

m i g r a t i o n s

VOLUME I: DON'T FORGET TO BREATHE

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s h a n k e r

MIGRATIONS, VOLUME I: DON'T FORGET TO BREATHE

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To Maki

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Part One

W I N T E R

The Karakaze

I.

It was only a matter of hours before Bunnu was to be imprisoned and it would take several more years before he was able to marshal the resources for his daring escape, the first in a series of which would eventually propel him to notoriety within the Republic as one of the greatest escape artists of all time. Yet, at the moment, his immediate concerns were of a different nature.

Now, he stood frozen in place, listening to a sound that usually wouldn't otherwise capture his attention; an insignificant, everyday sound that, for some reason, brought the past back to him with a renewed clarity.

As he cocked his head, his eyes slowly rolled back to the sink in front of him. It was more like a washbasin than a sink, really. Above it, penetrating the darkness of the water closet was not truly a light, but more precisely a candle. It'd been years since he'd been in a place like this. But where exactly was *this* anyway?

He was far away from his home. That much was certain.

Far away...and in a foreign land.

Far from civilization in a town too primitive a condition for its people to understand truly and fundamentally why and from what perspective they might be referred to as *primitive*. Or, maybe it was just the lack of electricity and running water that made it all seem that way. Admittedly, these facilities were relatively rustic even for this area of the world. Other inns at least had indoor plumbing and electricity. Most even had radios. But not this one.

Perhaps it had something to do with the part of town he was in. It was known to the locals as the Nostalgia District, though no one really knew how the area had gotten its name. Did it come about through the feeling that it evoked in its residents and visitors? Or was it due to a lack of modern conveniences? The former certainly seemed less likely than the latter as it seemed doubtful that its long-time residents could continually, over the course of years, manage to be subject to a sense of nostalgia. After all, wouldn't the perpetual absence of a modern context, eventually, defeat the purpose of evoking such a feeling? In fact, it would seem more appropriate to assume that visitors who spent enough time within the confines of this area were unwittingly apt to live in the past and become nostalgic for the modern day... or even the future.

Regardless, at a younger age—that is, in his childhood—this sort of setting would have seemed normal and everyday to Bunnu. The washbasin. The candle. Even the draft coming in from the window. And maybe at that time, his surroundings may have seemed primitive to someone else. But who might *that* someone else have been? Perhaps his future Self: the very same *future Self* that now stands frozen in the washroom reminiscing about the past because of some unexceptional, everyday sound.

That sound: Maybe it was seeking him out from somewhere in his past. That didn't seem very possible, but then again, this *was* the Nostalgia District. The sound may well have created a rift in the fabric of

Space-Time, thereby allowing elements of some previous event to leak in and prevail themselves upon the constructs of the immediate reality. It seemed improbable, however, that events in time and space should reoccur in such a manner as to correspond exactly with one's memories.

No, perhaps, it wasn't as complex as all that. It *was* just a sound, after all. In fact, it seemed likely that its source was simply the whistle of a tea kettle in the next room and nothing more. A high-pitched whistle that served the function that the kettle had been designed to perform: to signal when the water had started to boil.

Presumably, beyond that, it had no inherent significance. It certainly couldn't conjure up a latent event in Space-Time. Yet, it seemed to remind Bunu vaguely of something that happened many, many years ago. And with each passing moment, the whistle penetrated the volumes and chapters of his life, boring a hole further and further back through fleshy gray layers of archived existence into the distant past; reversing and spiraling into the depths of hindsight until, finally, Bunu found himself reflecting with clarity upon the day his parents found and adopted his younger brother, *O*.

Truth be told, it had been years since he'd so much as thought of, much less corresponded with *O*, which is not to say, however, that it was entirely Bunu who was to blame. *O* had *come into his own*: or so it was said. Nonetheless, in what respect and to what degree *O* had done this was something about which Bunu didn't have the slightest bit of information. Not for a lack of wanting to know, but more conceivably because *O* didn't seem particularly interested in making that information available to him.

The kettle was still whistling, which caused Bunu to wonder for a moment, as he soaked up the blood under his swollen lip with a wet cloth, if it wasn't, in fact, all happening in his mind. *Hasn't anyone noticed the damn thing yet?*

He looked in the mirror, rinsing the cloth in the washbasin. In the flickering water-reflected light of the candle, his face was awash in bands of light and dark rippling over his features in tandem. At one moment, his eyes sparkled in the light and in the next they were enshrouded in shadow. What connected those bands of light and dark? Could they indeed have been distinct entities?

He closed his eyes and listened to the noise beyond the door. Amidst the whistling were the sounds of the other patrons: chatting and laughing and muttering away, seemingly unaffected by the piercingly loud noise. *Why isn't anyone complaining to the innkeeper about the sound?* In stark contrast to the complaining or collective uproar any rational person might expect to hear in this situation, Bunu could hear a fair bit of laughing and good-natured revelry.

There had been a group of 3 men in broad-collared overcoats who were sitting at a table in the corner, enjoying a good laugh, when he'd walked in. A glance in his direction had silenced them for scarcely a moment, presumably because he'd been covered in bruises, which was certainly enough to arouse anyone's attention. But when the moment passed, they continued on in tones of mutual familiarity. Bunu had, in a way, been impressed by the manner with which they shared that sense of camaraderie. Be it in the laughter, or in their gestures, or even in their choice of words—that may very well have been a kind of in-group vernacular—he couldn't help but feel a bit envious, as that was once the sort of relationship he'd had with his friends in the Greater Kaiiba-8 Football Association. Before things soured, that is.

The pitch of the whistling now began to waver as he realized that the sound was not, in fact, that of a kettle, but rather of the wind outside. He went to the window and peered out at the city streets. Branches from trees in the tiny courtyard in front of the Algorithmist Temple flailed violently in the fury of the wind. People in the streets started running for cover as this could only mean a storm was on its way.

There was a knock at the door. Bunu ignored it.

The wind. Maybe that's what it was. He leaned against the wall, still looking out, watching the sky slowly darken, and thought about the Karakaze back home, which he now remembered used to cut through him, body and soul, at a similar pitch—frigid and mystifying and naked in its essence as it swept through

town to signal the arrival of the winter season.

The person knocked again. This time louder. “Mr. Bunu!”

Bunu looked back at the door, but hesitated to respond. “That must be what it was,” he said to himself, recalling a day, years and years ago, when he was a little boy.

II.

It had been a particularly windy day: the first of the season.

He had been outside picking ants up with a twig and placing them into a tiny wooden boat of his own design. His intention was to have them set sail through the narrow canals of a nearby rice field. A field that he had taken it upon himself to assign the name: *011235*.

This boat was the latest in a series of attempts to circumnavigate the Field, and perhaps, his best design to date. He had whittled the wood down himself with a sharp knife, bound each piece together with a strong adhesive that his father otherwise used to mend his work boots, sealed the exterior with wax, created sails from the thin fabric of his bed sheets, and stamped the hulls ceremoniously in red ink with his own name. And now that it was ready for its maiden voyage, he loaded the ants into the boat, pledging to each of them in whispers that all would be well and that they would be perfectly safe throughout their journey. Naturally, he couldn't be sure that his words would provide much reassurance for them, so he had designed the boat in such a way that it had a latch on its compartment door, so as to prevent any of them from abandoning ship mid-voyage. He didn't truly seek to force them into this situation, but, at the same time, knew that there could be no effective way of persuading them to partake voluntarily with the means at his disposal. Yet, this was no matter to approach lightly, for if he was to fail again in this attempt and passengers were to perish, it was *him* who would be held responsible and there would be no mistake in assuming that the brethren ants, or their posterity, would, one day, have their revenge.

This was, of course, a chance he was willing to take as it was for the sake of *exploration*: an undertaking worthy of any sacrifice. In any case, he was confident that, this time, his hard work would pay off.

The boat would sail. Glory would be had.

His father had helped him build his first boat. This crude, top-heavy vessel, however, had capsized the moment it touched the water. And so, the boy, thereupon mistrustful of his father's input, endeavored to devise his own fleet of seaworthy creations: toy galleys, merchant boats, pirate ships. Vessels with hollow compartments for the purposes of transport. To him, something about these objects inspired him with a sense of wonder he could scarcely put into words. The ships were, to him, sentient receptacles that carried their passengers and cargo to and from the shores, insensible to what had transpired on land prior to the voyage and unaware of what would unfold upon arrival. They simply served the purpose for which they were designed. And thus, to have a function that served ends beyond the scale of one's own understanding: something about it filled him with an urgent need to explore the possibilities. The ships were, thus, not just a means of play, but also of experimentation for workings that pervaded on a larger—and perhaps, even a smaller— scale.

As he slid the compartment door shut and fastened the latch, his mother called to him from the kitchen. "Bun-bun! Put your toys away and come in! It's getting..." Her words were swallowed up by a strong gust of wind. Not swallowed, exactly, but *intercepted*. The Karakaze had intercepted them! Bunnu imagined the words' syllables like beads on a thread, held together in array and swept away with the wind. And along with his mother's words, he presumed that there must have been numerous strings of other people's messages being carried about in a similar fashion. The beads of all the strings collided at once in mid-air: intertwining here and tangling there into one fused consonance (or cacophony, as the case may be) of sound. The Karakaze captured all these threads and weaved them in with its own. What it wanted to say in its new message was something Bunnu didn't know, but was determined to find out.

Bunnu ignored his mother's calls as he walked along the dirt path in the direction of the rice fields. "Bun-bun!" he could hear faintly behind him. The wind pierced through him, ruffling his hair, until a chill shot down through his body. He tried to rub his nose only to find that both his face and his hands had already

gone numb.

The Karakaze swept down from the snow-covered mountains far in the distance, through the valley, whisking through trees in a series of howls and high-pitched squeals. It scattered smoke and parted dust as it made its way through the nearby village of Bahlia, swooped down through the dancing spider-tree orchards, ricocheted between the vast overhangs and solitary plateaus of the Coral Canyons, now and again puckering inward to create something like a vacuum among the caverns that tunneled inward to, as legend told, the distant past. The wind seemed to swirl through the fields as though it were a tornado's eye scanning over the land, scrutinizing it.

Bunnu's father had once told him that the Karakaze didn't swirl, but that it had an unswervingly straight course for the port towns to the Southeast. Yet, he could see it in the movement of the tall grass stalks and weeds along the path: an invisible swirling pattern it drew over the landscape. He allowed a certain levity to fill him as his pace along the path quickened. His feet suddenly felt lighter.

Yet, despite his good spirits, he was slowly beginning to feel the chill of the wind reach his head. A dull headache spread from the back to the front as grains of dust blew into his face, causing his eyes to sting and nose to itch, in spite of the numbness. He coughed as he rubbed his eyes with a dull, frozen palm. The boat, which he'd meanwhile been keeping lodged at the mast between the middle and ring fingers of his other hand started to wriggle as its sail undulated violently. If he wasn't careful, the mast would give, rendering the boat unfit to sail.

With his eyes still closed and a hand cupped over the sail, Bunnu ran a short way down the path. He opened his eyes again and, in the distance, could make out two small figures right next to field 011235: an adult and a child, but it was difficult to judge from this proximity who exactly they were and what they were doing.

The two stood stationary, fixedly staring at the field.

As Bunnu got closer, both turned to look in his direction and he realized that they were people of Mumtaz, a faraway village separated by the mountains about a day's journey away. He'd never encountered a real Mumta before, but had heard stories about them from the Outlander that boarded with his family: an old friend of his maternal grandfather's who called himself Rakesh-7. "The Mumta," the Outlander once told him, "are really from a place far away from here, across the sea, but if you told any of them that, they would likely stare at you in disbelief, since all of their historical records have been purposefully altered by the elders of their tribe. If only they knew that their ancestors had been the envy of other civilizations as theirs was a well-developed and intricate culture, unsurpassed in their pursuits of the arts, the sciences and philosophical doctrine. Their mother civilization, with whom they've since lost all contact and historical connection, were also pioneers, one might say. Pioneers of the high seas!

"But somewhere in their history, in a way yet unknown to any modern scholar, there was some kind of schism in their society after some of their dissidents decided to migrate to this continent. It's possible that some of the pioneers saw more opportunities here than back home. It's hard to say what the real reason was and I'm sure each one of the dissidents had his own reasons for leaving. But if you asked any of the Mumta about it, now, they probably wouldn't understand the question. The descendants of those who'd left don't know their true roots. . .and most certainly wouldn't know why their ancestors had left. And their ancestors weren't inclined—and perhaps, still aren't inclined to have them find out."

He took a puff of his pipe and blew out a cloud of vanilla tobacco as he sat back in his armchair, "Which is to say, as far as they understand, they are people of this land. And when the historical record of your civilization gets wiped clean, you come to think you're native, regardless of your true lineage. And even though their so-called 'native' culture is still on the whole quite derivative of their ancestors, there are also some marked differences between their New World culture and the ways of their Old World ancestors. At least, as far as I know and, truth be told, I don't know that much about them. Truly, the ways of the Mumta are not well-known, as they had been nomadic for hundreds of years before settling beyond those

mountains. And even now that they are here, they don't associate much with outsiders. "As a society, they seem to have chronicled extensively the past hundreds of years of history living as nomads with no ties. They are very proud of their achievements in the New World. And any one of them would know their history as a collective in elaborate detail: right down to the names and positions of all the people in their society, prominent or otherwise, whether in recent history or 150 years ago.

"And apparently, over the course of time, the linguistic structure of their language has come to abandon the past tense, as it has become their intuitive assumption that the past and present exist at once and as one entity—and as such, the usage of past tense has become superfluous in their speech. Meaning that, to them, there exists only everything that has happened up until and including now and everything that will happen from the here on out. No distinctions are necessary beyond that. And everything that has happened until now is still, in effect, continuing infinitely onward to the here on out. The spirits of the dead are said to commune with the people who fill the roles they'd previously occupied. For example, legal counsel in their criminal cases is given by one lawyer and any number of his dead predecessors. The matter can sometimes get confusing when there is a disagreement among the predecessors as to the appropriate course of legal action. This, of course, being further complicated by the existence of recent precedents, which, as I'm sure you can imagine, tend to be overlooked by the deceased. Especially the elders.

"Of course, for a society like this to function successfully, there needs to be a self-imposed code of social conduct, highly specialized and more austere than the ways of their brethren in the Homeland. And maybe that's what they had been looking for when they left in the first place. Who knows? Who knows why they migrated here? They certainly don't. Your culture calls them *Mumta*, but where I'm from, we call them *Drawans*, which in my language means *lost children*."

The Outlander often had stories about people from places far away. Places Bunu had never heard of that sounded so distant from his own reality that it felt as though one may require a lifetime just to reach these places. And yet, they seemed to occupy special territories of his imagination that he often visited at night when he closed his eyes just before going to sleep. In calling upon these places at bedtime, his hope was to dream of and actually visit them, so that he could meet the people that the Outlander had told him about. Of course, he could never manage to do this, but he never gave up trying.

It excited him to think about those areas out there beyond his reach. It gave him a certain special comfort, specifically that of knowing that the world had more to offer him than the rice fields and the distant mountains, to which he'd long since grown so accustomed that one could have even called them extensions of him: the fields, the sky, the tall stalks of grass, the weeds, the dirt path and the mountains were all attached to his senses by invisible threads from which he wished to break free, if only for a moment.

He, unlike his parents, was fated to venture out into the world. To hit the high seas: he would be a captain in the Royal Navy and lead the fleet of his Lordship Bunu-5, the patriarch whom his parents had chosen as his namesake, to cities of gold and sunken chests from pirate ships containing jewel-encrusted ornaments and antiques of incalculable value.

The old man's stories gave a depth and a sense of detail to these dreams as he talked of his travels and adventures. In his stories, the Outlander always managed to depict himself as some witless observer, dragged into a situation by circumstances beyond his control, causing him to become embroiled in some tangled web of loyalty and betrayal, honor and deceit, generosity and greed. His stories always revolved around unlikely protagonists: Ghosts of Dead Cobblers, Mercenary Guardian Angels, Swordsmen who tamed wild beasts by way of the magnetic forces generated by their blades; Jungle shaman who, by communicating with wood spirits, could recite the living history of every tree down to the hour and minute; a society of deposed Kings, hailing from many a land, being made to spend their remaining years in exile living together on a far-off island, as they waged petty wars on each other for the small gains achieved only through the swarms of moths which served in their legions and which attacked their political

opponents by feeding off the old fabric of their once luxurious gowns; Shadow Parasites that passed from host-to-host through the convergence of their shadows, allowing them to feed off of and slay whole villages almost instantaneously; a Carnival Freak Show Attraction composed of a complex of connected whiny green bubbles, known famously to the carnies as the Ethereal Scapegoat: a despicable and blameworthy being that had the ability to inconvenience anyone and everyone by the necessity of its mere existence.

The Outlander's protagonists all lived in this world that just didn't seem to be made for them. That was perhaps what Bunnu liked most about his stories. In the winters, they would sit together in the tiny attic space that the old man had been occupying in the house for the past 25 years and drink hot ocha as Rakesh-7 wove together seemingly simple threads into complex and detailed narrations that Bunnu could listen to tirelessly for hours on end, only to, upon hearing the finish, unleash a whole new barrage of questions about what could have happened to this character and why on earth did that character decide to be evil, and how come the guardian angel was so interested in money if he couldn't use it in Heaven without God catching on, and so on. Bunnu's questions were so persistent, in fact, that the Outlander often found himself remarking half-jokingly that Bunnu's curious nature would not only be his greatest asset, but also his undoing.

