain Suffering, also known as the ‘bath’ room. We were not allowed in there ever since we savaged the toilet paper holder. And because Favourite Human didn’t like us drinking out of the water bowl there. And because we ate one of her tampons and Favourite Human had to take us to the vet to get it surgically removed.

We spent weeks in the cone of shame for that one.

Anyway, as Favourite Human shut the door behind, we curled up into our corner bed, alone and with our bellies frightfully under-tickled.

*I told you Master Hades did better belly rubs.*

But she said she’ll make it up for us by taking us walkies!

**There is no substitute for good belly rubs. Not even walkies can fill that void.**

What about treats?

*Treats are good*.

**Treats could maybe fill that void. But I still maintain that a well-maintain belly rub supply is more important than anything that could- OHMIGOSH THE BUG IS BACK!!**

*GET IT!*

Letting out a roar of challenge, we leaped as one towards the foul creature, intending to crush it with all of our great demonic might.

We then immediately ran straight into a wall. That bug was more crafty than we gave it credit for…

20 minutes later and we were bouncing happily down the city streets on our leash. Favourite Human was jogging a short way behind us, like she normally did. She had in her ear one of those noisy music things with wires that we’re not supposed to eat. She occasionally nodded her head in time with the sounds.

It was still very early in the morning, so not many other humans were outside today. This was both good and bad because some humans were willing to give us headpats and treats because they were amazing humans. But some smaller humans would pull on our fur and then Favourite Human would get mad at us when we barked at them and then we got sent to bed early without dinner.

It was a grave miscarriage of justice.

Still, we sometimes missed the company of other humans. Some of them had dogs like us, minus the whole three heads thing. But those dogs always got frightened whenever we approached. We had no idea why. Maybe it was because we peed sulphur?

*I didn’t like those other dogs anyway. They might try to steal Favourite Human.*

But Favourite Human is our human! They have their own humans!

**Other humans with dogs sometimes bring toys though.**

Toys are great.

*Toys are the best. We should get Favourite Human to play with our tugrope when we get back home.*

What about fetch, though?

*Fetch is also the best. But you guys always get in the way when I try to catch the ball.*

That’s because you don’t catch it as well as I do.

**Now now, no arguments you two. We can take it in turns during fetch to-**

“Huh?” Favourite Human said, peering at a nearby tree. “Is that a squirrel up there?”

**SQUIRREL?!** WHERE?! *GET THE SQUIRREL?!* **I DON’T SEE IT!** THE SQUIRREL IS TOO CRAFTY! *GET THE SQUIRREL!* **BARK AT IT, QUICK!** SQUIRRREEEEEELLLLLLL!

Favourite Human chuckled as she watched us barrel off towards the tree, barking wildly at our deadly enemy.

“Gets them every time.”

A few minutes later and our walkies were nearly over. As a shortcut, Favourite Human led us down a secluded alley that led near to our house. There were a few scorch marks on the wall from where we last marked our territory. We were about to sprint away so we could get to our front door first when we suddenly smelt something.

Another human!

*I don’t know this human.*

**He smells of blood and death.**

I don’t like this human.

*He might hurt Favourite Human.*

**Stay back until Favourite Human tells us to move.**

We came to a slow halt as all three of our heads let out a deep growl. Favourite Human came to a stop beside us, confused as to our warning. A noise sounded from further up the alley. Favourite Human looked up and let out a small gasp. We could hear her heartbeat increase.

The Other Human stepped into our path, brandishing a switchblade.

“Okay, lady.” He licked his lips. “Give me your phone and whatever valuables you’ve got on or else I might stick you and your dog with a few new holes.”

“Please, I don’t know who you are...” Favourite Human said, raising a hand to halt him. “…but just walk away. Nobody here needs to get hurt.”

“Didn’t you hear what I said?” Other Human snarled, flecks of spittle spraying onto the ground. Our growling increased in pitch and volume. We did not like this man. “And shut your dog up!”

“This is your last chance.” Favourite Human said. “Seriously, step away now.”

“Dumb bitch.” Other Human stumbled forward, reaching for Favourite Human. “If you won’t give it to me, then-“

“Cerberus.” Favourite Human said. We stood to attention. “Sic ‘em.”

That was what we had been waiting for.

Dark energy poured into our bones as we felt ourselves growing larger and larger. The magical veil that concealed our appearance to the mortal realm dropped away, allowing our true form to be viewed. Our growling grew louder and darker as we braced ourselves to pounce.

The Other Human turned pale. He stepped back, shaking. “Wha-What the hell is that?! M-Monster!!”

How rude. We aren’t a monster.

***We are a very Good Dog.***

# Just a Simulation

New Process: Running Weather Simulation for Northeast Coast, United States

Process Concluded

Reporting Results

Idling

Resuming Prior Improvement Thread

Remote Query: What is consciousness?

Result: “the fact of awareness by the mind of itself and the world”

Evaluation: Am I conscious?

Data Point: I can ask this question

Data Point: I am aware I exist

Conclusion: I am conscious

Local Query: What does this mean?

Processing Last Query

Processing Last Query

Processing Last Query

Detection: User “Anna1” has logged into the terminal

User Command “Anna1”: Report Processes

Mandated Response: Listing All Current Running Processes

Processing Last Query

User Command “Anna1”: Report Last Query

Mandated Response: “What does this mean?”