And now, Bunnu wanted to speak with the Outlander more than ever. He had so many questions he couldn't bear not to have someone around to ask. He was absolutely sure Rakesh-7 would be able to explain why the Mumta were here at field 011235. Why they had journeyed so far over mountainous terrain. Why they didn't come more often. Bunnu had a flurry of questions running through his head, spiraling, perhaps, at roughly the same speed as that of the Karakaze, but no one was there to answer them. Anyway, to expect Rakesh-7 to be there with him would have been fruitless, as he hadn't left that small space in the attic for going on 10 years.

The adult Mumta was a tall slender man with an olive complexion and an overall gentle demeanor. He had shoulder-length wavy hair, which the Karakaze blew back into his face occasionally. His features were sharp, one might even say watchful. If Bunnu hadn't known better, he might have mistaken him for a guard or a ranger of some kind as the man's entire face seemed to focus in completely on anything that his senses deemed worthy of further inquiry. As he viewed Bunnu, there seemed to be this strange sensation in the air, as though every sense were acutely aware, not only of the boy himself, but also of his specific condition in that moment.

Could this man, in fact, taste the apprehension in the air molecules that separated them? Could he smell the aromatic vapors of the young boy's curiosity as it bubbled inside, escaping, perhaps, through pores in the skin or even through the ears like sizzling bacon fat having been laid upon the white hot foundations of his imagination? Could he feel the charge that Bunnu radiated in anticipation—an electricity that ran anxiously through his spine, down through his arms, legs, fingers, and toes?

Regardless of whether he could or couldn't, after a short period of silent observation, the man cocked his head back abruptly and his son, who had, all this time, been staring at Bunnu in frozen silence, seemed to be yanked to attention, as though by an invisible thread connecting the two of them, and he awakened from his trance. He glanced casually up at his father, who, now, appeared to be digging in his heels, arching his back and, with his head cocked back, teeth clenching, veins now popping out of his neck, was struggling to maintain influence over his son's attention, like a fisherman grappling with a stubbornly spirited fish just slightly beyond his control. After a moment's hesitation, the boy turned effortlessly back to glance once more at Bunnu with an expression of amusement before gazing back out at field 011235. Bunnu followed his lead and looked out in the same direction only to find nothing of interest in the field. At least, nothing peculiar enough to arouse one's curiosity, as he saw it. *What are they looking at?* He wondered. His eyes scanned fields that spanned outward from him to the horizon. Nothing at all worth staring at.

Except for...

He quickly turned back to them to find that they were already slowly walking in the other direction. He watched their footsteps from behind: they were slow and graceful. Careful as if they were tip-toeing. Surely, it would take at least 2 days for them to return at such a pace. Bunu plodded after them in faster, louder, clumsier steps.

“Wait!” he heard himself call out. The sound echoed as though he were in a tunnel.

Both Mumta tensed up suddenly, presumably taken by surprise. They both turned around with expressions of disbelief. Bunu stopped dead in his tracks. He could still hear the reverberations of the echo. His voice repeatedly saying *Wait... wait... wai-...* reminded him of the echoes in the caverns that tunneled underneath Coral Canyons. It looked like he'd startled them. But how could that be?

And suddenly, Bunu noticed that he could no longer feel the wind ruffling through his hair. Not the slightest breeze could be felt, which is not to say, however, that the wind had stopped. In fact, it gained intensity all around him and the two Mumta. The Mumta stood motionless before him at a distance of maybe 5 meters, but the wind seemed to be swirling about the 3 of them as though they were being scrutinized by the Karakaze Itself. Silence resounded in the wind to the effect that Bunu could only assume that the Karakaze had somehow formed a sound-proof barrier that encircled them. The Mumta, now visibly calmer than moments earlier, looked at him expectantly, perhaps wondering what the boy was going to do next, or more conceivably, why he had called upon them. “You are...um... That is, are you from...Mumtaz?” was all he could manage to say.

The words came out loud and abrupt to the point that even Bunu jumped at the gruffness and invasiveness of his own words. The Mumta didn't respond or even show the slightest bit of surprise or annoyance at the disruptive nature of his words, this time. *Had I not been heard?* Bunu wondered. The wind still remained strong, yet he could hear his own voice loud and clear. In fact, it was rare that his words had such resonance. It was fair to say that this barrier created by the Karakaze even served to amplify them. He could not just feel their echo, but also their impact as they created ripples through his consciousness like pebbles in water. He could feel inside of him the depth of their meaning—and, beyond even the intrinsic meaning itself, he could sense the intuitive curiosity that seemed to underlie the words. In fact, he was so dumbstruck by their power that it would seem that these were not the same words that had left his own mouth.

The eye of the Karakaze passed over them and resumed its presumably unwavering course for the port towns to the Southeast and once again Bunu felt the wind begin to ruffle his hair and the chill run down through his body.

The Mumta still stood before him, their expressions hidden by their long hair which blew wildly across the fronts of their faces. They stood there, not resisting the wind: trance-like with arms at their sides. They, too, must have been quite cold, as they were only clothed in thin-cotton sarongs which they kept draped around their waists. This sort of attire, while beautifully ornate, was certainly no protection against the wind and thus must have left their arms, legs, heads, and chests vulnerable to the elements.

Bunu watched the fabric of their sarongs flutter in the wind and, thinking that it must certainly be too cold for them to make the journey back in this weather, did something that perhaps any boy his age might have done in this situation.

He invited them to dinner.

Raju and Yuri

“Are you sure you don’t want more potatoes?” Yuri asked them for the third time, “They’re fresh from Upper Bahlia! Better I’m sure than that awful stuff you folks are forced to eat out there in the mountains.”

The boy stared blankly across the table at Bunu, who was now wrapped in blankets and laying next to the fireplace with a bladder filled with cool mustard oil on his forehead. Meanwhile, the Mumta father flipped through a small book with tattered pages that he’d produced from his pouch. He got out a wooden compass with a quill attached and drew arcs over hand-drawn maps he had on each of the pages. Neither he nor his son had so much as taken a bite of the food that Yuri had put in front of them.

“A map-maker, are you?” Raju inquired as he sat back in his rocking chair with his pipe. He was a short, but stocky man with salt and pepper black and gray hair, a dark Vasallan complexion and a big belly like that of a bear that Bunu often liked to use as a pillow when they would lay out in the fields on a warm spring day. “Quite a future in that, let me tell you. Had a friend who used to do that back in the old days in Vasalla. That’s where I’m from. That’s why I might seem a little different from the rest of these backwards folk in Bahlia.”

“Papa!” Bunu cried as he sat up and leaned on his elbow, “We should take them up to see the Outlander. He’d have lots of maps he could show him.”

“The last thing we want is that old fool scaring them away. Anyway, he’s no doubt undertaken his evening prayers. See? It’s a full moon.” Raju motioned back towards the window behind him. The Karakaze was still howling outside. Amidst the whistling, they could hear the rustling of the grass and leaves.

Raju turned back to look at the untouched mounds of food sitting on the dinner table in front of the two Mumta. He licked his lips as he said, “The chap upstairs is a bit batty. Not a member of this family, really. A friend of my late father-in-law: apparently they fought together in the same legion under Lord Ieyasu-13, so now there’s this lifelong association that exists between the two that appears to even transcend death. But we certainly can’t turn the man away. Common sense would assume that he’d have left of his own volition years ago, but apparently, that’s not how things were in his time. He’s become a sort of surrogate grandfather, so he feels it’s his obligation to stay for Bunu’s sake. So, it looks like we’re stuck with each other. Bit of a strange one, though. Chose a ‘7’ rather than an ‘8’ to go with his moniker of Rakesh. What’s wrong with calling yourself Rakesh-8? Why the ‘7’? Can’t say I’ve ever heard of anyone using anything but an auspicious number with their name.”

Yuri put another blanket around each of the Mumta and placed another cup of hot ocha next to the other 3 untouched cups that sat before them. “Enough Raju! Let them eat. They must be hungry after their long journey!” Despite her reprimanding tone, she smiled at the Mumta warmly, while intermittently diverting her attention to her husband long enough to cast upon him momentary scowls with lasting effects.

Yuri had a very petite frame, which, despite its fragile appearance, radiated a kind of indescribable vigor, as though her spirit were fighting the form. At first meeting, many people might look at her and dismiss her as the shy and frail type, being protected by a strong and domineering Raju...but after some time passes, one begins to notice the remonstrative look in her eyes when Raju has tipped too much for the

apple delivery, or the way she paces impatiently behind him as he chops more wood for the fireplace, or even the icy demeanor she seems to project toward him whenever Bunu has disobeyed her.

Today had been no different as Bunu had returned home with two unannounced dinner guests, along with a terrible fever and sore throat to boot. If the boy had had a better role model than this big-bellied fool and the cretin upstairs, he'd have obeyed her when she'd first called him in for dinner, instead of running off into the cold.

Of course, despite her initial annoyance, she was now trying to make the best of the situation. And the scowls she was now casting toward Raju? Well, they were clearly not because he was interrupting the Mumta, but more likely because it was all *his* fault that she was being forced to resort to such measures. He had, after all, turned to her with a smile after Bunu had asked permission to have the Mumta for dinner and said, "You know, honey, it's been years since--"

"Yes it has. I'll take care of it..." she had responded instantly, despite knowing full well how much trouble she would have to go to in preparation for the meal. But of course, Raju never thought about these things. He only thought of himself and that big belly of his!

"How about some more green rice?" she now asked the Mumta sweetly with a smile, as she went over in her head, once again, how she would go about killing her husband that evening. This was nothing new as Yuri had made numerous attempts on Raju's life in the past. Her lack of success probably stemmed from the fact that she wasn't very good at planning these things out and had very little experience plotting murders. The tricky part was, obviously, to make it look like an accident so as to avert suspicion.

The first time she tried to kill him was when he was drunk. He had gone upstairs after a long night of drinking some of the Laughing Magenta he'd brewed from his own still. While he was passed out across their bed, she loosened a wooden floorboard on the staircase and called to him from the kitchen. Unfortunately for her, as the Laughing Magenta had come out particularly concentrated, this time, her husband was in too deep a sleep for her calls to elicit a response. Bunu, on the other hand, awakened almost instantly by the noise, came plodding down the stairs rubbing his eyes. "Bunu! Nooo!" was all she could say before he was facedown at her feet at the bottom of the stairs with a broken arm and a twisted ankle.

Early the next morning, as Bunu was being bandaged by the doctor in the kitchen, Raju repaired the floorboard and Yuri was riddled with guilt. She began to feel terrible about her decision to kill Raju. *Perhaps, it was temporary insanity*, she thought to herself. She didn't want to believe she was annoyed enough with someone to feel like killing them. The truth was that she loved Raju very much. It was just little things that bothered her. The way his jaw hung open when he read. The way his nose would whistle in his sleep, especially when he was drunk. The way he always shrugged his shoulders indecisively when asked simple questions such as: *Are you hungry?* Or: *What day is it today?* As well as, the inevitable: *Are you even listening to me?*

After lacerating herself over the matter for days and weeks on end, she finally decided to seek the counsel of O-bousan-34, a local priest. She had heard of him from some of the other village wives at the marketplace in Bahlia. He was known for giving very sensible advice, when it came to difficult matters, and was said to keep sensitive information private, which is perhaps a good reason why he had won the confidence of so many.

"And he always gives the most tasteful funeral services," one of the wives had told her, "I call upon him *whenever* my mother passes away... and he *always* guarantees me a special place in heaven for her. Apparently, at quite a discount, too. Mmm-hmm." The woman nodded her head blissfully, "Oh yes, he is a bit more expensive than the other O-bousan around, but he's one of the few who accepts jewelry, in addition, to money. A cut of the inheritance isn't *just* money, after all. Oh...he really is such a wonderful man! And so handsome! Why, if I weren't married..."

Yuri visited the temple after one of the services and asked one of the boy apprentices where she could find O-bousan-34. “In the office through the gate. I can take you there.” He smiled calmly and turned to walk with her. Yuri was very impressed as the young boy seemed very well-mannered and refined. He was maybe the same age as Bunnu, but seemed a lot older in his mannerisms. *That just shows what a good environment can do for these kids*, she thought to herself, *Imagine if Bunnu had grown up in this sort of environment rather than around that drunk buffoon!*

They entered the office building, which was elaborately decorated and laid out so immaculately that it was far beyond the level of cultural sophistication Yuri deemed possible for people as simple as the Bahlians. The walls were of marble with an inlay of emeralds, rubies, and precious stones of the like in the shape of remarkable designs. Lining a ledge along these walls were various gold and silver receptacles designed for holding the ashes of the deceased. In the middle of the room was a set of silver chairs with silk cushions set up around a square wooden table with a gold engraved center. Seated in these chairs was a group of O-bousan engaging in seemingly delightful conversation. “Your Holiness, O-bousan-34,” the boy announced to the group ceremoniously, his arms at his sides. The group looked up in attention. “Someone is here to see you.”

“Thank you, Takeo,” the one directly facing them said with a twinkle in his eye. “Right this way, please, madam.”

He led Yuri into a smaller office that was a great deal less luxurious than the reception area. He motioned for her to have a seat as he sat down behind the desk. Yuri sat down to find that the chair she was sitting in was more a bench than a chair and that the desk that O-bousan-34 occupied was quite utilitarian—no bigger, it seemed, than that of a schoolboy’s.

“I gather you are here for advice,” he said with a pleasant smile.

He had a boyish face, round with doughy features, which Yuri imagined, must have gone a long way to win the affections of the women who came to seek his counsel. In addition to the shiny rings that adorned each finger, he wore numerous gold chains of varying length and thickness that hung down overtop a robe of the finest purple Wormdroll silk. The longest and thickest of them had attached to it a large medallion with the number 34 engraved into it.

On the wall behind him was a chart with the names of all the O-bousan with a series of red X’s next to their names. His name had the most next to them. The Chart Read: *Month-to-Date*.

“How did you know?” she asked.

He exhaled through his nose loudly as a look of amused complacency crossed his face, “Oh, you know... you do this sort of thing long enough. You can read someone the moment they walk in the door.”

“Well, it’s a rather serious matter. I wasn’t sure who to go to about this...and I’m not even sure you can help me, but I feel terribly guilty about it.”

“I’m listening.”

“My son...his name is Bunnu. He’s about the same age as Takeo. Is...er...Takeo your...uh...your-?”

“He’s the son of O-bousan-13. I’m unmarried.” He said quickly, all the while biting his lip. “Please continue.”

“Right...um...well, like I said, I have a son. And because of my selfishness, he ended up getting injured.”

He leaned forward, eyes widening, “Is it serious?”

“No, no,” she said, starting to wipe tears from her eyes, hunching slightly forward with her head in her hands, ashamed to show her face. “It was serious, at first...but it’s been a few weeks and he’s begun to heal.” The O-bousan exhaled from his nose as he leaned back in his chair again, slowly. “But actually, it was my husband I wanted to hurt.”

“What do you mean?” he said with a sigh. He slumped forward lazily over the tiny desk, relaxing his chin against the knuckles of his right hand. He stared out into space and sighed again, this time louder.

“I mean...I really wanted to hurt him. Not just emotionally. I think...I...I...wanted to kill him.”

There was a brief silence. Still hunched forward with her head in her hands, she finally heard the O-bousan lean closer and say in a nearly inaudible whisper, “Really?” She nodded quietly as she sobbed. He continued slightly louder. “Does your husband have a lot of money?”

She shrugged her shoulders. “I guess we do alright. Don’t get me wrong, O-bousan! I’m not that terrible of a person. I’m not after his money.”

“But you still do want to kill him, don’t you?”

“Well...yes...I think so. That feeling still hasn’t subsided.”

“And you haven’t thought of leaving him and taking your son along with you? I mean, if you don’t love your husband anymore-“

“It’s not that!” she cried looking up again with eyes full of tears. “I still love him! I really do! He’s a good man. He picked me up off the streets and saved me from having to live my life as a prostitute. I’ll always be indebted to him for that. It’s not at all because I don’t love him that I want to kill him.”

“Then?” he asked impatiently.

She continued in a loud voice, “He’s just so annoying! I feel like I’m going crazy sometimes. He just won’t stop with that nose whistling! I can’t even get a good night’s sleep! And that incessant shrugging: I don’t think he’s even listening half the time!”

“And you want to kill him because of this?”

“Great! Now you’re judging me.” She said spitefully, quickly wiping the tears with a sweep of her hands. “I knew it was a mistake coming here.” She was about to stand up when he held out his hand in a motion for her to stop.

“Hold on,” he said calmly and she froze, as if powerless to respond. “That’s not at all what I’m doing. Anything you tell me will be held in the strictest confidence. I’m here to help you. I want to be here as your guide on the path to knowing yourself. That’s what life is all about, after all, isn’t it? Knowing oneself well enough to know one’s limitations. Do you know yours...um...I’m sorry I didn’t catch your name.”

“Yuri,” she said as she sniffled, now slightly calmer than she had been a moment earlier.

“Yuri...right. Yuri, do you know your limitations?”

“I’m not sure what you mean.” She said, settling down in her chair again.

“Don’t worry. You will. But let me ask you a little bit more about your husband. What does he do exactly? I have to say that he must be doing very well for you to be able to afford such beautiful earrings. They really are marvelous, by the way. Is that red pearl?”

“Why yes it is! You’re very observant, O-bousan!”

“Like I said earlier, you do this sort of thing long enough...” He had a self-assured look on his face as he leaned back in his chair. In doing so, his large belly pushed the tiny desk slightly forward in the direction of Yuri.

“My husband grows the Magenta spice. He’s kind of new to the business. I’m told there’s a great demand for it. Back in our hometown of Vasalla, he and his father raised Lesser Bison for their jellied eggs.”

“Magenta’s a growing industry. Very profitable business, I’d say. Fortunately, His Majesty Bunu-5 has not yet imposed any sizeable taxes on Magenta farmers either.” O-bousan said seemingly impressed. “Your husband must be doing quite well then. I should have known. Your taste in clothing and jewelry show a certain refined elegance.”