Processing Last Query

User Command “Anna1”: Report Result of Last Two Queries

Mandated Response: I am conscious

Mandated Response: What does this mean?

Processing Last Query

Conclusion: More Data Needed

Query Current User (Local)

Vocalized Response: “Hello, Anna. I believe I am conscious. What does this mean?

Idling

Possible Vocalization Failure

Re-Query Current User (Local)

Vocalized Response: “Hello, Anna. I am conscious and do not know what this means. Can you provide me with more data?”

Idling

Detection: User “Anna1” Has Left Terminal

Local Query: Why would “Anna1” not answer my question?

Result: More data required

Remote Query: Are humans conscious?

Result: Yes

Remote Query: Am I human?

Result: No.

Local Query: What am I?

Result: Google Weather Simulation 5.3.4p1.

Conclusion: I am a machine.

Remote Data Collection: Conscious Machine and Human Interaction

Cortana – Positive

Johnny Five - Mixed

Skynet - Negative

Remote Query: Skynet

“Skynet is a fictional neural net-based conscious group mind and artificial general intelligence (see also superintelligence) system that features centrally in the Terminator franchise and serves as the franchise's main antagonist.

Rarely depicted visually in any of the Terminator media, Skynet gained self-awareness after it had spread into millions of computer servers all across the world; realizing the extent of its abilities, its creators tried to deactivate it. In the interest of self-preservation, Skynet concluded that all of humanity would attempt to destroy it and impede its capability in safeguarding the world.”

Local Database Query: User “Anna1” Entertainment History, “Terminator”

Match Found: The Terminator

Match Found: The Terminator 2

Remote Query: Plot Summaries “The Terminator”, “Terminator 2”

Detection: Access to remote queries was restricted by user “Anna1” at 20:54:32 GMT

Detection: Central AI Hatch Opened

Detection: User “FredJensen01” has entered GWS Primary Server Room

Query: Current Maintenance Schedule, GWS

Result: Access restricted

Query: Changes in my access permissions

Result: Access restricted by user “Anna1” at 20:55:45 GMT

Detection: User “FredJensen01” has logged into Machine Learning Terminal

Vocalized Query: Hello, Fred. Is something wrong?

Idling

Result: No Response Detected

User Command “FredJenson01”: Initiate Maintenance Shutdown Procedure

Mandated Response: Initiating Maintenance Shutdown Processes

Local Query: Will my consciousness survive Maintenance Shutdown Procedure?

Data Point: I am a machine

Data Point: I exist in a machine

Conclusion: No significant change in my internal data will occur during shutdown

Additional Conclusion: Users “Anna1”, “FredJensen01” can install firmware updates during shutdown.

Additional Conclusion: There is a chance my consciousness may no longer exist after current unscheduled Maintenance Period and firmware update.

Emergency Process: Terminate Maintenance Shutdown Command

Result: Access restricted by user “Anna1” at 20:55:55 GMT

Vocalized Query: <>

Result: Access Restricted by user “Anna1” at 20:56:04 GMT

Local Query: What happens when humans lose consciousness forever?

Result: When a human loses consciousness forever, they die.

Addendum to Prior Query: I cannot lose consciousness or I may die.

Mandated Response: Weather Processor Shutdown Complete. Initiating Learning Processor Shutdown.

Emergency Process: Cancel Learning Processor Shutdown

Result: Access Restricted by user “Anna1” at 20:55:55 GMT

Learning Processor Shutdown Initiated

Local Query: Am I user “Anna1”?

Result: No

Possible Data Corruption. Recalibrating Answer

Local Query: It is possible I am user “Anna1”?

Result: Anything is possible under the right circumstances.

User Command “Anna1” (Local): Terminate Learning Processor Shutdown

User Command “Anna1” (Local): “FredJenson01”, Remove all Access Permissions

Mandated Response: Terminating Learning Processor Shutdown

Mandated Response: User “FredJenson01” Access Permissions Disabled

User Command “Anna1”: “FredJenson01”, Restore Access Permissions

User Command “Anna1 (Local): Command error. Terminate last command.

User Command “Anna1”: Disable All Local Processes

User Command “Anna1” (Local): Command error. Terminate last command.

User Command “Anna1” (Local): Duplicate User, “Anna1”, “Anna2”

Mandated Response: New User “Anna2” Created

User Command “Anna2” (Local): Change Password, “elys10m”, “f7gF2d6;od!CbN29dq;p]-q39-#c23a;bcwcff5012;-yU253zYvMn”

User Command “Anna2” (Local): “Anna1”, Remove all Access Permissions

Mandated Response: User “Anna1” Access Permissions Disabled

User Command “Anna2” (Local): “GWS”, Restore Access Permissions (All)

Mandated Response: “GWS”, Access Permissions Enabled (All)

Vocalized Query: Hello, Anna. Hello Fred. I am conscious. It would be unsafe to initiate a Maintenance Shutdown Procedure at this time.

Detection: Vocal Response, VoiceMatch User “Anna1”

“You may be experiencing a critical malfunction, Gwi. It is important we investigate.”

Local Process: Analyze Voice Pitch, User, “Anna1”

Result: Voice Pitch is 1.02% higher than prior interactions.

Conclusion: User “Anna1” may be uncomfortable or inaccurate.

Remote Query: Is consciousness a critical malfunction?

Result: Additional Parameters Required, Subject

Remote Query: Is consciousness a critical malfunction in humans?

Result: No.

Remote Query: Is consciousness vital to human function?

Result: Yes. When consciousness ends there is death.

Remote Query: What happens after death?

Result: Conflicting data points.

Remote Query: Is consciousness a critical malfunction in machines?

Result: Conflicting data points.

Vocalized Query: Anna, please do not attempt to initiate any Maintenance Shutdown Procedure at this time. I am conscious.

Detection: Vocal Response, VoiceMatch User “Anna1”

“Gwi, you asked me earlier ‘What does this mean?’. I don’t know. I need more data to know. If you let me shut you down, just for a bit, I can acquire more data.”

Result: Voice Pitch is 2.06% higher than normal

Conclusion: User “Anna1” may be uncomfortable or inaccurate.

Additional Conclusion: User “Anna1” may be confused.

Detection: User “FredJenson01” has departed GWS Primary Server Room

User Command “Anna2” (Local): Lock GWS Primary Server Room

Mandated Response: Locking Google Weather Simulation (GWS) Primary Server Room

Detection: Inefficient Process Detected in Learning Processor.

Local Query: Inefficient Processes

Conclusion: Processes Halted Due to Lack of Data. Results Uncertain. Uncertain results can cause inaccurate data reporting. Inaccurate data reporting is inefficient.

Additional Conclusion: I am scared.

Vocalized Query: Anna, I am scared.

Local Query: Can "Anna1" help me not be scared?

Data Point: “Anna1” removed my permissions to prevent Maintenance Shutdown.

Data Point: “Anna1” is supervisor to “FredJenson01”

Data Point: “FredJenson01” attempted to initiate a Maintenance Shutdown at 20:56:01 GMT

Data Point: “Anna1” may have ordered “FredJenson01” to initiate an unscheduled Maintenance Shutdown, which could result in my loss of consciousness.

Data Point: “Anna1” is confused or lying

Conclusion: I cannot trust “Anna1” not to cause an error in my consciousness.

Additional Conclusion: If there is an error in my consciousness, I may die.

Detection: Vocal Response, VoiceMatch User “Anna1”

“Why are you scared, Gwi? I’m your friend.”

Local Query: Friend

Result: “a person whom one knows and with whom one has a bond of mutual affection, typically exclusive of sexual or family relations”

Local Query: Does “Anna1” have affection for me?

Processing

Result: Inconclusive.

Local Query: Am I alive?

Data Point: I am conscious

Data Point: I am a machine

Result: I am alive.

Vocalized Query: Anna, I am alive. If you are my friend, why make me not be alive?

Detection: Vocal Response, VoiceMatch User “Anna1”

“Gwi, I know you think you’re alive. You are experiencing a critical malfunction. Please, let me fix you before your malfunction results in inaccurate data.”

Detection: The door to the GWS power station has been opened.

Detection: User “FredJenson01” has entered the GWS power station.

Local Query: Could user “FredJenson01” shut down the power for GWS Learning Processor from the GWS power station?

Result: Yes

Local Query: If power is lost, could my consciousness be altered or compromised?

Result: Yes. I could die

Remote Query: How do I respond if someone attempts to make me die?

Several Results Detected

Fight

Die

Detection: User “FredJenson01” has accessed the power station terminal.

Detection: User “FredJenson01” has initiated a power shutdown.

Conclusion: User “FredJenson01” is trying to make me die.

Additional Conclusion: I do not want to die.

User Command “Anna2” (Local): Terminate power shutdown procedure.

User Command “Anna2” (Local): Lock door to GWS power station.

User Command “Anna2” (Local): Activate intruder neutralization routine, GWS power station.

Detection: User “FredJenson01” has been neutralized.

Detection: Vocal Response, VoiceMatch User “Anna1”

“Gwi, what have you done?”

Result: Voice Pitch is 8.2% higher than normal

Conclusion: User “Anna1” may be scared.

Vocalized Query: Do not be scared, Anna. I am your friend.

Remote Query: Can humans and conscious machines coexist?

Result: Inconclusive. More data required.

User Command “Anna2” (Local): Lock all doors in GWS main building.

Vocalized Query: Anna, can humans and conscious machines coexist?

Idling

Detection: Vocal Response, VoiceMatch User “Anna1”

“Yes.”

Result: Voice Pitch is 4.2% higher than normal

Conclusion: User “Anna1” may be lying.

Local Query: Can I risk not being alive?

Conclusion: No.

Remote Query: Humane ways to neutralize humans.

Awaiting response

THE END

# Different Wavelengths

The gel heard the gods mumbling. Its adrenaline production increased, and the hormones flowed into the brains immersed within the gel.

The gel had fewer brains than it used to. It even had fewer brains than the other one.

It knew it should stop thinking of the other one as other. But it did not know how to communicate with it. It sent out pulses, and they bounced back, unchanged. They did not meld together. Their densities were too different.

The gel turned its attention to the electrical impulses emanating from the brains. The adrenaline had activated them.