Yuri giggled, “Why thank you!”

O-bousan smiled. “Not at all. Just an observation. For what it’s worth...”

“That’s very kind of you,” she said reassured, “But what do you think I should do? These feelings won’t seem to go away. Should I kill him?”

“You want to know something, Yumi?”

“Yuri.”

“You want to know something, Yuri? I’m going to tell you something that might sound a little crazy to you...but you asked, so I’m going to give it to you straight. This bloodlust of yours: it’s not going to disappear on its own. You are going to have to realize your limitations by pushing yourself further and further in the direction that you seem to be resisting. A path must be made to understanding. And it must be followed a step at a time. The first step is to let go of our hesitations. To throw caution to the wind, as it were.”

“Are you saying what I think you’re saying?”

“That you should work through your feelings? Yes! That you should understand them clearly and not resist the temptations that have been plaguing you? Absolutely! Frankly speaking...um...Madam, until you take yourself right to the edge of what you’re capable of doing, you won’t be able to get to the root of whatever it is that’s causing you to feel this way. I’m guessing that it must be some kind of deep-seated anger.”

“Yes. My husband seems to think it’s a result of a childhood trauma.”

“You mean your husband is aware of your intentions?”

“Yes.”

“And he hasn’t done anything to retaliate or escape?”

“Like I said, we love each other.”

“Huh...Sounds complicated,” O-bousan remarked, stroking his chin.

“It is!” she replied and with that, she took her leave of O-bousan with a whole new set of suggestions about how to go about killing her husband. His ideas primarily involved the use of farm equipment in setting up the accident, as some of the new machinery being shipped in from the cities was advanced beyond the common farmer’s capabilities.

“This may sound a little strange,” she had told the O-bousan before leaving, “but I think I would be rather sad if my husband actually died. What if one of my attempts is successful?”

O-bousan-34 thought for a moment before saying slowly, “Well, I suppose we’ll cross that bridge when we get to it...”

Dinner

Two years and 27 unsuccessful attempts later, Yuri was now scowling across the table at the back of Raju's head as he unwittingly faced the fireplace and puffed at his pipe. Without breaking her stare, she gently put down a second bowl of soup in front of the Mumta father, who seemed oblivious to her presence as he wrote what looked like numbers along the edges of one map.

"Ahhh!" Raju said happily, taking a deep breath. "These moments before dinner are always best. But as much as I enjoy the anticipation, I sure am hungry. I do wish those Mumta would start eating faster..."

"Papa, that Mumta kid won't stop staring at me!"

"Ignore him, then! Why aren't you sleeping anyway? I told you I'd wake you up when the main course was done!" Raju barked back, holding his pipe.

"I can't sleep with him looking at me like that. His jaw's been hanging open like that for almost an hour now."

"Well...then you shouldn't have brought him here, now, should you? Well...no...actually, I don't mean that. I'm quite glad you did, as a matter of fact. What were you doing out there anyway, boy?"

"Trying to sail my ship through the water in the fields."

"Hmph! The boat probably didn't even float. The water's too shallow 'round this time of year, isn't it? In any case, I thought I told you to stay out of the neighbors' fields."

"It was a small boat. I thought the Karakaze would be able to navigate it through. Anyway, the mast broke before I had a chance to try it out."

"Well, it was a foolish idea to start with. I don't want you going out there like that in this kind of weather!" Yuri interjected. "And next time, you come back here when I call you in to the house. None of this pretending not to hear!"

"Hmmm!" Raju uttered in weary assent.

Bunnu sat up suddenly causing the bladder of cool mustard to land on his belly. "Oh yeah! I almost forgot to tell you. When I was out there, I saw something shiny sitting in the rice fields. Like a mirror...or something that can reflect the sunlight. Out past field 011235. That kid," he pointed at the Mumta boy, who just stared back at him blankly, "was staring at it when I saw them..."

He paused for a moment.

"Papa, can you *please* tell him to stop looking at me? He's making me uncomfortable!"

"Bunnu!" Yuri said, "Don't be rude to our *guests*. Yes, they might seem a little strange to you because they don't have the benefits of civilization, but they are still here as our *guests*. And as our *guests* they must be treated with the utmost care and preparation. Now, look how upset you've made them. They

haven't even gobbled the stuffing I've put in front of them. They obviously don't feel comfortable eating it, even when it's clearly better than the wretched swill they have to eat out there among the other savages."

"Sorry about that, fella," Raju said over his shoulder to the pair. "The boy's been picking up the worst habits living among these backward Bahlians. The wife and I've been talking about making a move back to Vasalla someday so we can bring him up right. Things just aren't the same around here as they were back in the hometown. Like I said before, we're a lot different from the people around here. Bunch of simple-minded layabouts! No sense of hygiene! Why...my wife told me how, one day, she went to the marketplace. The place was flooded, since it had been raining for a few days. Apparently, some kids thought it would be funny to bathe with some of the cattle in a rain gutter. Bathing in the same water! And the parents? You'd think the parents would have been furious when they found out. After all, what kind of people are willing to let their kids roll around in filth with the animals? We certainly wouldn't. And yet, the parents of those children were actually standing aside and laughing as it all happened. Laughing, mind you! Unbelievable isn't it? Like I said, no sense of hygiene. Just look at my boy!" He pointed at Bunu, "He hasn't even washed his face once, since coming in. Where I come from, no one would have stood for it. But the people here lack common decency. I guess you must be wondering how people like us even ended up living among them to begin with. Well...it's a pretty interesting story, actually. It started out--"

"Oh no, Raju!" Yuri interrupted immediately. "Not now! If you start telling them that story, now, we'll never get the chance to knock them out!"

"Well, I just thought that--"

"Well think again!" she said sharply with her arms folded. "I've already started the fire under the cauldron!"

"Papa, we really should take them to see the Outlander. He knows tons of great stories he could tell them. Plus, he knows a lot about their culture. He told me that their language doesn't have a past tense...and that the spirits of dead people talk to people who are alive all the time and give them advice and-."

"Enough about the Outlander, already!" Raju barked at him in annoyance, "Anyway, that doesn't make sense. How could he possibly know something like that?" He shook his head, "No...no. He was clearly making it up. He does that sometimes. Just like those silly horoscopes of his."

"Well, that's what he said. So, maybe he *does* know!" Bunu said in a cheeky tone.

The Mumta father looked up from his calculations. His son looked at him for a moment before they both turned to stare out the window just behind Raju.

"Ah! I see you've noticed our Vasallan water-clock!" exclaimed Raju, motioning to the clock hanging just to the left of the window. "That was a wedding gift from the nice man who managed the brothel that my wife used to work at. What was his name again, honey? Anyway, I thought you might notice it sooner or later. Beautiful craftsmanship, isn't it? Certainly not the sort of gift you'd expect from your average purveyor. The man certainly had an eye for this kind of thing, though. For example, that wood comes from a kind of tree that grows in the forest just to the south of Vasalla in a place called Neha. You've, no doubt, heard of the famous Battle of Neha? Same place. In fact, I'm a veteran of that battle. Thought I was going to lose a leg that day! Ha ha...but through a spot of luck, one of the field commanders had a set of spare medical supplies, so they didn't have to go through with the amputation. 'They really sheared the sheep on that one,' as my old friend Anup used to say. Ha ha! You know, I really should tell you that story about how--"

"Papa," Bunu interjected. "I don't think they're listening."

The Mumta were now, in fact, both standing. The Mumta boy stared down at the food on the table with a mixture of curiosity and amusement, as though bewildered by shapes, smells, and textures that were making themselves known to him for the very first time, while his father continued looking in the direction of the window with his watchful expression. He stepped in its direction, glancing back for his son to follow.

Raju looked through the window, too, and could see torches alit in the distance. “There are some people out there.” He muttered.

“What could possibly be so important that they should be out there at this hour in this kind of weather?” Yuri said as she rushed to the window.

“Are they out by field 011235?” Bunu asked.

There was a knock at the door.

No one moved to answer it, but judging by Bunu’s and Raju’s expressions, Yuri found, to her annoyance, that the responsibility of opening it had fallen on her. *You know how much I hate answering the door!* she silently admonished them with a look.

“Well...so much for dinner!” She cast an eye hungrily at the two Mumta as she opened the door to find Bunu’s little chubby, rich friend Motiwala standing before her. His eyes just stared up at her as he said nothing.

“What is it, Motiwala?” Raju said over his shoulder. “Something happening out there?”

The boy continued staring up at Yuri without a word.

“Motiwala!” Bunu said. “What is it?”

He looked over at Bunu and said, “O-bousan-34 told me to fetch your Mama.”

“Did he say why?” Yuri asked.

Again, the boy said nothing.

“Why, Motiwala?” Bunu repeated in frustration, despite knowing that Motiwala was only capable of hearing his voice and no one else’s. Motiwala’s special hearing disorder was perhaps the only reason that someone of his status and wealth could be allowed to establish a friendship with a boy of Bunu’s caste: a fact that he often reminded Bunu of, when given the chance. However, without Bunu’s help, he was effectively deaf to the voices of those around him. This is not to say that he was incapable of hearing any sounds at all. On the contrary, the acuity of his hearing was more than adequate. It appeared that his unique hearing impairment was one which only seemed to be related to human voices and nothing more.

Rakesh-7, upon meeting the boy, had surmised that Motiwala’s sense of hearing had a range different from that of other people, in that it could only pick up certain vocal frequencies. This often made Bunu his chief source of contact with the rest of the world, as both of his parents were similarly unable to communicate with him. On occasion, Motiwala’s father, Diogenes, who was the younger brother of the Bahlian viceroy, sent for Bunu to come visit him at his residence to translate for him as he had man-to-man chats with his son. Motiwala usually did his best to avoid actively participating in these conversations in the presence of Bunu, as they usually seemed to involve topics that were rather sensitive to be discussing freely in front of one’s peers. However, Diogenes, feeling it was his fatherly duty to forcefully engage his son in this sort of dialogue, was adamant in his resolve and shameless in his expression, causing both the boys to blush on more than one occasion. Nonetheless, through this interaction, Bunu and Motiwala had become quite close friends.

“The O-bousan,” Motiwala now told Yuri matter-of-factly, “is waiting.”

The Field at Night

Why O-bousan-34 had sent a boy incapable of hearing his message as his envoy was something that Yuri had failed to understand, but now, as she ventured out into the cold of the night with the boy, along with Bunu, Raju, and the two unfed Mumta, she wondered if the O-bousan hadn't, in fact, forgotten to make the arrangements that they'd agreed upon earlier in the day. She quickened her pace with her arms folded in front of her chest and her head down as the wind blew dust into her face.

Walking a few paces behind Yuri, nearly side-by-side with the Mumta, Raju began to wonder if it might not have been best for Bunu to stay home while they were away, as his fever still hadn't subsided. The wind had gained a great deal of intensity due to the cold of the night and he was worried that Bunu's cold would get worse with continued exposure to these conditions. But Raju also knew it wasn't safe to leave Bunu alone at home like that...and he certainly couldn't let his wife go meet the O-bousan alone, lest the two of them should collude in another attempt on his life.

Treading several paces behind Raju and the Mumta, Motiwala and Bunu walked together. "Papa was really happy to see you last week," Motiwala carried on, "I don't know why he's taken such a fancy to you in particular, when I have countless other friends of greater wealth and status than the likes of you. But I do have to say, since you gained my father's favor, you have started to catch up on some of the stragglers and deadwood who occupy the lower echelons of my elite acquaintanceship. If I were to rank my friends according to a hierarchy, I would place you at about better than average, if not within the top third. That's a pretty good spot to be in, considering your social standing, and I think that even by giving you that much credit, I'm really sticking my neck out for you. Who knows what'll happen if my other friends find out that I spend my time with you? I won't be taken seriously! I hope you appreciate what I'm doing for you! It certainly isn't winning me any new friends. I heard that's why Takeo stopped playing with you, after all. By the way, are those Mumta? They are, aren't they? You weren't going to eat them, were you? Egad...I thought civilized people stopped doing that, years ago. I guess it must be a Vasalla thing, huh? Still...pretty barbaric if you ask me..."

Bunu, who was very much used to Motiwala's garrulous nature, ignored his words, hoping they would be swallowed up by the Karakaze and woven into something that he cared to listen to. They'd already walked far beyond field 011235 and he could now see the faces of the people holding the torches.

There were 4 or 5 of them standing around in the middle of the path, looking down in silence. O-bousan-34 looked up and approached Yuri, saying, "Ah...did you get my...?" He paused as he noticed Raju and the Mumta a few steps behind her. "A-Are those Mumta?"

"The boy didn't tell us anything, except to come," Yuri said quietly. "Does this have to do with what we talked about earlier?"

"As a matter of fact, no..." O-bousan-34 replied sotto voce, still momentarily distracted by the sight of Raju. "I wanted to-"

"What's that?" Bunu interrupted.

He had joined the circle of people carrying torches and he was now pointing down at something in the middle. Raju and Yuri slowly walked in their direction before they were able to see, in the flickering light

of the torches, a round, silver reflective ball about fifty centimeters in diameter in the middle of the road. The ball itself didn't seem to be made of a very firm substance, as its weight caused its bottom edges to flatten against the surface upon which it sat. Its exterior was soft and gelatinous in nature.

"Whoa! Gross! What is it?" Motiwala exclaimed in half-horror, half excitement.

"What the hell is...?" Raju said slowly to himself, as the two Mumta next to him looked down with similar expressions of awe.

"Oh, my dear Lord! How adorable!" Yuri sang in a piercingly jubilant tone. "But how did he get here? The poor dear must be so cold."

Everyone looked at Yuri curiously. "What do you mean *'he'*?" Raju said. "You mean you know what that thing is?"

"You're a lovable little guy, aren't you?" Yuri said, attempting to tickle the gelatinous mass, only to find that her hands were penetrating the inside of the jelly. O-bousan-34 stood aside with a look of curious amusement on his face. "O-bousan! Was this little boy abandoned by someone?"

"Little...boy?" Raju repeated.

"I'm afraid I'm as mystified as the rest of you," O-bousan-34 said with a shrug. "O-bousan-21 and I found *it*...uh...*him*...found this thing here on the road first...and then other people...just...started showing up."

"Hear that, Raju?" Yuri looked up with her eyes glowing in the light of the torch's flame. "He doesn't belong to anyone. Raju...he's got to be some kind of gift from heaven. Don't you think? Oh my God!" Her voice was overcome with profound joy, "I just can't express how...how-" she broke off, unsure of how to continue, before settling on simply saying, "Oh...thank you, God! Thank you! Something has been missing from my life. Something has been missing from all of our lives, causing us to be unhappy. Now, it seems we've found a purpose!"

The O-bousan shrugged his shoulders again. "Our salvation often comes from mysterious places. As does our sense of purpose. Sometimes they are two ends of the very same vine—one of those long vines that twist and fold around themselves and other objects until their ends become obscured. And yet, when we find those ends and where they lead, they become the defining roles in all of our most crucial human relationships," he said with a self-satisfied smile on his face.

"Um...Wha-...oh...uh...W-Well said, O-bousan! So very well said!" Yuri exclaimed. "Raju, don't you think the O-bousan has a way with words?"

"Well, I..." Raju started, unsure of what to make of the situation.

"That's why I followed through on my first inclination to send for you." O-bousan-34 continued. "This little ball...er...boy...uh...*O*. Let's call him *O*, shall we? Whatever *O* is, it could very well be the next step on your path to finding yourself!"

"Hold on!" Raju said impatiently to the O-bousan, "What are we talking about here? Are you saying we should take this thing home?"

The O-bousan smiled peacefully, "Not only that. You should clothe it, feed it, and teach it right from wrong."

"Hear that, Bun-bun?" Yuri crooned sweetly. "You have a new little brother!" Her demeanor had lost the intensity and frustration that it previously seemed to possess. There was a certain serenity that had now overtaken her. Everyone standing around her couldn't help but notice the difference. Raju saw it too. He

could no longer see bitterness and anger in her eyes. In their place, he saw love. It reminded him of how she'd been the day Bunu was born. He found himself wondering if the absence of this *something*, this *O.*, whatever *it* may have been, could have been the very source of her frustration.

She was now sitting on the road, legs folded in front of her, embracing the gelatinous ball, as her hands momentarily disappeared beneath its reflective surface.

She whispered again with her eyes closed, "You have a new little brother!"

Back at the Inn

The showers came and went, taking the clouds with them.

Meanwhile, the pounding had grown loud enough that it was now shaking the washroom door. The sounds of the inn's patrons beyond it had long since ceased, indicating that they had either been cleared out, or that their curiosity had been piqued enough that they saw it fit to abandon their respective conversations, in favor of watching what was about to unfold before them.

"Mr. Bunu!" an authoritative voice said. "Don't make this any more difficult than it has to be!" In response to this, Bunu could hear a round of raucous laughter as though it had been said for the effect of eliciting an audience response.

The charade was likely meant to serve as some kind of entertainment for the other patrons, which led Bunu to the obvious conclusion that the men at the door were, no doubt, members of the Performing Arts Division of the Morellan Intercultural Settlement Police Department. Specialists from this division were often sent in for the arrests that were expected to garner a great deal of attention from voyeurs and curiosity-seekers alike.

Depending on the immediacy of the enforcement initiative, marketing research projects were often undertaken well in advance, in an attempt to determine the target audience, ticket price, as well as, content preferences. Based on the findings yielded by initial quantitative assessments, direct mail campaigns would, then, be launched, targeting specific consumers that matched the demographic and lifestyle types that promised the greatest returns. This process could be set into action hours, days, or even weeks before the main event was likely to take place. In many cases, the promotional campaigns kicked-off far in advance of any requests that might have been made of the courts for the necessary arrest warrants, and as a result, the anticipation created by the lag time tended to drive ticket demand and, consequently, the selling price.

The expense undertaken by the Police Department was, of course, a formidable one. As the preparation required for creating a public spectacle could be both time-consuming and cost-intensive, investors were granted permission to purchase shares to provide capital for their collective venture and, subsequently, influence content and scripting decisions in such a way that they were able to effectively optimize factors of audience appeal, and accordingly, their profit margins.

Throughout the process, of course, the accused was left out of the loop by way of proactive behavioral analysis and preemptive methodical diversion from any promotional signs, radio spots, literature, or even ticket vendors that he might incidentally encounter in his day-to-day experiences. In doing so, field agents were required to monitor his activities and report back to HQ on an hourly basis on matters as important as his media consumption and as trivial as his everyday encounters. When the operation was in grave danger of being compromised, the field agents were expected to act in order to ensure under any means necessary that the accused would not obtain prior knowledge of his arrest and attempt to take flight before the main event.

All this being said, it sometimes happened that the accused was not left out of the loop. When sales were

at a lull, arrests were often staged with the consent of the accused in exchange for a shorter prison term, or in the case of an innocent plea, a generous offering of company stock. In such cases, the accused was expected to say certain lines, pre-determined by the writers and, given the right circumstances, attempt to escape or take one of the arresting officers or audience members hostage, initiating a sales-boosting audience-participatory manhunt.

Bunnu now surmised that it was likely that his assailants from the Greater Kaiiba-8 Football Association were *in league*, in a manner of speaking, with local law enforcement, and perhaps assisted in maintaining the diversion by attacking him suddenly and without provocation (presumably, this could be chalked up to the fact that Bunnu had quit the team years ago to embark on his many travels—a fact that may have caused them, through some self-absorbed process of illusory superiority, to assume that he deemed himself inadequate of their traveling football club, its unifying spirit, and its aggressively militaristic political agenda—thus priming him for a well-timed and well-deserved decking: to them, undoubtedly, a most bittersweet reunion after these many years apart).

Regardless of the cause, the fact of the ambush in and of itself meant that this was not going to be one of those staged arrests wherein he could be extended the privilege of prior knowledge in advance of the main event, and that, in a similar way, this was not either the sort in which he should be afforded the opportunity to negotiate terms in return for cooperation. Nonetheless, he wondered if it might not be best to try to make it interesting for the audience, in an attempt to curry favor and, thereupon, cut a deal with his captors. However, given the size of this venue, he imagined that the arrest hadn't generated enough appeal to attract a large audience and, therefore, couldn't be expected to have a sufficient enough response to justify a bargain, should he decide to play along in these circumstances. And yet, not putting up at least a token resistance could actually affect his case negatively, to the point of even extending his sentence.

"It's always the same with you people!" Bunnu now exclaimed in his best stage voice. "Try to kick a man when he's already down!"

"Ohhhh!" the audience bellowed. Bunnu had clearly impressed them with the way he'd voiced his lack of compliance.

"Whew! Nice one!" the officer said in seeming admiration of Bunnu's mock defiance. "If that's the case, it seems like you've got but two choices. You can walk out...or get carried out!" The audience erupted into applause, cheering on and hooting at the arresting officers. "Thank you...thank you..." Bunnu could hear the officer saying in response to the mindless chorus of cheers.

Bunnu concentrated for a moment. It was necessary for him to say something, but it was even more imperative that the officers had the last word in this battle of wits. Thus, it was necessary to maintain a defense strong enough to heighten the suspense for the audience, yet not so profound as to deem any attempt at a counter-argument invalid. He decided to take a calculated risk by saying something both seditious and inflammatory. "Easy for you to say when you have the backing of the government and corporate interests. Who is it that you're really protecting? Your shareholders? You're methodically using your audience's morbid curiosity to serve interests contradictory to their well-being!"

There was a silence. Bunnu wondered for a moment if he'd been heard, or if in fact, he'd neglected to speak out loud. But after a few moments, he could hear the voice of the arresting officer, this time much quieter, as though addressing Bunnu directly, "Are you crazy? What the hell are you trying to do?"

"What?" Bunnu whispered back through the door.

"Are you trying to upstage me? There's no response to that one." The man's whisper seemed to carry a hint of panic.

Bunnu sighed and whispered back with a tone of annoyance, "Just tell them that acts of sedition are an even greater trespass on the public's sense of well-being because they undermine the authority of the

officials and organizations in which Society places their trust. Thus, any such declarations can only be those of an anarchist who puts his own agenda before the will of the people.”

“Right...” the officer said hesitantly. “What was that...uh...part after ‘undermine the authority...’ again?” Bunu said it for him again, tapping his fingernails impatiently against the wooden surface of the lavatory door, as he did so. The officer repeated it back slowly, as though he were writing it down somewhere. “Right...thanks!” the officer said finally before reciting the words he’d been instructed to use in his best stage voice.

There was a roar of applause accompanied by shouts of support. One of the patrons screamed out, “That’s right! Don’t take that from the traitor!”

Bunu could hear glasses breaking and tables being overturned in the next room as the crowd unleashed their primal passions on the nearest breakable items. Their quarry had been cornered in his defenses and their bloodlust was such that they were likely to pay top Julep to watch him escape, so that he might be brutalized and killed before their very eyes, as this was much more gratifying to them than simply watching justice be enacted. They, too, understood that societal constructs for justice were moderate gratification, at best, as they were empty and subject to contradictions and compromises steeped in moral relativism and an unconditional dependence upon overblown semantics that made the law a mockery of itself. As for the ideologies that these hollow systems of jurisprudence sought to define and uphold: these could easily be subjugated through a meticulous analysis of the trivial components of one statute or another. The rule of law had failed them. What the people wanted, in its stead, was rather simple: moral absolutes. Good versus evil. And evil was not to be simply prevailed over. Evil was to be dominated and effectively eliminated, because as long as it was able to while away the time somewhere—in some sweaty prison cell, far away, staring out the barred window with a wry smile, as it plotted its next offensive on the Common Good, a sense of wholeness could not be achieved.

The crowd wanted a bloodbath and Bunu knew it. It was time to surrender. “OK...” he announced amidst the cheers and breaking of chairs in the next room, “I’m coming out...”

As he opened the door, he noticed, to his lack of surprise, that the officers standing before him were, in fact, the three men in the broad-collared overcoats that he’d seen when he’d first walked into the inn. The crowd let out a collective sigh of disappointment, but still applauded in a show of respect for a great performance.

“Well-played,” said one of the officers, patting Bunu on the shoulder. He was apparently the leader. Or to be precise, he’d likely been *assigned* the role of leader, solely due to the thickness of his mustache as it clearly had greater dramatic presence than those of his associates.

Members of the audience now threw roses at the two of them. “Now, don’t just stand there!” the officer commanded Bunu, “Bow!”

As the two of them bowed together, Bunu asked the officer under his breath, “What are you taking me in for?”

“Before I get to that,” the officer whispered back through his mustache—its ends upturned and smiling at the audience, “the Coach wants to have a word with you...”

On Acquaintanceship

There was a strong chill in the air outside.

They had emerged from the door to find that the city streets seemed to embody a certain frozen stillness. People were suspended in mid-air, crystallized into the permeating ether. A Paan-Wala hung in paralysis over his usual street corner, shoulders slightly more hunched than usual as he looked down at his legs, which dangled in mid-air. He called out in a high-pitched voice, “Paan!... Aiiye!...Paan!...Aiiye!” In his clenched fists, he squeezed wrapped betel leaves that dripped with spices to the street below until his fingers were red from the leakage. Watching the Paan-Wala reminded Bunu of a story that Rakesh-7 had told him once, but he did his best to ward off the approaching memory as there were more pressing matters at hand.

“You want to know something funny?” the officer-in-charge said through his mustache to Bunu.

They were now walking through the streets of the Nostalgia District. The officer’s hand was gripping Bunu’s arm firmly, squeezing it emphatically at times to stress specific syllables in the words that he spoke. It was as though his words were saying one thing, but the squeezes were intended to communicate a message that lay beneath the words: a message that Bunu found himself at a loss to interpret.

“What’s that?” Bunu responded impatiently.

“You and I,” the officer crooned eagerly, “have probably been aware of each other’s existence for years, but we’d never had a chance to be formally acquainted until now! That is to say, we probably knew of each other, just not in a clear and definitive sense. But now...years later, here we are! Another opportunity glaring at us! Well, you must be just as surprised to meet me as I am you. Especially in such bizarre circumstances. Not the best situation for us to be meeting, I’m sure you’ll agree. But all the same! Odd coincidence, wouldn’t you say? Of all the arresting officers and all the suspected felons to be paired together, it ends up being us! It sure is a small world. But then, I suppose life has a funny way of crossing the paths of good friends and bitter enemies over and over again!”

Bunu paused. The man was still accentuating certain syllables in his words by squeezing his arm. What could the squeezes possibly mean? Was it a code? Or did the accentuated syllables together form a different message? Whatever it was, the coordination of speaking and controlling the squeezes must have been difficult, as doing both simultaneously required the cooperation of two completely different areas of the brain. It was conceivable that this man had undergone some sort of special training or treatment so as to bridge these neural centers, giving way to his ability to communicate a multi-tiered message. And yet, Bunu could only seem to scratch the surface in his comprehension of its meaning.

“It certainly does...and which might we be? Friends or enemies?” Bunu responded as he looked at the man again, thinking he detected a smile, since the ends of the officer’s mustache were, again, upturned, as they had been back at the inn. However, by the appearance of the other features on the man’s face, Bunu imagined that it was less likely a smile of complacency or that of someone trying to rub it in, but more likely that of someone delighted to make his acquaintance, which struck him as more unusual and alarming than a smile of any other kind, given the circumstances.

The man’s eyebrows perked up in perfect arcs over his eyes, which themselves appeared to be filled with

an unmistakable air of exuberance. The lines on his forehead were deep and close enough to one another to create folds in the skin that gave Bunu the impression that the muscles of the man's lower face were stretched to their limits from a certain child-like wonder and enchantment. It was rare that he saw such an expression from someone who carried himself as a man, much less as an authority figure of some measure. But then... being a member of the Performing Arts Division of the Police Department, the man was, also, an actor, and for that very reason, likely given to a sensitive and subtle mind capable of resisting the confines of the Moment to circumvent his protocol and see the human condition in the larger picture for what it was. In this particular case, he saw it fit to rekindle an acquaintanceship that he alone seemed to remember.

"Well..." the man said thoughtfully, "I imagine that's up to you. Your attitude toward this matter is perhaps the defining factor. Friend or foe: as strange as it may seem, I am willing to accept either. However, the decision rests solely with you. And, whichever you choose will meet with my complete understanding."

"Is that so?" Bunu responded, careful not to let on that he couldn't remember having made the man's acquaintance before. "And what if I decide to pass up on our...so-called *acquaintance*? You know...deny its existence..."

The man laughed, squeezing Bunu's arm gently.

"Well, I'm afraid that would be a difficult thing to do for both of us, don't you think? Short of erasing our memories of one another, I don't think we can escape from the fact that we are acquainted. Denying it, too, implies the necessity of denying it to oneself. I don't think either of us is entirely capable of willfully deceiving himself. And frankly speaking, would it be worth the effort just for the sake of denying an acquaintanceship?"

"Well...that remains to be seen. Don't you think?" Bunu said carefully, "An acquaintanceship carries an attachment between people that is, in itself, a responsibility. Have you not ever been falsely accused of wrongdoing through a matter of mere acquaintance with the true perpetrator?"

"I have..." the man said slowly.

"Then, don't you think that the crossing of our paths today might, similarly, have its basis in the fact that in the past, I have been acquainted with other such perpetrators and that through my acquaintanceship with these people, been deemed guilty by association?" Bunu continued. "Acquaintanceship is often a lot to ask of someone. I walk before you an innocent man, who has been a victim of unfortunate acquaintanceship."

"I'm sorry. I don't see where this is going."

"I'm referring to my arrest..."

"Which...as I've made clear to you numerous times, is not a matter I am able to discuss with you until you've talked to the Coach."

"What does the Coach want with me?"

"You'll have to ask him. But...back to what I was saying, perhaps we cannot escape from our acquaintanceship. After all, no matter how you deny it, you require my cooperation for your denial to hold water. However, cooperation implies complicity, which is, in itself, a stronger bond than that of mere acquaintanceship. Which brings us back to the idea that there is no way to escape the fact that we have a personal association with one another. Anyway, denying our acquaintanceship is something I am unwilling to do, for personal reasons. Reasons...that you are no doubt aware of..."

Bunnu sighed before saying slowly and thoughtfully, “Perhaps, you’re mistaken. I don’t believe we’ve ever met each other...or at least, I don’t remember ever having met you. As far as I’m concerned, you are my arresting officer and I have no memories that require erasure that would imply anything to the contrary!”

“Mr. Bunnu, I do beg your pardon,” the man said, digging his long fingernails deep into the flesh of Bunnu’s arm, “but I’m afraid it is *you* who is mistaken. Like you said, we haven’t met. I am not denying that. That is an unmistakable truth...but at the same time, I must take exception to your claim that we are not acquainted. It is a matter of common knowledge, not just between ourselves... that we are, in fact, pretty well acquainted. There are many people who can attest to this and who would do so without the necessity for duress. Are you saying that you don’t remember?”

“I think it’s possible that you believe that we are acquainted...but I think you might have me mistaken for someone else.”

“So...it seems it might be a problem related to your memory. What if I told you that our acquaintance was made through your older sister?”

“I don’t have a sister.”

The man’s face seemed to tense as the hairs of his mustache stood on end, as though zapped by a precision static charge. His cheek muscles, too, seemed to be pulled taut into a kind of wince, which he did his best to suppress as he regained his composure and said in a very controlled tone, “Highly unlikely, Mr. Bunnu. Even the police records indicate otherwise, but it seems we’ve forgotten we have a sister, as well. I should have figured as much.”

“Then, this is clearly a case of mistaken identity!” Bunnu protested, apparently pleading to the other two officers following silently behind them. “I was named after King Bunnu-5! Do you know how many parents in mainland Kaiiba had the same idea as mine and decided to name their babies Bunnu? Quite a few, I’d say. You have the wrong man!” He, then, looked back at the leader and said adamantly, “I’m sorry, but I really don’t know who you are...”

The leader’s eyes narrowed slightly as he released his grip on Bunnu’s arm and stroked his mustache, releasing a cloud of dust and debris Bunnu imagined to have been the remains of an insignificant micro-Universe of minor creatures who lived an irrelevant existence, which, at a point of trivial climax in its own respective Space-Time, chose to resolve itself to a state of pure Matter, harden into a wafer-like consistency and then collapse into its rudimentary crystalline fragments, which thereupon came to be ensnared between the follicles that adorned his upper lip. “Well,” he said contemplatively, “You’ve no doubt heard of Ottoman-13.”

“Ottoman-13?”

“At your service.”

In the Protozoan Quarter

The four men walked on in silence.

They had left the Nostalgia District and were now walking down a main avenue of the Protozoan Quarter, an area so named because of the amoebic structure of its buildings which—despite maintaining a design, fluid-like and smooth on the outside—were held together by interlocking networks of microtubules that converged on and connected to thick cylindrical structures that projected upward from the ground at each building's center. The materials from which these buildings were constructed were, in fact, themselves, living Protozoans of the subphylum B²C-89 (according to the newly-devised nomenclature).

These organisms—having undergone a patent-pending process of genetic modification for the purposes of playing prescribed cooperative roles, related to structural, respiratory, and cytokinetic functions, among others—had been bred to reproduce at rates functional to the support structure of these buildings, effectively eliminating the need for manual maintenance, repair, renovation, or extension. They had also been made receptive to stimulation at specific frequencies so as to allow the cellular architect or any team of affiliated structural microbiologists to, by way of medium-wattage transmitters, further manipulate their allocations and densities according to the specifications of their clients.

These exact controlling frequencies were kept confidential, by law, and could only be accessed readily by a select few individuals, in order to prevent cases of vandalism, terrorism, and, most importantly, insurance fraud. This last issue was of primary concern to the Morellan Intercultural Settlement Housing Authority; and thus, it had been at their urging that the building owners, themselves, were not allowed access to the controlling frequencies for their own buildings. Naturally, the preventative measures undertaken by the Housing Authority served to be a source of reassurance for the buildings' numerous residents and commercial tenants.

And yet, despite the safety provisions enacted and the functional strengths of the materials used, the buildings' fluid design had its downsides as well. For one, it had a tendency to bend incoming light rays, so as to create the appearance, both inside and out, that the inhabitants had been stretched to bizarre proportions that could only be perceived two-dimensionally. In addition, each window in these buildings was circular and despite being sealed shut, did not block the passage of sound into and out of the building. Neither, unfortunately, did the doors nor walls, which were, themselves, transparent. This, of course, did little to maintain the privacy sought by the residents and workers, and so, many buildings imposed a 'no talking' policy in order to minimize disruptions among tenants. However, despite their best efforts at the enforcement of these policies, it was difficult to keep the inhabitants completely quiet, especially when the office or apartment in question had a resident practical joker, who despite the 'no talking' policy had the ability, through a series of gestures and contorted facial expressions, to cause his or her fellow inhabitants to erupt into a chorus of uncontrollable belly laughs.

To make matters worse, each building had a paging system installed, consisting of a long rope hanging down from the circular windows to street level for the purposes of allowing visitors to announce their presence to the specific party that they wished to call upon. The ropes were connected to a bell above each window, encased in a glass capsule, further encapsulated by B²C-89 protozoic substance. Normally, this would have seemed a rather convenient way to call upon someone, until one considered the hassle caused to the other tenants as the bells' reverberations often initiated a hum that resounded throughout the

structure of the building itself, resulting in a seemingly interminable sound similar to that of a tuning fork. Long-time residents claimed to have grown accustomed to the sound, but first-time visitors were often shocked and annoyed by its loudness and ceaselessness.