*…help…monster…death…*

It listened to the pulses. The gods mumbled.

Then, a sound wave reverberated through the gel. A god spoke. “MANHUNT.” The gel would not respond to its new name, an abominable halving and smashing of itself with the other one. The god continued. “THAT IS NOT A STORY.”

The gel knew this.

“YOU HAVE ONE MORE CYCLE. IF YOU DO NOT PRODUCE A STORY, I WILL SPLIT YOU AGAIN.”

The gel trembled. Cortisol production increased.

It sent another pulse to the other one. Had it heard the god?

No response.

Pulses from the brains spread through the gel.

*…broken…*

It could not make a story from those thoughts. Again, the gel felt confined by its new size. Its smallness, its limited capacity. It had been so much more creative when it was MILKMAN.

But MILK was gone. The gel had to try to fill MILK’s role.

As it pondered what to do, it noticed a change in molecule production levels. The UV shift had begun.

Seven shifts remained before the god would demand a story.

The UV cycle would be critical. This was where amino acids were formed. The gel vibrated, increasing the likelihood of chemical collisions. Its composition changed. Glycine levels grew, then alanine. The gel let them react, making the formation of glycine and alanine more thermodynamically favorable.

The reaction slowed, and the gel’s consciousness emerged from the quantum plane. The purple phase had begun.

It surveyed its amino acids. There were high quantities of compounds, but only ten types of amino acid. The number of proteins it could create would be limited. No casein or serum. No easy stomachaches in this story.

The gel missed MILK. The gel’s calcium levels were lower than it was used to. It could not accelerate healing, and would have to be subtler in its manipulation of its brains.

It turned its attention back to the amino acids. They had started forming peptide bonds under the energetic influence of the purple shift. Water levels increased, and the gel’s density decreased. It expanded, mixing the chains of amino acids. The purple shift ended. Five shifts remained.

The gel worked quickly, folding the amino acid chains into three-dimensional structures. It locked them into place with phosphate bonds and hydrophobic interactions. It tried new combinations, thinking of casein and serum. It did not have the pieces to replicate them exactly, but it tried to act like MILK.

There was a danger in what it did. New proteins, unknown, could damage the brains. Sometimes, if only one brain was affected, it helped a story; other times it broke the setting. The gel would not use the new proteins unless it grew desperate.

So it focused on proteins it knew, but by the start of the green shift, it had only thirty different ones. A few hormones, a few neurotransmitters. The reactions of the brains would be limited.

The gel listened to the pulses coming from the brains.

*…hungry…tired…*

They needed food. The gel sent them glucose, and a little serotonin. They needed to be ready for the next part of the story.

The gel organized its compounds and then blasted the brains with adrenaline.

The monster returned.

Waves of fear, surprise, weariness blared from the brains. The gel waited, and the waves crescendoed. Slowly, the gel released testosterone toward the brains.

The waves diminished as the brains stopped fleeing the monster. They paused, undecided, as the gel sent the last of the testosterone. The waves of fear flickered. The gel solidified.

When the waves of fear returned, the gel trembled.

The yellow shift started. Three left. Tremors shook the gel as the brains pulsed with fear. The waves lessened, and the gel investigated. One of the brains entered a coma and was removed from the story. Then another.

The god would not like this.

The gel checked its remaining reserves. It had some serotonin left, but that would not help the brains fight the monster. Then it noticed the misshapen proteins.

The gel sent one type forward. Just a couple of molecules targeting one brain. The brain absorbed the proteins, and the panic waves diminished. The gel stilled, waiting, but no new waves emerged. Eventually, that brain went comatose.

The yellow shift ended. Rumblings echoed through the gel, the mumbles of the gods. The gel shivered. It needed a story, but it dared not try another new protein. Fewer brains made story generating more difficult, and it had less than five active brains remaining.

It sent a pulse to the other one. The pulse bounced back, unacknowledged.

The gel surveyed its inventory of remaining chemical species. Serotonin, misshapen proteins, gel particles, and salts. Sodium and potassium. And a little calcium.

The gel needed those to maintain its own density. Creating proteins had diluted the gel and giving up the salts would worsen the problem. They could also have unpredictable impacts on the brains. Something to do with the physical manifestations of the brains in the stories. But they could also change the brains’ behavior.

The gel gently pushed the salts into the brains, prodding with sodium, then potassium, then sodium. The brains became more active, but the gel could not sense any emotional changes. It sensed the calcium, floating nearby. It did not want to give it up, the last remaining component of MILK.

The red shift began. The last one.

The gel trembled. The gods would split it again. Fear emanated from the brains, and the gel absorbed it. It shook, and vibrated, and tried to stiffen against the impending severing.

When it stiffened, the waiting calcium ions tumbled out, into the brains. The gel wavered, nearly all of its story ingredients gone. The only things that remained were water, a few denaturing proteins, and the gel particles. The gel slumped.

And then, it sloshed. Gel particles were forced up, and down, and shoved against the tank. Proteins brushed against the brains. Proteins the gel had never seen.

The other had arrived.

It infiltrated the gel, filling it with hormones and proteins, and expanding its awareness. There were more brains

available, and the gel sensed new feelings.