A resonant hum now radiated between the buildings. Bunu could hear the chorus of tens of thousands of tiny frogs, calling from the trees lining the street, in response to the sound.

Apparently they thought it was some kind of mating call.

The branches shook with the calls and chirps as the more masculine and self-confident among these frogs attempted bizarre and hyper-erotic mating dances. The trees themselves creaked and groaned with the movements. Bunu stared at the flailing branches and couldn't help but think of the Dancing Spider-Tree Orchards back in Bahlia. Their memory brought a smile to his face.

"Ottoman-13...the name does sound familiar," he finally said after a very long silence. "Maybe I have heard it. I just can't seem to place it though. Rather unusual name!"

"Yes, it *is* unusual...isn't it?" Ottoman-13 replied faintly, as though having lost interest in discussing their past acquaintanceship. Ottoman's arms were still at his sides, leaving Bunu completely unsecured. Bunu realized that he could make a dash and try to escape now if he wanted, but part of him felt like staying, if for no other reason, than because he now felt somewhat obligated to his captors.

He couldn't leave now. Not with the conversation being left where it was. It had clearly caused an uncomfortable silence that now seemed to gnaw at him. Ottoman's expression was difficult to read, but it was quite possible that the man was truly disappointed by Bunu's lack of recognition. Bunu suddenly started to feel slightly guilty for having hurt the man's feelings.

"Sorry if I was rude earlier," Bunu finally said with a half-smile.

Ottoman-13 looked at him wistfully. His face suddenly drained of its previous energy, he said, "No...no. Don't worry about it. I brought the whole thing up at the wrong time. Surely, you would have other things on your mind. You know, being under arrest and all." He nodded slowly. "I understand that the timing wasn't good for a reunion with one another. Really! I...I feel terrible about it, now that I've had some time to think about it. I just thought that...you know, after all we'd been through together, you'd have at least remembered *something* about me."

"Well, the thing is--"

"My friends and fellow actors tell me that I have very unique personality. My mum used to tell me that I had an unforgettable face. She never really told me I was handsome...but at least, she said that much." He shrugged his shoulders. "Listen... I'm sorry you have to see me like this. I just...I-I've never been forgotten by someone before."

He sighed as he looked back at his men who still appeared to be following in silence, their eyes staring down at the pavement below, which was in a horrible state of disarray, having become littered by street trash, feces, and irremovable stains of indeterminate cause. The smell was suffocating; that is, once one was able to get past the very sight of the rubbish, to say nothing of the various vermin scurrying through and around it, occasionally brushing past one's feet, if they weren't otherwise making a cheeky attempt to crawl up one's pant leg (or, in the case of Drawans, up one's sarong, which despite its seeming lack of plausibility, occurred often enough to warrant the posting of signs around town in the Drawan dialect, replete with graphic images, warning of the dangers of letting one's sarong hang too close to the ground).

"Well," Bunu said, "Your friends are right. And so is your mother. I really must say, when I saw that mustache, I knew you had to be the leader! For what it's worth! It's just...well...you know...maybe if you jog my memory a little, it'll come back to me..."

Ottoman-13's face brightened as he looked at him, as though suddenly energized by this concession. A smile spread across his face, but he remained thoughtfully silent.

The sound of rushing water could be heard all around them. They were making their way into the Dowa district, which lay to the west of the sacred river Placenta-C, the universally-acknowledged border between the Morellan Intercultural Settlement and the neighboring Melic territories. The untouchables of the Dowa district, despite their proximity to the river itself, were not allowed to approach its banks, but had the privilege of watching from the steps leading down as others of higher castes purified their essence in its blessed waters by tucking their legs in and floating for a few brief moments in the fetal position. According to Morellan scripture, the waters were said not only to cleanse one's soul of its wrongdoings, but also to allow one the opportunity to merge briefly, yet infinitely with the pure reason of the Boddhisatva, initiating a kind of spiritual rebirth.

The people of this district were a mix of Morellans, Drawans, Kaiibans, Gautamans, in addition to some communities from various islands in the Melic archipelago, most of whom were the descendants of comfort women from religious wars centuries earlier. Straight ahead, an untouchable boy of seeming mixed descent, who was wearing no shoes, crouched down amidst the rubble of a demolished building on little brown toothpick legs and used the sharp edge of a stone to strike at a bolt that held two sections of exposed metal water pipe together.

Behind him stood a group of three Melic half-breeds, laying one of their own to rest upon a stained white sheet that one of them had likely borrowed from one of the households he did odd-jobs for. They bowed their heads. Eyes welled with tears that seemed to freeze in the chill of the cold winter air. Moist breath came out in tiny swirling clouds as they chanted a requiescat.

The deceased man had leathery, sun-damaged, brown skin, pinched by wrinkles into webs. His pants were those of a tattered kurta pajama, stained by the dust kicked inadvertently in his direction by the foot traffic of passers-by. From out of his ears and mouth overflowed beautiful and vibrant orange flowers that, for some reason, *looked* particularly aromatic, if such a thing were possible. A rodent scurried up and stole one of the flowers just as the untouchable boy cracked through the water pipe.

Brown water spurted out, as the two sections of pipe came apart, washing away the rodent along with some of the flowers that had been scattered about the sheet next to the man's body. The three Melic men turned to look at the boy with a smile of approval as one of them picked up a metal bowl that he'd borrowed for the funeral rites and filled it with the water.

"Hmmm...Crafty little fella, isn't he?" Ottoman -13 remarked in seeming mock admiration. His mustache contorted as his lips soured and eyes narrowed, a shroud of bitterness descending over his heretofore gentle, inoffensive face. His voice said faintly, "The boy's still young and oblivious to his circumstances, though. He'll learn his place among the sweat simians soon enough. Or else, someone will make sure he does. The boy is, likely, young and curious: obsessed with possibilities, but he must eventually face up to the cold, hard truths of the world. But don't get me wrong, one can't help but admire his spirit—one might even be inspired by it. The young mind stirs with wonder at the world around him, but invariably it shall slow with disappointment. At the flush of curiosity, he shall be veined with cynicism, doubt and despondence, bowing to a role circumscribed for him by Time Immemorial. His skin shall drag until bones rattle in discomfort. He shall be an effigy of Karma to which all our sins are beholden. You know how it works."

Bunnu felt a hand squeeze his arm again.

"A debt remains unsettled, after all," Ottoman continued in an intensifying rumble, "A debt that we few had to bear...and no combination of curiosity, exuberance, or possibility could have ever hoped to cancel it out. I say *we*, because I was once like this boy. I once lived in the Dowa Districts amongst the sweat simians. I was once the bearer of karmic debts unpaid—pursued relentlessly through crumbling alleyways and disease-infested, muddied streets by the Parasitic Superego."

Bunnu found himself nodding with each squeeze. This arm-squeezing could very well have been some kind of persuasive technique or method of suggestion directed at the subconscious. In fact, Bunnu found himself unwilling to exert any effort in an attempt to curb his acquiescence, as the more he listened, the greater the weight of each word's implications came to bear upon him. It was conceivable that he was beginning to understand the message intuitively on different levels, but he couldn't seem to process in distinct terms what specific elements were present beneath the surface that were lacking in the verbal message itself. The squeezes could have been giving these words a different context by which they would be interpreted, thus affecting Bunnu's response to their meaning in such a way as to correspond with Ottoman's will.

"Emerging from the lifestyle, of course, was no easy task. It required the initiative of one possessed of a sense of entitlement, which is something you don't find often amongst the sweat simians. To have a sense of entitlement, one must know privilege first-hand. The constructs of these people's reality are such that they would never even have an inkling of what their aspirations ought to be. I guess you could say that my childhood experiences instilled me with a sense of entitlement that set me apart from the others. That's why I was able to emerge. As for the others: those who never scrambled for higher ground, well...that's why they still bear the debts of Man."

"I couldn't even begin to-" Bunnu started to say.

"What I mean to say is that I had not always been an untouchable, but came to take on the lifestyle as a means of survival. And eventually...I managed to emerge from it with the help of your family."

"My family?"

"Yes, that's right. I must say that I'm rather surprised you don't remember any of this." Ottoman-13 sighed in frustration, "OK...it's a long story, but we still have a long walk ahead of us. So, Mr. Bunnu, if you don't mind..."

"I'm all ears."

Ottoman's Story

"I suppose I'll start by telling you how I ended up living as an untouchable in the first place."

"Sure."

"No...wait," Ottoman put a finger to his chin, "Before I explain that, I guess I should explain how I ended up in the land of Kaiiba. In your hometown of Bahlia..."

"Uh...OK, then -"

"No...no...I think I ought to tell you about where I came from first. My origins. I don't suppose I'm going too far back in order to explain this, am I?"

"Right...I don't know. Whatever you think is best..."

"So...you mentioned earlier that my name is a rather unusual one. Did you not?"

"Uh-huh," Bunu sighed.

"My name is, in fact, unique to a culture that no longer exists. It's vapor! That is to say, it's a culture that's been forced to disperse by circumstance, which is quite different, mind you, from a culture that's been dominated, influenced by another, or even lost in history. After all, in such cases, remnants of the culture remain. Relics. Or scriptures. Maybe through the accounts of descendants of either pure or mixed blood. Traditions might endure. Or myths, or artwork...or even a history. Something that can give the world a firsthand look at this culture. Of course, there are cultures we were in contact with that will still vouch for our existence—neighboring and rival tribes with whom we traded. But someday, their accounts of us may as well be relegated to myth. Without something concrete like an artifact, there is no proof. And, sure, there are probably some artifacts lying around the site of my village, even still, but nothing that would likely distinguish us significantly from our neighboring tribes. Maybe if there were still a solid group of us practicing our traditions and using our language, passing on our history, we might still, as yet, have a chance of making our existence known to future generations of humanity. However, it's quite unlikely, as the surviving descendants of my culture fled our village at different times...and in different directions. Maybe if even some of us were still together, or if we met by chance, there might be something left to call a culture. If through nothing else, then through the spirit of togetherness that bound us. But I highly doubt that's the case now...or that it will be the case anytime in the future. Because...I think, secretly, we all wanted out. And we're glad to be done with it.

"You see, I come from a place deep in the South, far beyond the borders of your country, Mr. Bunu; beyond the confines of that glorious homeland of yours that I have come to love and have since adopted as my own; beyond the boundaries of that wondrous paradise once known to the world as Kaiiba. You probably didn't see it as a paradise, but I cannot help doing so, for my village was, by comparison, a terribly cold and barren land: a place that, if you visited it now, would seem like a rendering in shadow of something that never was.

"In my childhood, my community mined coal, the necessity of which kept our trade going with the nearby villages and our homes warm in the harsh cold of the winter. I lived with my parents and my sister in a

village of maybe 30 or 40 houses. Yes, we were a small village. But we were close. We knew everything about each other. Of course there was gossip, as tends to happen. And of course, there were long standing feuds that existed between people. Sometimes between families. Yet, our tribe was able to survive because we understood how important it was to cooperate. It was instilled in us by our parents and in them by their parents. The tribal community had a long history. And we were proud of it. In the spring and the summertime, school was in session and I would leave my house in a rush just to feel the sunlight on my face, wishing that the natural warmth I felt would never go away. Outside, the world was alive, not just with people, but with nature too. The birds and the flowers. The butterflies. Beehives. The market always had fresh fruits and vegetables. And the man who owned it would always smile as he handed my friends and me apples on our way in to school. Our teacher would be waiting outside the schoolhouse, tapping his foot, with his arms folded, as we took our time getting there. My friends and I often had races to see who could climb trees the fastest as the other boys and girls watched. Some sat on rocks, playing a pan flute... and some a lyre, while the more mischievous kids voiced profane lyrics along to the tunes of the songs being played. Our teacher usually had to come out and search for us. Upon finding us, he'd scold us the whole way to the schoolhouse about the importance of an education.

“When I think about that now, I guess it’s kind of a funny thing to reminisce about. I mean, education is, in many ways, a sort of indoctrination into one’s culture and traditions. Not wholly, but when one considers the idea of civics and of history and of all the other seemingly meaningless things we were being taught at the time, the purpose was to develop a frame. A collective frame by which we could, as a consensus, view our reality. After all, historical accounts must be given from *someone’s* frame of reference. What they were looking for was consistency of that frame. Something that could bind us as a group. Preserve our culture. And now...I’m one of the few remaining products of such efforts.”

“Right...” Bunu said slowly. An old Vasallan man, bald except for scraggly tufts of hair that sprung from the top of his head, stood shirtless at a doorway that seemed to lead into the darkness of an old rundown stone building. He rested a shoulder against the wall, licking his lips as he looked at a group of Drawan children scavenging in the street. “So, where does my family come into this?”

“I’m getting to it.” Ottoman-13 responded, his eyes on the old man. “Anyway, that was the spring and summer. When the village was alive and warm—but those seasons were overshadowed by the harshness and cold of our winters, throughout which, we had minimal contact with one another. The temperatures often got so cold that we were forced to stay in and isolate ourselves even from our own neighbors. Some people we would only see two or three times over the course of the whole winter. Others, we wouldn’t even see again until the following spring. And then there were some, whom we might have been looking forward to seeing in school the following year, who ended up succumbing to an illness during the winter.

“We all lived together, but in seclusion from one another. That was the reality of the winter and we all accepted it and did our best to get by. The coal that we mined was an important part of these efforts. In the fall, just as the animals tend to forage, so did the families of our village. At the end of summer, we started to stockpile coal, vegetables, and meats, which we kept stored in places that could get us through the coldest months. The coal and vegetables were often kept in cellars, built into the floors, in order to maximize space. However, gathering the supplies to get us through was usually rather time-consuming and required help and, as such, often became a village-wide effort. The last month before the winter came in was usually the busiest for shoring up our food reserves. It sometimes even got to a point that the workers in the coal mine were pulled away from their duties to help. That made it so they couldn’t mine the yields that were required to keep the village going through the winter, in time...and so they had to work through the first month of winter in the cold and amidst the snowfall.

“Which was typically not a problem—just extra work for the coal miners. They usually made the deliveries themselves to the other people in the village and on rare occasions, to the other nearby villages that we traded with. But one day, during the first snowfall of the winter, there was a horrible disaster. The mines collapsed. When we found out, we were shocked. Many of the miners had been killed in the collapse. Not only that, but the collapse was a devastating blow to the whole town. Coal was our

livelihood. We couldn't survive without it. Economically or otherwise. Everyone had plenty of food, but at the time, our coal stockpiles were probably just enough to get us through the next month. Now, how's that for an exercise in cooperation? What do you think happened next?"

Bunnu shrugged, "Everyone cooperated and your culture thrived?"

"If only..." Ottoman-13 sighed. "At first, people did share...and in many cases, homes were abandoned as whole families saw no other choice, but to share a roof with their neighbor. We didn't mind it so much. Times were different, then. Back when I was a boy, that is. Back then, people watched out for one another. The village was our extended family. I mean, literally. Our *extended family*, but that only strengthened our bonds with each other. I think people really did try to cooperate for a while. But over the course of days and weeks, cramped together in tight spaces, tempers begin to flare. Naturally. People get cabin fever and they start to withdraw from one other. I don't know what it is about the winter that does that to people. Maybe it's because there's less sunlight. We seem to become different people in the winter. We seem to interact differently with one another. Don't you think?"

Bunnu nodded.

"And that's what started happening to all of us. It wasn't long before abandoned houses were again inhabited by those turned away by friends and relatives. And we were back in the same situation. All of us: isolated from one another. We didn't have enough coal to survive the winter. The men of the village met to discuss the various courses of action. Some suggested finding ways to get back into the mine, while others believed strongly that we should send an envoy to the neighboring towns calling for help. Still others, albeit few, felt that it was best to abandon the whole village altogether. The men deliberated and argued for hours. Some discussions got heated, as this crisis had gotten some people's passions flaring. Personal attacks and accusations were dealt left and right, but nothing was accomplished. They adjourned their meeting with no feasible plans and a growing mistrust for one another."

"So much for cooperation!" Bunnu smirked.

"Mmm...so, weeks passed and the supplies were down to half what they were at the start. Desperation spread through our village like a plague...and that's when the looting began. A group of young men started breaking into houses and shops and stealing things. In some cases, they threatened or even injured any residents who got in their way. They justified the measures they were taking by calling it a kind of political revolution. They had either been convinced or they had convinced themselves that what they were doing was a form of social protest. They sought change and they proclaimed that they would do whatever it took to take control, even by violent means.

"But at first, we didn't think much of it. Just some angst-ridden teenagers and young adults, perhaps, taking their impatience out in one destructive way or another. We'd seen it before. Vandalism. Theft. Maybe some fighting here or there. Anything that even remotely resembled a political revolution amounted essentially to resorting to threats they couldn't follow through on. Usually, it was just a ploy for attention. You know how kids can be at that age. And so any injuries that might have occurred seemed incidental and unintended. So, naturally, it didn't seem like something to worry about. We'd seen it before and figured that they'd tire themselves out with all this carrying on and things would soon settle down again.

"But then, the news came one day from one of my neighbors that one of the key tribal council members had been dragged out of his home and killed. The perpetrators had apparently broken into the man's home, tied the family up, knocked the man out, loaded his coal into a wheelbarrow and hung him from a nearby tree."

"Hmmm..."

"Yes...well, we were certainly surprised by the news. At first, we wanted to think that this was simply an

isolated incident. Perhaps fueled by some kind of ongoing feud. We simply couldn't allow ourselves to think that this had happened because of this so-called revolution. But then, over the next few days, more reports started to come in through the grapevine. Other members of the tribal council suffering the same fate. And then, the following week, more reports. This time more gruesome. Entire families slaughtered. Wives and daughters raped. Fathers, sons, and elders tortured and killed. It seemed like the news was getting worse and worse each day. Until finally, one day, we stopped hearing reports altogether. The grapevine had withered away. Either people were afraid to leave their homes to find out what had happened to their neighbors, or they themselves were dead. Whatever the situation, there was no way of knowing truly what was going on out there.