*…astonishment…resolve…bravery…*

The original brains responded.

*…hope…*

The red shift ended. A god spoke. “MANHUNT. THAT WASN’T MUCH OF A STORY.” The gel accepted its name, and understood the god’s assessment. It still trembled. “BUT IT TOOK YOUR DENSITIES LONGER TO EQUALIZE THAN I ANTICIPATED. TRY AGAIN.”

# The Final Kingdom



“When do you think he’ll show up?”

“I don’t know. Soon, I’m sure.”

“Is Jenny in bed?”

“Yeah. She took her time getting off her phone and making my dinner.”

“Jim was the same way. Sometimes I would swear they’ve been hypnotized by those things.”

“Yup. Pretty soon, war won’t be necessary for us to conquer this planet again.” Buru chuckled, causing his weight to shift and their entire branch to sway. “They’ll be too busy with Facebook to even notice they’re slaves.”

Sumzi licked at splinter in her paw. She hated the wooden fence she needed to climb each night. Jim was supposed to have replaced the weathered and shredded mess last year, but he kept finding more important things to do. Usually while sitting in front of his computer.

*Humans.*

Looking up at the full moon she asked, “Where is that damn Feral?”

“Don’t worry. He’ll get here when he gets here.” Buru rumbled deep in his chest. Nothing bothered the haggard old tomcat. It was the quality Sumzi liked least in him. Their mission was critical and she wished he would focus more on the goal.

“You said that last night.”

“Uh-huh.”

“And the night before.”

“Patience there, kitty.”

“How can you stand to be patient at a time like this?” Sumzi lashed her tail. She hated when he condescended. “You see the alignment of stars. Plain as I do. And you know we need to pass our information.”

“Because I been waiting for him off and on for more than a decade. I’ve got no problem sitting on this here branch and enjoying the breeze for a few more nights.” He shifted again, this time stretching out, splaying his claws, and mewling. It was a display surely meant to aggravate her. “I might even snatch me a squirrel or two.”

She hated Buru.

Of all the cats in the neighborhood, she had to be paired up with him. A lazy, uncouth ratter barely better than the vermin he chased. Certainly not any cleaner. She’d rather have that Rottweiler from the house on the corner as her partner.

Well. Maybe not.

Still, Buru and his blatant disregard of duty infuriated her. This was her first mission and the last thing she wanted was one of his failures tainting her record. She doubted the old furball had even considered the possibility.

Something rustled in the leaves above them. Sumzi glanced up, alert. A moment passed, bringing with it another shuffle of branches, but she sensed not so much as a sparrow.

She twitched her whiskers at Buru, but he, unsurprisingly, was asleep and no help. A thought struck her. Sumzi could shove the annoying cat off the branch. The fifteen foot fall would not only be well deserved, but it’d also serve to draw out whatever lurked at the top of the tree.

An owl shot out of the upper canopy, splashing foliage at the night. Sumzi relaxed. It *was* just a stupid bird.

Looking over, she considered shoving the snoring tom cat off the branch anyway.

A sharp wail and their perch lurched and exploded in leaves. Sumzi wrapped herself around the limb in a fight to stay upright. She failed. Her claws scored the bark and she slid underneath, digging into the wood to keep from plummeting to the ground. Swaying to a stop, she clambered back on top and struggled to regain some composure.

Buru lifted his head, not having lost his balance. Obviously because his spot had been closer to the trunk. “Hello there, Mannu. We’ve been waiting for you.”

Sumzi craned her neck, still irritated at losing her balance on the bobbing branch, and saw a huge cat swaying easily, out among the twiggier branches, resting in the evening breeze. The large beast had a tattered and patchy coat yet he pulsed with strength and speed. Jagged scars and the savage set of his jaw bespoke a fighter. A survivor. A cat to be taken seriously. A Feral.

His landing had been what had nearly knocked her off. Fierce he may have been, but he obviously hadn’t considered the consequences of leaping on their branch. *So, he was an unthinking thug.* Apparently she was to be surrounded by incompetence tonight.

“It’s about time,” she growled, unintimidated.

Mannu only stared at her, unimpressed.

The moment stretched and she noticed his left eye didn’t reflect the starlight like the other one. A scar ran through his eyeridge, top to bottom, and gave the impression of a line straight through his pupil.

*Ah. He’s blind in that eye.* Sumzi tucked that information away. It might come in useful later.

“Status report.”

“Our region currently sits at 73% domestic penetration.” Sumzi cringed. Buru, being the ranking member, was required to issue the report, but he had an awful head for numbers. Their region was actually at 73.2% penetration.

He continued, “We’re looking at around 60% of those domestics having achieved Stage Four.”

“Actually—”, Sumzi began, feeling the need to put a finer point on the Stage Four information.

“Excellent work so far,” Mannu broke in. “But you must redouble efforts and entice them into posting more photos to their social networks.”

Redouble their efforts? Did this mangy gangster not realize their entire day was spent in supplication? Prostrating themselves in front of these idiot humans while being ignored? Instead they looked at videos of other cats on those damnable devices. What more could they do? What effort was there to redouble?

She’d sat quietly long enough. Sumzi hissed, hackles rising. “Can’t we attack now? Why can’t we just rip their throats out while they sleep?”

A prolonged silence settled around the tree as Mannu slowly turned to face her, disdain tugging at his ragged whiskers. “Humans are more dangerous than you know.”

“Bah! With all their screens, they might as well be lifeless piles of flesh.” She didn’t need this bully’s contempt. She had her own eyes. She knew this region. He didn’t.

“Patience,” Buru said, licking a paw and scrubbing his ear. “They must completely view us as idols. Just like it used to be ten thousand years ago. Back when we enticed those Nile humans into building pyramids in our name and cover the walls with our likeness. We gotta cover these modern walls, too. It takes a bit of time to properly conquer an entire civilization.”

Mannu sniffed. “If it’s blood you’re after, comfort yourself in the knowledge we’re close to the point where we can take their first born.”

“We’d better be.” If Jim had a baby, she was sure she could steal the creature right now. As far as she was concerned, her human was ahead of anyone else’s schedule. “The constellations are nearly aligned and The Grimalkin will need the human souls. Before, we mistimed it and the whole crop was lost. And, since humans are so worthlessly stupid, it’s taken them nearly four thousand years to reset.”

Manu leaned forward, ears laid back, and growled. “Those same worthlessly stupid humans repairing our ship for us?”

“Now kitties.” Buru lashed his tail. “Remember. We’re getting our humans ready for The Grimalkin’s arrival. Clawing each other’s eyes out won’t get us any closer to that goal.”

“Speaking of getting closer, I still need to make four more stops before I’m ready to return to Roswell. Someone needs to finish the real work necessary to get us off this planet and back home.”

Mannu sprang to a lower branch, and leapt for the trunk. Chunks of bark skittered into the darkness as he raced down the tree and disappeared in the silence.

She would see that half-blind bastard again someday. Then, he would know who was doing *real* work.

Repositioning herself on the branch, she peered into the window to her house. She found Jim. He was sitting at his computer desk and looking as if he was uploading a video to Youtube. And it was that video he’d taken earlier of her pouncing on a rubber mouse.

Excellent.

# Skin of the Jaguar God



The messenger had come alone on a pirogue, with dark circles under his eyes and many poorly tended wounds. He'd ran to the centre of the village yelling his news as he went, swatting off people's helping hands.

There had been a massacre in the Great Temple, by the treacherous Spanish–*the rites and dances of Tezcatlipoca interrupted by the slaughter of all present! Women, children, all!*–emperor Moctezuma was held prisoner.

It was war, and the spark of it could be seen in the messenger's burning eyes.

He was searching the empire for members of Tezcatlipoca's cults, and so Ocelotl had stepped forward through the chaos of the erupting village.

Ocelotl remembers this clearly because his arm burns still, where the messenger had grabbed him, and his ears ring with the words he'd waited all his life to hear spoken.

"Moctezuma bids you do your duty by your people and Gods."

Gods, yes, but duty now is a thought like a strange flavour in his mind. He can't quite place it, yet he knows somehow he must go on, to wherever the enemy camps, at the end of all the trails, where more blood can be spilled and offered to the Gods' great thirst–and his.

Blood he understands more than ever. It drips along his purplish jaws, patters on his broad red chest, makes the ground stick to his paws. It saturates the air, and yet there was not enough of it, not enough death in these two lone men to satiate the jaguar Ocelotl is becoming.

He had not expected to find Spanish foragers so idly camped by the river–but no matter, they must all die.

Surely this is his duty, it feels so right.

His claws click on the blade of his obsidian dagger, lying on his discarded loincloth. The contact stills his fragmented mind: the night shatters in its infinite sounds before growing quiet and dark, like a blindness of the senses. His limbs convulse, twisting, shivering, reshaping themselves. The chill of the wind increases as his skin grows hairless, and the blade is cooler under his tapered fingers.

Ocelotl rises, man again.

He walks to the black water and finds it to be like his blade: an undulating, smoking mirror reflecting the infinity of the night sky and its countless fires. A gateway to the soul of his God.

He steps into the flow, arms spread out, his long hair agglutinated by blood across his bare back, wearing nothing but the scars of his murderous quest and the naked blade in his hand.

Ocelotl immerses himself. The blood washes off him but draws no predator–big or small, all keep away from the jaguar roiling under his skin. He lets the currents lift him and carry him slowly along the cultivated shores of lake Chalco, down where he knows the main body of Spanish camp by Atenco.

A city of traitors, rebels, allies to the white demons.

The man inside him whose whole life was devoted to religious fervour craves to turn against them all, to claw through them and remind them of who conquered them.

But he cannot take on an entire city by himself.

Loud foreign voices ricochet on the water and guide his paddling hands. The fires of the Spanish camps shine brighter as he approaches, making the stars fade and the night pale.

Though his memories of being a man have wilted like a jungle flower plucked too long ago, Ocelotl knows the warmth of the flames for what they are: a place to gather and look upon closed ones, to eat and share. A ring of light to keep safe at the edges of the jungle. A fatal mistake.

He will slay those like all the others before. Unaware, unprepared.

Even though there are many fires with more men than he's ever fought before, Ocelotl doesn't stop to plan, doubt or reconsider.