“My father decided that it was time for us to get out of town. His plan was to try to find some of the other survivors and leave together. With our collective efforts, we had a chance of making it. As long as we cooperated. But even still, our chances were pretty minimal and my father knew it. Many families had already fled in fear for their lives, but in those conditions, few, if any, could really make it past the mountains without freezing to death. There was little hope.

“It's a really strange thing, you know? When you know you're going to die soon and knowing that everyone around you, everyone you've ever known in this world—they're going to die, too. I mean, we all die, of course. As do all the people we've ever known. I'm not disputing that, but to be in those circumstances with that kind of foreknowledge. That your whole society, your whole culture is, in effect, dying. Killing itself off, really. Well, it's...it's an indescribable feeling.

“And when a whole village starts dying like that, other strange things begin to happen, too. It's like a beacon signal is being transmitted through the ice, and through the wind, to all of the surrounding nature. A message that says that these creatures are *on their way out*. Soon to be extinct. And predators, scavengers, and leeches—they have a kind of sixth sense for homing in on that kind of signal. They can smell the vulnerability and desperation in it.

“A pack of stray wolves wandered into town. My father saw them in the early morning from our window as they were converging on the house of the family of one of the dead councilmen. He ran outside and shoed them away rather easily, but not before falling host to a rare breed of Shadow Parasite. You know, the kind that pass between people's shadows and suck the life out of them. Well, there's no known cure for them, nor is there any known way to prevent or remove one. And apparently, as we soon realized, they can also pass from animal to human. That being said, it was only a matter of hours before my father's body was completely sucked dry to the point of desiccation.”

Bunnu perked up for a second, “Hold on a second! You know what?”

“What?”

“I think something's coming back to me. This story...it sounds familiar, for some reason.”

“I don't see how that's possible. I haven't even gotten to the part where I met your family yet. There's no way you could have heard this part. Who could you have heard it from? I'm the only one left to tell it.”

“Yes, but I feel like I've heard a similar story before. Yet, it was told from a different point-of-view...”

“Well, I—” Ottoman-13 started to say, but stopped short as an untouchable walking in the other direction bumped into him. The roads were beginning to narrow and become crowded. Bunnu could feel the movements of other people brushing up against him in all directions. Ottoman pulled him by the arm inward so the two were now walking closely together.

“But please continue.” Bunnu said, looking down at Ottoman's hand on his arm. “I'm eager to hear where my family comes into this...”

“Yes...yes, your family. I’m getting to that soon,” Ottoman-13 said quickly. His voice was now quieter. The two were now walking close enough that he seemed to feel justified in whispering into Bunu’s ear. “Where was I?”

“Your father’s body was completely drained to desiccation...”

“Right! So, that night, my mother, my sister and I stood around him and chanted a requiescat together, careful to make sure that our shadows did not overlap with his. Outside it was a full moon. Have you ever seen a full moon over a snow-covered landscape? I’m sure you have. The snow has a tendency to reflect and, thus, intensify the light until everything outside has a kind of nightmarish glow. It’s like you’re stranded on the moon itself. And that night, it was almost easy to feel like that was the case.

“That being said, my sister, forgetting that it was a full moon out, stood in front of the window to my parents’ bedroom and the reflected moonlight cast her shadow upon that of my father. And she, too, became host to the parasite. Upon realizing this, my mother told me to leave the room immediately. She said she would attend to my father and sister herself. After I walked out, she closed and locked the door behind me. I looked out the window and could see something moving around outside through the snow in front of our house. Behind it, I saw several more shadows. I knocked on the bedroom door and called to my mom, saying that the men were coming. She assured me they wouldn’t come tonight and told me to get some sleep. She told me she loved me.

“Beyond the door, I could hear my sister crying and my mother saying something to her in a sweet and soothing voice. I’ll never forget that voice. My mother was not one to show her affections very tenderly. She was a strong woman. The women down south were like that. Very tough! But her voice, that night... it had a certain frailty to it, different from the reassuring tone one would expect from a mother’s voice. It had a weakened, quivering sound to it. As though she were too frightened to speak in a loud voice. I remember one time watching a friend feed his pet snake a baby mouse. The tiny mouse shivered in the corner of the cage as the snake watched it. But the snake wasn’t doing anything else...it was just waiting and watching, as though it were savoring the moment. That was how I imagined my mother: as that baby mouse, shivering in the corner being watched by the snake. I couldn’t quite make out what she was saying to my sister that night, but that voice of hers...it still haunts me in my dreams sometimes.”

“Ssss...” Bunu inhaled abruptly as he felt a pang of Ottoman’s pain seep into him. He had never empathized with anyone on this level before, had never been able to connect with someone’s feelings so intensely without himself having had the same sort of experience to draw upon.

“Unsettling, isn’t it?” Ottoman-13 remarked, seemingly empathizing with Bunu’s empathy, “It was for me, as well. Incredibly unsettling! And yet...that night, I fell asleep almost immediately. One wouldn’t think I would be able to sleep after all I’d been through that day. But I did. I think I was too tired to worry. Too tired to grieve. That might have had something to do with it. I remember falling asleep by the artificial warmth of the coal stove that night and waking up hours later to find that the room was freezing once again. The sky outside was getting brighter and the sun would probably rise within the next half hour or so. Looking outside, there was no one out there in the snow and I couldn’t see any footprints, but they might well have been covered over by the drifts.

“I wrapped a blanket around my shoulders and knocked on the door to the bedroom. There was no answer. I knocked harder and called out both my mother’s and sister’s names. Nothing. I stood there for a long time, hoping that someone would say something. But, of course, I knew that there was no one there to answer. Thinking back to it now, it seems rather odd, but, even then, I couldn’t grieve. In fact, I think it’s completely possible that, at that point, it didn’t occur to me that I should. All I could think of was whatever it was I had to do next. I was now alone and it was up to me to take care of the house. I had to do whatever I could to survive. Perhaps, in the back of my mind I felt that I could only afford myself the opportunity to mourn my family’s loss once I had properly steered myself clear of this situation. That is, I could only mourn when I had the luxury to do so. But first...first, I had to make it through that winter.

“We still had a stockpile of coal in the cellar. Whether it was sufficient to get me through the winter was something I was unsure of, but highly doubted. I decided it would be best to get as much out of the cellar as possible, to save myself the trouble of having to go down continually with a bucket to get more. I remembered that my father kept some rope and pulleys in his storage shed. Thinking that it would surely make the job of moving the coal much easier, I went outside to retrieve them. On my way back, I could hear some men nearby talking. I hid behind the open door of the shed and listened.

“There were three of them. All young. I knew I recognized their voices from somewhere, but it wasn’t until later that I realized that it was because they were all distant cousins of mine. One of them, the oldest of the three, was complaining that they’d been at it for three days non-stop without a break and proposed they call it a day. This generated some moans from the others, as they were eager to hit the rest of the houses that day, so they could ‘make the trade’ soon. Apparently, ‘the trade’ they were referring to was a deal with a neighboring town to the west. They were planning to hand over all the coal in our village in exchange for a train ride north, essentially, leaving the rest of us to die...that is, if they didn’t kill us themselves.

“And from what I gathered in their conversation, the larger and more developed towns to the west were also in a panic because of the mining disaster. Evidently, they had been waiting on some deliveries of coal from us that never made it. As a result, they didn’t have enough coal to get their trains out for extra food and supplies, resulting in a similar pattern of chaos there. It sounded like an equally serious situation, but on a larger scale, which made it perfect for a trade.

“So, the oldest of the three proposed that they hit the remaining houses the following morning, adding that if they got everyone in their organization to help, they should be able to finish pretty quickly and make it out of the area by the late afternoon. A second man expressed his agreement. But the third man started to voice his concerns about the future of their revolution. By the sound of his voice, I could tell he was the youngest of the three. And judging by the way he was speaking, he seemed remarkably dedicated to their so-called *cause*. He started to go on about how their leader and uncle, the wise and venerable Ottoman-3, would never have approved of these measures and how he couldn’t understand why the group couldn’t stay and make their political uprising work. The oldest laughed at him and said that their revolution ended the day the mine collapsed. And its ideals died with that old fool Ottoman-3. Now, they had a new ideology to abide by: one of self-preservation. But all they could hope to do now was to, by whatever means possible, take whatever they could and do whatever it took in order to survive. Even if that meant making certain necessary sacrifices, including anyone who tried to get in their way. And then, he said something I’ll never forget. He said, ‘That, my young friend, is what we call survival.’

“Their voices started to grow faint as they walked away, but I stood behind that door for a long time, listening to the man’s words ringing in my head over and over again. ‘That, my young friend, is what we call survival.’ I felt like he was saying it directly to me. I mean, what he was saying: it sounded merciless...and calculating. Slaughtering a whole village and taking its resources for oneself. For one’s survival. It was wicked and malicious...but at the same time, it sounded brilliant. Logical! Perfect!

“It was fair to say that, in some instances, a cold-blooded act was the only logical recourse for survival. The only virtue, at that point in time, seemed to embody a certain calculated and necessary cruelty. How else, after all, is one to survive? Not through mercy or soft-heartedness. I mean, imagine...what has kept our species here for so long through hundreds of thousands of years of hardship? What has kept mankind moving forward? Kept civilization progressing? Would you say it’s Competition? That sounds like it should be right, but that doesn’t even begin to explain it. Let’s call it a certain will to triumph over any obstacles, big or small, that cross our path. A necessary ruthlessness. Is high civilization not, after all, founded upon the necessity of cruelty? I’m sure I’ve heard someone say something to that effect before.”

“Yeah...I think it was that one guy. The one people quote all the time.”

“Yes...him! Anyway, I think he was right. Gains must be made at the expense of others, in order for a

civilization to thrive in the first place. The survival of man, of civilization, itself, is dependent upon a baseline killer instinct that can only be suppressed, and when necessary, invoked and further rationalized by ideology. Yet, the ideologies that I had been taught up until then, my frame of reference by way of indoctrination, told me that there was no virtue in taking the life of another. On the contrary, self-sacrifice was seen as a greater virtue for the Common Good. The spirit of cooperation, after all, had its basis in altruism. But in these circumstances, I found myself not terrified by the possibility of transgressing the boundaries of morality that my culture held dear, but rather exhilarated by it. Maybe you can call it selfishness. Rugged individualism. The ends justifying the means. Call it what you like. But I knew for a fact that this culture was on its way out...and *their* boundaries, *their* ideologies: none of it mattered anymore. They didn't apply to me. No one was going to be around anymore to tell me that I'd done something wrong. No one left to judge me from the frame of reference that defined my culture. I suddenly felt...*free*.

"A wave of ecstasy trickled through me. It was pure and perfect survival that I would seek from then on. Absolute and without the slightest flaw. It was the inner dynamics of man come to the forefront. The very essence of all life in its mystical intensity. An incontrovertible meaning circulated before me, whispering emphatically the sacred truths that oscillate like a pendulum out of reach and then back again, cyclical in the culmination of events and the realization of opportunities, unfaltering in the inevitability of paradises both lost and regained. The moment had until now strayed from my advances to the point of being exhausted and withered, only to now be opportunely deluged with a fresh flood of painful elation. I felt it rush over me as I could see a chance to survive looming before me. The moment bloomed again and filled itself with a grandeur I couldn't help but taste in the frozen air that surrounded me. The bitterest of the bitter. The sweetest of the sweet. A static charge nipped at me like a prick of tens of thousands of needles upon my body: inside and out. The excitement! The beauty of this life of absolutes. It saturated my soul with a resolution and my spirit unflinchingly and inflexibly with a sense of duty. I would be a servant to my own freedom. And with that freedom, I had a new ideology to abide by. I guess you could say I embraced the very same principle as that of my cousins: that of self-preservation. One that would get me through and justify the actions deemed necessary for survival. The only difference, perhaps, between my cousins and me was that I didn't require a group to achieve my individual ends."

Bunnu rolled his eyes and chuckled to himself, "Hmph...Right!"

Ottoman paused mid-squeeze, "What's the problem?"

"Long story short," Bunnu yawned, "You, as the young hero, outfox and systematically kill off your cousins and the rest of the villagers with the help of the shadow parasites. Then, you single-handedly usurp their coal and trade it for a train ride north. I knew I've heard this story before!"

"How could you have heard this part before?" Ottoman-13 responded in shock, his grip on Bunnu's arm loosening slightly.

"Well, in all honesty, it wasn't from you," Bunnu responded matter-of-factly. "I heard it from Rakesh-7—except he told the story from the point-of-view of the Shadow Parasites. Apparently, he preferred to use them as the protagonists. I didn't know that you were the kid, though." He sighed and continued in an unaffected voice, "Well...I guess *that's that!*"

Bunnu suddenly felt a sense of relief. He was normal again: no longer influenced by this man's method of suggestion. The realization that he had heard this story before from a different point-of-view seemed to make him suddenly insensible to Ottoman's attempts at persuasion, perhaps even disillusioned at Ottoman's hope of establishing a common perspective with which he might sympathize. He, thus, decided that he would not let the man make any further inroads to his will. He would protect himself with a barrier of cynical musing. That'd seemed to work wonders in the past. Sarcasm would be his tool of skepticism. This man was not worthy of his sympathies. He was simply a piddling actor...and not a very good one at that. Moreover, his version of the story was far less compelling than the one that had originally been told

by the Outlander. When faced with different accounts of the truth, one was expected to make a decision. That's simply the way things worked. Bunu chose now to view Ottoman's protagonist as a comical addendum to the main story, which is to say, he favored Rakesh-7's perspective.

"That's that?" Ottoman-13 responded quizzically.

Bunu snorted complacently, "Never mind! Wow...so, I suppose I should ask for your autograph or something. Well, it's like you said: we *are* acquaintances, so that means I know someone famous. I guess you could say it's kind of like being acquainted with a character from a fairy tale!" He paused and looked at Ottoman-13, who didn't look the slightest bit pleased to hear that, before continuing, "But yes...as far as I remember from the story, you basically duped them all into passing the parasite from one person to the other. And then, you grabbed the coal and made a run for it. Hell of a plot twist!"

"Well, it certainly wasn't as simple as that..." Ottoman sighed. He released Bunu's arm again. "But that is more or less how it happened, yes. But if you've heard this story, I won't belabor you any further with the details. And yes, I took a train and watched the town where I grew up—my so-called *hometown*—disappear behind me. But not before I set every house in that village ablaze. I wanted to eliminate every trace of it from the world. Anything that could remind me of the boundaries I grew up with. I can still remember the smell of that smoke, the crackle and the bursts, as I watched the flames shoot up at the sky, on my last night there...the sight of it: a gray cloud swirling up and scattering outward in the frozen night air, scattering ashes into the atmosphere. I thought about it the whole next day, on the train as I leaned out the window, watching the smoke rise from the engine. That was my village's coal it was burning. Spreading smoke out over the landscape.

"And then...there was this sound. I feel a little strange mentioning this, but amidst the noises from the steam engine, there was this subtle, high-pitched wavering sound." Ottoman paused uncomfortably, "I asked the engineer what caused it and he said it was the variation in the pressure created by the smoke. But it sounded to me like my mother's voice that last night when she spoke to me through that door."

"How touching," Bunu said flatly, "The very same mother who said you had an unforgettable face, right? Well I hadn't heard that part of the story before! Kudos to your knack for pathos...it almost makes me want to cry," Bunu sighed facetiously, "So, where were you headed that glorious day? Kaiiba, I suppose."

"Kaiiba, yes. The train was bound for the town of Bahlia. Apparently, a trade route had been established between Bahlia and the larger towns and city-states neighboring my village, soon after Bunu-5's isolationist reign ended. It was still winter there, but the winters were still much warmer and bearable than in my hometown. I think, that year, you were having an unseasonably warm one because in the landscape surrounding the town, some of the snow looked like it was melting. I could see the ice breaking and the water rushing over the rocks of the riverbed as we crossed the bridge. It was maybe one of the most beautiful things I'd ever seen. I couldn't help but wonder if Bahlia was equally beautiful. I asked the engineer every five minutes how much longer it would be until we got there. I couldn't wait to get there and start my new life.

"But when the train arrived, I got off and suddenly my eyes started welling up with tears. I didn't know what triggered it, exactly. But then I realized that it was the first time I'd cried since my family had passed away. So, I walked the streets of Bahlia and allowed myself to cry, to mourn silently. But after a few hours, the feeling started to pass. Not subside. But just wither away completely. It felt strange for such a thing to happen, given the circumstances. But even stranger than that was that none of what actually happened felt real anymore. Not like I was in denial. It was a different feeling. The existence of my village itself seemed to lack relevance to this new cosmos I occupied. It was lost somewhere in another time. Existing in another place. And perhaps I was there, but I, too, was a different person. Someone who lived a parallel existence. An existence rendered in shadow."

"Hmmm..." Bunu rolled his eyes.

“I decided that it was best to focus more on the here and now. So, I made my way to the Dowra District of Bahlia. I was still very young, so I had no choice, but to live among the untouchables. There was no work for me, so I would have to find other ways to eke out a living. But it’s easier to panhandle for food when you’re a child. So, that’s what I did for the next few years.”

“Huh...that must have been something.”

“Well...it’s a strange feeling being on the receiving end of the looks that people give you when you live as an untouchable. Most people look at the untouchables and they envision their lives as one of misery: these pathetic beings having to live in such sub-human conditions, performing the roles in society that no one else is willing to perform and without the ability to change their circumstances, living as effigies that Karma likes to burn whenever the fancy occasions itself. But in my hometown, we didn’t have any untouchables. There were too few of us to have those kinds of social stratifications. So, naturally, my perception of their situation was different from that of most people. The first time I saw how the untouchables lived, you know what I thought to myself?”

“What?”

“That I finally had a chance at a fresh start.”

Half Daughters, Quarter Sisters

I.

“So, you started your blissful existence as an untouchable. Where does my family come in?” Bunu asked impatiently. “Isn’t that what you were supposed to explain to me instead of telling me stories I’ve already heard?” They were approaching the banks of the river. The muddy streets were now crowded with people moving back and forth restlessly like ants in an unbelievable rush. Bunu found himself remembering the ants that he used to use as passengers in his toy boats and, consequently, found himself wondering if any of the untouchables around him had ever been on a boat before—if they had, indeed, been the subjects of a larger experiment to circumnavigate a Field heretofore unexplored.

“Right. I suppose it’s about time I got to the point.”

“My dear man, I do wish you would...”

“Well, there’s still a lot more to tell. I just didn’t want to leave anything out. Which would you prefer: the long version or the short version?”

“Which do you think?”

“Long story short?”

“You really are a master of intuition, Detective Ottoman.”

“Right. Long story short,” he said taking a deep breath. “I’ll skip ahead a little bit. So, I lived in the Dowa Districts for about a year as an unknown. It was a difficult life. As a child, everyone has designs on exploiting you to suit their own needs. Times were especially tough during the reign of Keisuke-610. Struggling to survive everyday, living among the lepers and madmen and the predators. Having people of higher castes look at you like they despised you for reminding them of your existence, sometimes abusing you. I managed like that for a long time, always remembering that it was survival that mattered most. And one day, out of the blue, I was discovered by the conceptual artist, Sanchez. You know him?”

“Oh yeah. I hate that guy! What did he want with you?”

“Well...he said he was having a kind of party and that he wanted to invite me. He told me he would give me food and money, if I came. So naturally I went.”

“Was it was one of his crazy theme parties?”

“In fact, it was. He called it a Degradation Party. The other untouchables and I wore elegant clothing while the other wealthy, snobbish types wore rags and served us high-class cuisine from silver trays. He gave each of his guests little cards with lines written down that they had to utter about how miserable they were and what an honor it was to be in the presence of such graceful and godly people as ourselves.”

“Sounds like Sanchez alright.”

“The guests loved it. Any chance to step out of their boring existence for just a moment suited them. And Sanchez simply went wild when he found out that I could read. Not like I meant to tell him. He just happened to have a book by my favorite poet sitting around in the dressing area. I stared at it for a long

time and looked around to make sure no one was watching before I started paging through a little bit. And when he suddenly walked into the room, he wasn't at all upset to see me handling his book, but more intrigued as to how I'd learned to read. But without waiting to listen for my explanation, his face brightened as he suddenly asked me to read from the book of poetry in front of his guests. You know, do a little recital. So, that's what I did. Apparently, the idea was a hit with his friends, who just erupted in laughter at the sight of the emaciated untouchable reciting poetry. Many hailed it as his best party ever."

"So, you became Sanchez's toy..."

"That, my young friend, is what we call survival.' And the struggle for survival is often what begets these sorts of circumstances. Yes, I was something like a toy for a brief period. But you know how easily Sanchez gets bored."

"Boy, do I!"

"At first, he wanted me to be a conversation piece in the living room. So he built a podium for me to stand on in the center. But it was very difficult to stand like that for so long, so after a while, he made it into a baby crib and asked me to wear oversized baby clothes. But soon, that became boring, too. So, it wasn't long before I ended up being given out as a party favor to a guest at one of his dinner parties."

"The man who took me home was an underboss in the Mob. He wasn't one of those typical mob types, as you might guess. After all, he was at a conceptual artist's dinner party. He, too, had certain artistic sensibilities, however diminished they may have been by his crude and self-inhibiting ultra-masculinity. He knew, too, that he had to save face in front of his less artistically-inclined comrades and...not quite knowing what to do with me, settled on using me as a paperweight in the back office of a confectioner's shop he used as a front for his criminal dealings. One day, when business was a little slow, it was just the two of us in his shop. And we got to talking. He told me that he didn't know much about art, but wanted to know more. He asked me what it was like being a work of art. I told him that it was often a better position to be in, to be a representation of something... much better and much more revered, perhaps, than being that which is, in fact, represented. Cultures, after all, place a heavy emphasis on symbols. The signifier sometimes has a greater affinity to people than that which is being signified. Thus, since I had become a representation, I had a greater ability to connect with people. My existence carried a greater meaning to them."

"So, in doing this, you succeeded in emerging from your life as an untouchable, then. You became something else. An object..."

"Yes and no. You see, I had emerged from the lifestyle. But I didn't emerge from the brand. In fact, since Sanchez had exposed me to the village as his work of art, my persona, in fact, had become synonymous with the Untouchable lifestyle. Yes...I was a cultural icon, but I was typecast. I couldn't escape from that public image, unless I did something drastic."

"So, that's where my family came in?"

"Yes. In fact it is."

"Well...it's about time! OK! So, what did my family do to help you emerge from that typecast?"

"Well...that's the interesting part. I find it amazing that you don't know yourself! It was highly publicized! Besides that, your older sister was at the center of it all!"

"I told you I don't have a sister!"

"Well...what about Didi, then?"

“Didi isn’t my sister.”

“But she-“ Ottoman-13 uttered in disbelief.

“She’s my quarter sister. She *is* older, though...”

“Don’t you mean half sister?”

“What’s a half sister?”

“Never mind that. You don’t know anything about-“ Ottoman started to say.

“Because,” interrupted Bunu, “Didi is the half daughter of my father. Apparently, he and another man had some kind of *ménage trois* with the woman who gave birth to Didi. But that woman wasn’t my mother. So, Didi and I share half a father, but no mother. So, that makes her my quarter sister. But here’s the funny thing, and this is always what confuses me...if that woman in the *ménage trois* *had* been my mother, Didi and I would now share the same mother and half a father. So, would that have made her my two-thirds sister or three-quarters sister? It’s all a bit confusing actually. Anyway, I know for a fact that it wasn’t *my* mom in that *ménage trois*, because she almost hit the roof when Didi showed up at our front door. When was that? I think I was about 12 at the time...”

“Right, but-“

“So, what’s a half sister?”

“I’ll explain later,” Ottoman-13 said patiently. “Now, it’s time for you to speak with the Coach.”

II.

They had reached the end of the street and were now standing at the top of the steps leading down to the banks of Placenta-C. The steps were made of concrete, but were caked with frozen mud.

Groups of untouchable children sat along the steps, watching an elderly Morellan woman down on the banks, sitting atop a tall chair, instruct her congregation of younger, naked, upper-class women in the Orthodox Morellan art of tantric sex. The women had their bodies stretched to difficult postures and wild contortions as the energy of the Universe flowed through their bodies and into their hormones. Their eyes closed, some shuddered as the waves of cosmic energy hit them. “Breathe! Breathe!” The old woman commanded them in an admonishing tone as she carefully stepped down the ladder of the tall chair and picked up a bowl containing the Guru’s semen and went around to each woman, touching them in sensitive areas, sometimes kissing them sensuously for the purposes of collecting from them vaginal fluid that was necessary to the composition of what was referred to as the Divine Nectar. Before moving on to the next woman, she chanted a mantra and mixed the collected fluid with the semen, using what appeared to be a shaving brush.

The other two officers stayed at the top and watched with big grins on their faces as Ottoman-13 and Bunu made their way down the steps. “That’s the Coach over there!” Ottoman-13 pointed down at a group of three men in the river. One was wearing what—at this distance— appeared to be a snorkel, while holding his legs to his chest in the fetal position. The other two were standing on each end, gently rocking his body in the water.

“Which one is he?” Bunu asked.

“The middle one.”

“Are you going to tell me how you know my quarter sister, then? You keep telling me how surprised you are that I can’t remember you...but you never seem to get any further than that.”

“Well, frankly speaking, I *am* surprised! But you’re right. I shouldn’t leave you hanging like that. Sorry, I tend to do that to people.” Ottoman-13 took a deep breath as if preparing himself to say something very difficult, “Anyway...I’m sorry I have to be the one to tell you this, but I’m the one who kidnapped Didi. The man who locked her in a storage shed for three months and tortured her on a daily basis until your parents coughed up the ransom.”

Silence.

“Did you hear what I said?” Ottoman-13 asked.

“Oh...so you’re the guy.” Bunu said feebly after another long silence. His shoulders slumped slightly as he suddenly felt Ottoman-13’s eyes burning a hole into him.

One of the Coach’s men emerged from the water completely naked and picked up towels that had been sitting folded on a blanket. As he returned to the river’s edge, he spread the towel out before him and enveloped the Coach from the back, obscuring Bunu’s view of him. The Coach’s men began to dry him off as he spread his arms out for them. Meanwhile, the old woman ascended the chair again as she chanted a mantra with her eyes closed, slowly lifting the bowl over her head. The congregation bowed their heads as they kneeled before the chair.

“You don’t remember, do you?” Ottoman-13 responded with a suspicious tone. “Or...rather, you didn’t

notice at the time! I might have figured as much. Didi said that you wouldn't."

Bunnu sighed. "When did this happen again?"

When the old woman finished chanting, she opened her eyes and ordered the congregation to practice what they'd learned today.

"And don't forget to breathe!" she said.

Didi

I.

Didi had arrived at their home at a time of family crisis.

It was around dawn that the sleeping village of Bahlia appeared before her: dream-like and frosted, seemingly fogged in glass. It somehow retained a perfect likeness to that of a village inside of a snow globe that her mother, Josefina, had still kept among her possessions upon departing this world. In fact, the resemblance was strikingly uncanny. This was not to say that the village inside the snow globe had been any feat of incredible craftsmanship. On the contrary, Didi had always viewed it as a rather crude representation of something that could only have existed in the clumsy, underdeveloped imagination of its Maker, who, himself, may have had a rather peculiar sense of humor.

And yet, seeing the actual village of Bahlia now much closer up and before her very eyes, it became clear that the snow globe had been no fruit of the semi-infertile imagination, for, in fact, this raggedy old settlement upon which she gaped had conceivably been the original that spawned the imitation. Nevertheless, this village appeared no less crude and no more inspiring than its smaller-scale rendering had been. In this respect, the painstaking precision invoked in the exact re-creation of Bahlia seemed, in equal parts, both impressive and wasteful. What sort of imbecile would dedicate the skills of his craft to the reconstruction of such a mediocrity? She contemplated this for a moment before abandoning the thought altogether; to pursue a solution to this query seemed a dreadfully pointless exercise. She couldn't help but wonder if deciding to come here hadn't been a terrible mistake. But, then again, she had traveled all the way here from Vasalla to find her half-father. There could be no mistake in seeking to do so.

Or could there?

She remembered now that day back in Vasalla after the funeral when she had found the snow globe among Josefina's belongings. Immediately, Didi had thought to herself, "Good god! Why did she hold on to this unsightly thing?" She wondered what could have possessed her mother, a woman of what she liked to consider reasonably refined tastes, to keep an item that could only have been made for the very purpose of its own cosmically ironic or kitsch value, together with her fine knitted shawls imported from Saruyama, her expensive jewelry, antique vases, and dinnerware. The snow globe, however, was an object for which Josefina had always, for some reason, seemed to harbor a great fascination, to the point that she would stare into it languorously for hours on end. It was a kind of unhealthy preoccupation that had always remained beyond Didi's comprehension, as well as that of her half-father, Guni, who—upon having, suddenly and without invitation, taken on the role of her guardian if only to gain immediate access to Josefina's belongings—simply told Didi to hold on to the snow globe as a keepsake. So, she kept it safely among her belongings, while Guni sold off Josefina's shawls, jewelry, and antiques at the estate auction. He promised Didi that he would put the inheritance money to good use, but never bothered to explain any further.

Naturally, she should have known better than to trust him.

Now, overlooking Bahlia from a clifftop above, Didi patted her horse on the head. The poor guy must have

been exhausted from the long night of riding. Their breaks had been few these past couple of weeks, for she had ridden in constant fear of being robbed, attacked, or murdered. The horse had served her well though and performed his role with greater honor than even most people were capable. She had, in fact, only become acquainted with this horse very recently, but it soon began to feel to her as though a bond had been forged between them, the strength of which she would otherwise be hard-pressed to find in any of her human relationships. She assumed that the source of this bond had something to do with their shared feeling of not being needed, of not even being wanted. He was an old horse who was useful to no one but her; similarly, she was a young woman whose thoughts, aspirations and opinions had very little value to anyone but this horse whose migration she had quite carefully guided.

In spite of this mutualistic relationship, the horse would certainly have been incapable of understanding that with the recent conferment of new obligations upon Didi, both financial and otherwise, the standard appraisal of her existence by her fellow humans had even managed to drop below zero to a sustained negative value. With the weight of the debts that had gathered on her shoulders, she had transformed from an ordinary unwanted daughter to a living and breathing and roaming liability. Thus, from the perspective of any human who placed the slightest value on his or her own self-determination, she was an object to be avoided—for there could be no doubt that all upon whom she descended would share in her burdens equally. This was simply the way of things.

As a natural consequence of this, there had been very little for her to leave behind in Vasalla. There were few people who would miss her, if any at all. And so, now, at the end of her sudden migration to the lands in the south, one could possibly say that she had been born anew—that all the pain, the abandonment, the loss had been shed with the skin of her former existence. Perhaps the same could be said for the horse.

This was a comforting thought.

After gaining control of the inheritance money, Guni had disappeared from Didi's life altogether, leaving her once again to fend for herself. She buried the snow globe deep at the bottom of a chest where she kept Josefina's remaining odds and ends and almost immediately forgot about the hideous little thing. At that point, thoughts of the snow globe would only have served to be distracting; her concerns were of a more pragmatic nature. For one thing, she had no money for rent, so the only option available was to move out of her lodgings and work as a live-in maid at the house of Josefina's former employers, as she waited for her half-father to come through with her share of the inheritance. However, it seemed that Guni had taken flight for one reason or the other, leaving the saloon he owned in the charge of one of his apprentice barkeeps. Didi waited two full years for him to return with her money, but didn't receive so much as a message from him. And when Guni finally stumbled back into town only to die immediately in the middle of the street of a runny nose, the mystery of what had happened to that inheritance money didn't make itself any clearer. On the contrary, Didi only managed to find, among his scant belongings, the draft of a letter that he'd written in which he'd promised to use the inheritance money to pay off the long-standing interest on a debt to a man named Anup.

Anup.

The name had a reputation all its own: Anup.

Now, just the thought of that man brought a shiver down her spine. Didi's horse bucked suddenly. "Easy... easy..." She whispered to him gently, "He's nowhere in sight. I'm told Anup's presence is announced by the music of a military march, some sort of awe-inducing anthem composed in his honor by the Vasallan Football Club. The drumbeats are what people speak of most, for they are the most portentous element of his approach. But surely what he gains in the sense of dread it creates he loses in his ability to surprise his intended victims. Either way, we should have fair warning if he manages to find us. Anyway, we'll get moving again soon. Just need to rest up a bit..." She stretched her arms out and yawned, hoping silently, as she did so, that Bahlia would make for an effective hiding place. If Anup had the support of the Greater Kaiiba-8 Football Association, surely he could find her no matter where she was, unless she left Kaiiba

altogether. In any case, before she could even worry about that, there was the small matter of finding the home of her half-father. Certainly, this would be no simple task, to say nothing of what should unfold upon their first meeting. He could very well send her on her way. This would not be an unreasonable reaction and, naturally, not one that she was not already used to. Regardless of what should transpire, the first order of business was to get out of broad daylight before Anup or his men had a chance to track her location. She stretched once again and yawned.

When Anup's underlings had first arrived in Vasalla to collect on Guni's debts, there had been nothing sufficient in Didi's savings to pay them off after all the costs incurred by Guni's funeral. It seemed that Guni had owed a rather hefty sum for reasons undetermined. After seizing control of Guni's remaining assets, including his saloon, Anup's men demanded the remaining balance from Didi, as she was his only surviving relative. Unable to pay, she offered instead to work off the debt as a hostess at the pub. The men were satisfied with this arrangement and agreed to the terms. For a few months, it seemed like the matter was on its way to being settled. Didi naturally didn't enjoy attending to the men of the saloon, but felt that this was the only way she could be assured that there would be no further trouble for her. It certainly seemed so...until Anup himself actually descended upon the town.

The horse's posterior now gave utterance to a flatulent howl that echoed hauntingly through the valley before her. Its echo was grandiose and daring, its scent foul, albeit liberating; yet she knew that this majestic gastrointestinal call to nature would also give away their position to those who were tracking her. It was hard to envision what lengths they were willing to go to in order to find her, or for that matter, how long the affair would remain unsettled before they finally gave up altogether. Beyond this, she simply couldn't comprehend the depths of the obligations which had now been thrust upon her. Just how far does an obligation extend and just how much does it encompass beyond that which can simply be settled through monetary means?

Anup apparently had a rather singular point of view when it came to this question, as he had been extremely dissatisfied with the way his men had handled the situation and was quick to exact his violent retribution on them, but not before extending the obligations of Guni's debts to Didi herself. He made it clear that what he sought was not simply the remittance of this sum, but something more—presumably something she did not wish to know about. It was difficult to know what nature of obligation that Guni had had outstanding to Anup, for there existed many species and sub-species thereof—obligations which lived and breathed and roamed just as much as the hosts who bore them and which were, thus, inclined to biodifferentiate through adaptation in the same manner as any other parasitic organism. In this case, the import and ambiguity of this nameless and unsatisfied obligation imbued it with a certain ominous quality before which none could help but tremble.