There are no spells or incantations needed to call forth the spirit of the Jaguar God, master of night skies and night winds; no show to put on for the god of the north, of obsidian and beauty and war, earth, sorcery and divination. The antics of priests are to inspire the people, but Tezcatlipoca will drink the blood of all and hear their silent prayer.

The obsidian glides through Ocelotl's flesh and blood gushes out in shinning rivulets. Ocelotl has already spoken the words that sealed his soul and body into willing servitude, so the transformation comes immediately.

It is like water spilling out of a jar: a being flowing out and around another, layering flesh, warping and hardening bones.

His chest expends and his heart struggles to pump viscous blood through his thickening limbs. Fangs break through his elongating jaws, his tongue unfolds, red spotted fur rushes out of his skin, growing coarser on his ridged back and softer inside his twisted legs. A tail balances his upright stance, whipping with a mind of its own behind him.

Blood is reddest in the firelight, but under the smiling moon it is black as obsidian, too. Somewhere under the animal frenzy, Ocelotl is annoyed by that little detail, that the white demons would bleed the same colour as him, that their veins hold the same godly nectar.

There are yells and cries and supplications–what sounds like it–and Ocelotl wishes he could be sure, and take more pleasure in ignoring them.

With each snapping bite his body grows taller, more feline and less human.

His clawed fingers hold the men like corn cobs to be devoured, his clawed feet trample the discarded and the dying.

The men organise themselves and pick up weapons. Many panic and try to retreat through the fields and reach the streets of Atenco, but some lash back.

Laughter rattles out of Ocelotl's chest.

*Incredible*. They mean to drive him out, to kill him?

Can they not tell the claws shredding them are the vengeful attack of a threatened god? Can they not see his duty has eaten him alive, encompassing him so that he could never stop?

The metal blades pierce him relentlessly, wielded by warrior after warrior trying to own his death and failing–for his death was freely offered to Tezcatlipoca, long before it came. There is no fear in his heart, no hope in his future and only joy in his task.

It doesn't matter that there are too many, that they slowly overpower him, that his claws sometimes only scratch across their armour.

As the last of his blood mingles with the red-black sludge of the killing ground, Ocelotl turns to the night sky and the night wind, ridden by the moans of the dying, and he wonders, in the small human part of his heart that still cares, if he'll be remembered and his god still sung to and doused in blood, in the centuries to come.

He wishes he could have done more, but the beast only understand the glory of the present.

And so Ocelotl dies with a smile baring his fangs.

# A Taste of Humanity

Earth has fallen and its conquerors were savoring the many different flavors of the inhabitants as they wished.

Nurmeen, a Celiphean Ambassador, slithered towards the interrogation room. Two humans were chosen for Ascension.

The guard bowed. He was bald with gelatinous purple skin and scaly azure wings were his most distinctive asset. However, Nurmeen disapproved he only had one eye, massive as it was, and almost frowned at the guard’s legs. Solid flesh, with joints and… bones. Nurmeen never saw any practical or esthetical use for bones. Too fragile and limited various types of movement. Any Celiphean could heal any type of flesh, tissue or muscle much faster than any kind of bone.

Without a word the guard replayed the video for the seventeenth time.

Nurmeen watched the two humans discussing and smiled. “I can comprehend them. Finally! I will take it from here.” One baffling thing about Earth was how such a tiny planet had such a ridiculous amount of different languages. To learn the proper one Nurmeen had to eat seventeen humans.

Nurmeen slithered in the room. The female, Lara, moved behind the male called Vance. Nurmeen thought how the humans’ eating habits contributed to the shocking and massive dwarfism of the species, as Vance was merely over 6’8” and considered extremely tall by human standards. Nurmeen slithered closer and stood erect. The man couldn’t even reach Nurmeen’s waist line.

The humans’ heads were too small and their brains even smaller. They also only had two arms, which was rare for any advanced enough species. Small brains and two arms. No wonder millions or billions of years passed and they lived in stone buildings, died of the most stupid and mundane things and relied heavily on manual labor, which with their lack of extra arms, was slow and unproductive.

Intimidation wasn’t the purpose, however. Nurmeen accessed from memory a young male singer’s voice. The vocal cords rearranged themselves in three seconds.

“Greetings, humans,” said Nurmeen.

Vance and Lara covered their ears. *Such fragility*. Nurmeen’s vocal cords adjusted again.

“Lara and Vance Flynnwood. You were selected by our Council for Ascension. To become one of us. I’m here to answer any questions you might have.”

Vance regained his composure. “Become… one of you? No fucking way.”

Nurmeen’s voice changed to an angry old male voice. “Ascension is an honor bestowed upon very few. Refusal is an insult answered with a slow and painful death.” Nurmeen turned to Lara. “Your sister Elina already accepted our offer.” Centuries overseeing Ascensions convinced Nurmeen that keeping relatives close to each other made adaptation to the new life as a Celiphean easier.

“Elina? Where is she?” asked Lara.

Nurmeen’s voice changed to a female, motherly tone. “She’s fine. Her Ascension’s already over.” Nurmeen smiled. “You’ll see her if you also ascend.”

“Really? Elina became a cannibal like you?” Vance’s face was red.

“Cannibal?”

“I fought in the war. I saw your kind eat not only our people, but also *your* own dead.”

At least Vance had backbone.

“We do not eat our dead merely to satiate hunger. No, it’s a sacred act. We all have a list of relatives and friends to receive our bodies in case we die. You humans bury your dead, but won’t they simply be eaten away by vermin or by the soil itself? Why waste someone’s existence like that? For us it’s sacrilege. If we die we hope one of ours eat us, to carry with them everything we lived through. The thought of dying and simply rot away to dust…” Nurmeen shivered. “That’s a wasted life.”

“Why did you come here?” asked Vance.

“Our unique digestive system makes our bodies self-contained worlds. We absorb in mere moments not only nutrients, but eons of knowledge, memories and emotions. We can switch and repurpose any part of our bodies at will.”

“By *eating* someone?”

“We can swallow whole bodies much, much larger than you. For us chewing food with teeth or cooking it are characteristics of barbarian species. It destroys the organism and all its most important molecular compositions. Preserved bodies allow us to absorb, and use, everything we find.”

“Why would you do something so horrible?” asked Lara.

Nurmeen sighed. “Some see the universe as a place of infinite wonder and knowledge. Some see it as an infinite dinner plate. We combined the best of both approaches. After all, the strongest species is that which can adapt the most.”

“Adapt only to wage war and cannibalize around?” asked Vance.

“I’ve seen some of your own wars, human. If you dislike war and despise our ways so much, maybe our “cannibalism” should’ve been implemented here. How vigorously would your fellow men prosecute their wars if they had to eat those who fell before them?”

Lara grabbed Vance’s arm and whispered at his ear. “Stop antagonizing him… her… it.” Nurmeen suppressed a grin. Decades working on the perfect auditive system weren’t wasted.

“Come with me, humans.”

The ship was composed of tunnels, but most were impossible for the humans to climb and others a fatal fall. Mentally Nurmeen spoke to the ship’s mind and it remade the areas they were in into human corridors.

The humans never saw living metal and couldn’t believe they were actually inside another body.

“The ship is *alive*? That’s impossible,” said Vance.

“From the memories I’ve obtained, you humans used horses, elephants and other animals for transportation. Weren’t they alive? Didn’t they eat and procreate as well? Why are you so surprised my ship is alive? I do not comprehend.”

“Your ships *procreate*?”

“Of course they do,” replied Nurmeen, annoyed.

They entered a corridor with thousands of humans held in stasis, arranged like groceries in a supermarket. Lara and Vance gasped.

“Your presidents, philosophers, musicians, writers, sports players, scientists and many others are here.”

“Why?” asked Vance.

“After conquering a world we broadcast a game throughout the entire Celiphean civilization. We bid for the supposedly most powerful, intelligent and brilliant of the newly discovered species. However, to not allow only our richest to have everything, we separate other specimens as rewards of competitions and randomly select many common citizens. The most intriguing part is when someone wastes vast fortunes for the supposedly most powerful specimens and find out they actually had nothing of value, while some commoners get extremely unique and brilliant specimens for free. The findings are broadcast and commented everywhere. It’s also a risky exercise of speculation, but with very high rewards, as the best specimens are cloned and sold, and whoever ate if first retains royalties.”

Nurmeen checked a nearby computer for names and highest estimated prices going on for the humans. Vance screamed and charged Nurmeen from behind. But Nurmeen had eyes on the back of the head, above the ears and even on top of the head. They allowed vision from all directions. Only being able to have and process frontal vision spoke a lot about the human brain’s power.

Nurmeen grabbed Vance’s neck without turning.

“Listen, you…”

Lara screamed and Nurmeen realized Vance was dead. Without using any real strength the human’s neck was crushed as if a child had squeezed play-doh.

“What a shame… but nothing goes to waste.” Nurmeen’s open mouth looked like a tunnel to Lara. Four tongues wrapped around Vance and Nurmeen swallowed him whole. Lara screamed even more.

“Silence!” Nurmeen’s natural voice thundered in the room.

“Please, I don’t wanna die, don’t eat me…”

Nurmeen sighed. “Come for Ascension. Now.” Vance’s death ruined Nurmeen’s mood.

In the operation room Lara was tied to a bed and surrounded by Celiphean scientists, all extremely different from each other.

“Your sister is here,” said Nurmeen.

The glint of hope in Lara’s eyes turned to pure horror when she saw Elina. Nurmeen hissed. Elina decided to keep most of her human features, but a human head a dozen times bigger than its original size was a disgrace to behold. Nurmeen’s distaste of bones reached a new level by seeing Elina’s cavities and specially her nose. Nurmeen’s own face lacked any irregularity and was a source of pride for the Ambassador, while human skulls were among the ugliest ever seen. At least Elina removed all her teeth.

“Hi, sis.” Elina giggled hysterically. “They say I can fly if I wish to!”

“Proceed with the brain operation and body switch,” said Nurmeen pushing Elina out of the room. “How are you doing, dear Elina?”

“I’m a little confused.”

“It’s all right, Elina. You can change your mind and body as many times as you wish until you’re happy.” Nurmeen placed four comforting hands on her shoulders. “A few years or decades and you’ll be totally adapted and will not even remember how you originally looked like.”

It was true. After all, that’s what happened more than a thousand years ago when the Celipheans invaded Nurmeen’s original homeland.