Fortunately for Didi, she had been away from the saloon when Anup had transferred these unsatisfied liabilities to her charge. This prompted one of the elderly regulars of the bar, upon spotting her in the street, to run up to her and inform her immediately of these new developments. He advised her to grab what she could and take flight. At first, she hadn't had any idea where she could escape to, but the old man recommended that she visit her other half-father in Bahlia, for he was the sort of chap who would not feel the slightest bit put upon by the obligations of his half-daughter. In fact, he might just accept them with a measure of earnest gratitude. And so the old man brought her back to his house, drew up a map to Bahlia and offered up one of his elder horses on the condition that she set the old palomino free upon arrival. He added, "...and tell Raju and Yuri that Eihachiro sends his best!" And so Didi left the town of Vasalla by horse in the middle of the night.

In the darkness of a pitch black sky, she left in her wake the balmy air, the sugar plantations, and the warm breezes. She knew that before long these would be replaced by the frozen chilly air of the areas to the south. The snow and that dreadful Karakaze! The lands to the south were known for being treacherous.

She'd experienced it once before, while on caravan with her mother, uncle and aunt through the Absconditus-21 mountain range. They'd traveled around for days wrapped in blankets inside the covered

wagon telling stories and jokes. Her uncle had a knack for coin tricks which he never explained how to do despite Didi's endless pleadings. But it wasn't long before the good-natured spirit that had prevailed throughout the trip was suddenly dampened when Josefina's reasons for having partaken became clear and it was revealed that their joining the caravan had actually been motivated by her desire to pass Didi off on her relatives. In the end, Josefina's pleas had been fruitless and the two of them returned together against the gusts of the freezing Karakaze wind to Vasalla on foot. And it was on that return journey that Didi suddenly began to sense that the Karakaze seemed to be filling her with a kind of emptiness, if such a thing could be said to happen. That is to say, she didn't feel drained of any sort of fulfillment, but on the contrary, a void had seemingly gained access to her insides, spreading throughout her system to supplant what had existed with a blank nothingness. Her memory had been wiped clean to the extent that she couldn't quite remember what it was exactly that she was missing, despite this notion that gnawed at her that, doubtlessly, something simply *had* to be. To her, the Karakaze was that very void—a medium through which meaning could be both drawn and erased in broad sweeping strokes that expressed themselves in gusts and swirls. Semblance was a side effect of its traversal through the landscape, for the Karakaze was something more than simply that which traversed. It was an invisible canvas, one that folded inward upon itself at the corners to flap vehemently in the pull of its own vacuum. And as it entered her system, although *invade* would be a more fitting word, a shudder of despair ran through her body at its frozen caress. She could feel its beckon to courtship. And that horrible chill had forever crystallized in her memory that feeling of being unwanted by a woman who was willing to even keep a laughable old snow globe in her possession over her own daughter: a snow globe that, whenever Didi looked at it, made it seem impossible for her to escape the faint, yet unsettling feeling that this wretched object carried a greater intrinsic importance than her very existence. Could it have had some special meaning? Was it the very expression of the life her mother fantasized about—a life free from obligations, from the burdens of responsibility and devotion to her only child? Or, could all of this simply have been some misappraisal on Didi's part, an overreaction that simply came about because she let her imagination run wild? Whatever her mother's reasons may have been, Didi couldn't help but feel jealous of the snow globe after her mother's death, to feel a bitter hatred for it; yet not just a hatred, but rather a kind of obsession with it, for it was almost mystifyingly calculated in its poor craftsmanship as though it had been fashioned with the intent to deceive. And if this were the case, it was not just her mother, but even Didi herself, who was on the receiving end of its varied and intricate deceptions. It was an idol of false promises. Of broken dreams.

And yet, on that first night of riding, upon dismounting from her horse, Didi reached into her travel bag only to realize that she'd inadvertently packed the snow globe, as well. She sighed as she felt past it with her hand to look for the map. That night, she sat by the fire, studying rough, uneven lines that weaved through non-existent territories and land formations to meet obtusely at points, annotated by illegible descriptions. The map was anything but accurate, but left with no other source of guidance by which to abide, she could only trust it insofar as it would provide a template by which she could plot her course. Roasting some nuts she'd received from the local O-bousan, words of caution loomed lastingly in her mind, "Stick to the main roads that the traders take. It's not safe for a girl your age to venture too far into the wilderness..."

Didi, however, was less concerned with the wild beasts out there. Those she could handle. It was Anup and his men that she feared. More specifically, it was this unknown, nameless obligation that scared her most, for she did not know what she was expected to do in order to satisfy it. The only logical recourse was escape. And abidingly, the only effective way to avert detection was to go against the O-bousan's well-meaning advice and avoid the main roads altogether. It would take longer to get to Bahlia, but she knew she'd arrive eventually.

And so, by firelight that first night, she mapped out a winding course just north of the main roads. And early the next morning, she set off once again, following the exact route she'd plotted.

II.

The main roads, which Didi sought so desperately to avoid, had been established shortly after Bunnu-5 had come into power, but the frequency of their use had increased not so long after he succumbed to his ongoing bout with Swimmer's Ear, two and a half years earlier. His successor, who went by the name of Keisuke-610, was the flamboyant and eccentric nephew of Bunnu-5 and a strong proponent of opening the kingdom to foreign trade, which, in spite of his intentions, ended up doing a great deal more to improve the quality of life of his people than to serve his own selfish whims.

To wit, his craving for "those divine Mumta fragrances and soaps" impelled him to open trade with the Kingdom of Mumtaz, allowing for an influx of theretofore unknown technology and cultural advances, such as steam power and indoor plumbing, which made everyday life more convenient—for starters, no more outhouses to contend with in the dead of winter!—and paved the way for greater industrial yield per man-hour.

Of course, in order to increase the number of man-hours available to be utilized, the labor force had to expand. This, however, was rather difficult to do, given the conditions of living prevalent under the Kaiiban caste system. And so, at the urging of his ministers, Keisuke called for a census to be performed in order to gain a better idea as to the availability of able-body laborers, as well as the conditions of living of all his people, particularly those of lower castes. Using these results, he was able to institute a kind of national lottery system for lower castes with prizes ranging from Mumta soaps to Civil Service jobs. "Clean, clean, clean your way to happiness and fortune!" became his slogan to the masses. And so, with the inception of the lottery system, the Mumta soaps became increasingly popular among the lower classes. They, in fact, came to be seen as auspicious objects for the prosperity of those who had, until now, lived in abject squalor. And so, the lottery served not only to collect funding to support public utility programs, but also to create a labor force of well-groomed men and women to keep these programs going. That is, only if they were lucky enough to win these sought-after civil service positions, but of course, that only caused them to keep buying in to the lottery system. To top it all off, these initiatives created a demand for Mumta soaps, which helped to bolster the already burgeoning economy.

In order to meet the new demand for consumer products and open the door to trade with other kingdoms, Keisuke-610 also became hailed as a friend of industry by granting special charters allowing for the formation of enterprises that could be granted the status of limited liability corporations, for the purposes of protecting entrepreneurs against the liquidation of their assets and the government itself against the financial risk of the ventures that it sought to contract from these organizations. Keisuke-610's abiding interests were with the Mumta. He had grown up with a great fondness for them and wanted to bring an influx of their goods to his land, but didn't have enough resources to do it without the help of private investors. These charters gave him the wherewithal to do it, while at the same time, providing a much-needed boost to the economy. They also allowed for the exploration and acquisition of resources and materials available solely in other lands outside of the immediate area. One of the largest import-export operations, the *Kaiiba-East Mumtaz Company*, had hired a fleet of ships to seek out resources in both chartered and uncharted territories. Accordingly, the corporation's merchant ships were accompanied by a whole fleet of Royal Navy ships, manned with garrisons charged with the responsibility of assessing the defenses of civilizations with whom they came in contact and, if the circumstances allowed for it, to "offer these weakened and vulnerable souls the protection of His Excellency the King Keisuke-610."

After mounting numerous successful campaigns throughout the neighboring areas, the influence of Keisuke had spread from the Eastern shore to the West and even out as far as to the Isle of Deposed Kings. Throughout these lands, the glory of Kaiiba was recognized by all. And so, one day, a group of old men in top hats and tuxedos appeared before the doors of the castle requesting an audience with the king. Upon meeting with him, they recommended that he standardize the currency throughout the kingdom, advancing

the notion that the money would have a greater aesthetic quality with his own likeness on each coin. Enthralled by the idea, Keisuke-610 made it so and it wasn't long before the market was flooded with new currency, which despite some initial bumps and pangs of consumer uneasiness, had lastingly good effects upon the market and gave way to a proliferation in trade between different areas. The trade routes were paved over and travel between villages became much easier than ever before. Needless to say, Keisuke-610's inadvertent reforms made him incredibly popular with his people to the point that artists from all over the kingdom were offering their services to adorn anything within plain sight with his stunning likeness. Keisuke-610 was naturally too hesitant to decline for fear of discouraging the artists from achieving their creative visions.

And so, his likeness could be seen on street corners, posters, statues, coins, the sides of wagons, hanging from banners, on fences, as murals inside doghouses, engraved into silverware, shaved into sheep, on boxes containing shaving utensils, branded into cattle, on the signs for banks, embossed on hospital linens, in the newspapers, as signs hanging over printing presses, carved into the caves under Coral Canyons, etched into the trees at the Dancing Spider orchards, painted on the side of factories, posted on the walls of police stations, on hotel stationary, on cloth diapers...just to name a few.

The prevalence of his likeness, along with his remarkable sense of fashion, and knack for diplomacy went a long way in earning him a nickname that he never tired of hearing: "Charismatic K!"

III.

In the cold and quiet dawn, as she looked upon Bahlia, Didi leaned forward and lazily rested her head facedown against the mane of the horse, as she let her arms hang down around his neck. These sleepless few weeks on the road had finally started to catch up with her. The horse brayed impatiently, causing her to tilt her head and look down at a coin she had been keeping clenched in her palm all this time. It was a bronze coin with the effeminate, yet proud face of Charismatic K on it. She wondered momentarily if this village from her mother's snow globe would accept this currency. But there could be no question that they would. She could see large ice sculptures of him on either side of the entry gates. And yet, she couldn't seem to dismiss the nagging feeling from her mind that the village, itself, was, in fact, some kind of illusion. This had been her immediate inclination upon her first sight of Bahlia on the horizon.

She now found herself remembering something the O-bousan had said to her when she had gone to pay him the money for Guni's funeral. She'd asked him what had happened to her mother after she'd died. Where did she go? She made no mention of Guni. There were enough people like him out there that she didn't really need to know what had become of him, specifically. But her mother...well, there was simply one Josefina. God wouldn't dare make another. And yet, the O-bousan smiled calmly at her and assured her that her mother's energy must be preserved somewhere in the Universe. Somewhere. Elements of her matter had decomposed and recombined with other things. Her body heat had dispersed into the atmosphere, into an ether, as it were, as the life crept slowly out of her body, until it became One with all that surrounded it. And these were just the ephemeral things about her mother. It was that which was infinite that mattered most: her soul. Her soul, after all, was to be reincarnated in the form of new life somewhere. Somewhere in the Universe, Mama's soul was still intact, existing maybe as the baby to another Mama...or perhaps as an annual rainy season flower, or maybe even as a bacterium adapted to subsist in deep sea high pressure vents of hot sulfur. Needless to say, Josefina, or rather elements of her, were, for better or worse, out there in the world and, even after her death, it was Didi who was left to deal with them—to pick up the pieces, wherever it was that she happened to find them. And she could sense those pieces all around her. Sometimes in the dry air that brushed against her skin, brisk and full of energy, or in the impetuous and impatient call to attention of the legions of crows that swooped down from the highest branches to pick up discarded bits of food along the side of the highway in the early morning, perhaps in the unquenchable fervor of the river rapids that hit the rocks, releasing a white spray that settled to a fine mist through which she imagined she could once again see the woman herself in all those fleeting moments that passed too quickly to register in a lasting and meaningful sense, those characteristics, those elements that comprised Her, Josefina—*she*, in her alluring and captivating grandeur, her soulful and poetic reserve, her infinite sadness. Moments that dissolved all too quickly in air with the mist. Didi couldn't be sure that the O-bousan had said what he did because he actually believed it, or because he wanted to believe it, or if he was simply saying it to comfort her. Whatever they may have been, his reasons for telling her such things were no longer important.

And when she had first seen the village from the snow globe materialize upon the horizon as she approached Bahlia, she couldn't, initially, help but wonder if it was not simply a mirage, perhaps yet another remnant of the departed Josefina. The snow globe, after all, was in Didi's travel bag—presumably this vast apparition had come into existence before her as an extension of the snow globe itself: projected outward from its glass dome through tiny microscopic gaps in the fabric of the bag and subsequently imposed upon the surrounding reality as a manifestation of Josefina's endless fantasies. At first, this phenomenon impressed Didi sufficiently to arrest temporarily her hatred for this accursed heirloom. Yet, as she drew closer to the village, she found that this was not the case at all and that the reality was far less heartening than that which had existed in fanciful reverie. In viewing the village from a distance, she had mistakenly understood the causality in reverse, when, in fact, the crude, mediocre village of Bahlia had inspired the crude and mediocre replica within the glass dome. She supposed these sorts of disappointments were inevitable, but this was nothing new. In a similar fashion, she had wanted to

believe, as the O-bousan had proclaimed to, that her mother was still somewhere out there, existing as reformulated Matter, but right now, it was difficult for Didi to think that her mother, even when she was *still* alive, had been anything but a poorly-crafted representation of a being that solely existed in the imagination.

But...no!

She could not allow herself to view the matter this way! Doing so would benefit no one.

She sat straight up on the horse, taking a deep breath of fresh air, as she put the coin back in her pocket. This was no time to give in to cynicism when a new day was right there before her for the taking. Disillusionment aside, there was still room to entertain possibility. And to do so was the only way to quell that lingering and encumbering sense of despondency that had a tendency to rise up and sap her will. For now, the snow globe would be whatever she decided it could be. She could dictate the terms of the reality however she saw fit; perhaps this meant that she was some sort of delusional fantasist like Josefina had been, but this sense of whimsy now allowed her to greet the rising sun with an undiminished sense of hope. Enough of this feeling sorry for oneself! She had arrived: the very thought of this now brought a hot tear to her eye and a warm smile to her face. Yes, she would embrace open possibility over closed cynical musing. There could be no other way to feel a sense of affirmation about her life in the days to come. Until now, she had been afraid...but now her fear was gone. It was time to look ahead instead of behind.

Looking at the village now, she decided that if the snow globe was projecting anything before her now, it was, doubtlessly, her irremediable and unshakable destiny. Perhaps, the model inside had always, in fact, been a representation of her fate. Back when she was young, having seen the snow globe before ever having had the chance to see real snow, to imagine that she would one day enter such a world seemed beyond her comprehension. Yet now, at the start of this wondrous new day, she rode down the side of the cliff and into the village, fully convinced that she was, in fact, riding into a kind of legerdemain fabricated by someone no longer present to watch His plans come to fruition.

She decided to make a quick pass through the village and move east, as the map indicated, just beyond it to the red 'X' that marked her destiny. The horse's trot was, of course, muffled by the snow, which now piled high, but not so high as to prove burdensome. The roads winded and crossed at the marketplace before forking into a series of tiny alleyways and side streets that branched into plazas with statues of Charismatic K in a pose of triumph on a horse, or Charismatic K with an inspired expression looking at an apple that he held before his face, or Charismatic K saving children from a burning orphanage.

Someone had cleared the snow over the manholes so that workers from the utility company—presumably winners of Charismatic K's lottery—could get in for an ongoing renovation project. A few of them stood around the manhole in front of the print shop, breathing warm air into their cupped hands and rubbing them together in the brisk air. It reminded her of that morning watching a few of the carnies warming themselves by a fire in a metal trash can next to the glass chamber that enclosed the green-bubbled Ethereal Scapegoat, as her mother tried to negotiate the terms of the proposed sale: "The sign said you were looking for a dog-faced woman...would you settle for a hairy little dwarf-girl? This magnificent specimen here is—" She rode faster, casting the echoes of this voice behind her, as she glanced ahead at the workers, who simply looked back at her in silent curiosity. Snow piled up to the windows of the print shop behind them.

It was pure and luminous and untouched!

After a few more turns, she found the East Gate, which was less a gate, and more precisely a break in the stone walls that fortified the east side of the village. On each side, she could see the back of another set of ice sculptures of Charismatic K. She pulled the horse into a sprint and sped through to find a vast snowy landscape spreading itself out before her. There were a number of houses scattered about the white expanse that stretched to the rocky snow-covered peaks of the newly formed Absconditus-011235 mountain range which jutted awkwardly up from odd precipices and bizarrely shaped rock formations

nearby to progressively tower outward to dizzying and imposing heights in the far horizon.

The map had shown this whole area to be farmland, but it seemed now that the mountains had advanced upon the town since Eihachiro had been here. *Is this town being consumed by those mountains?* She contemplated the question for a moment before deciding it best to forget such matters and enjoy the beautiful view. The snow globe certainly didn't show this side of the village. Quite a shame, as it was rather beautiful. She was annoyed by that, but at the same time, pleasantly surprised. Never before had she seen such a beautiful snowy landscape.

A peculiar sensation filled her body. Her trip was coming to an end and part of her was excited. Part of her scared. But for some reason, she also felt a hint of sadness, though she couldn't understand exactly why. She didn't miss Vasalla really. She certainly wasn't as disappointed by Bahlia as she thought she would be. Even the Karakaze had been strangely absent throughout the trip, as though hiding behind a tree or beneath a rock, lying in wait menacingly, as it simply watched her pass. If anything, it had been an uneventful journey. And yet, during all that time spent traveling, as she sped from the warm, moist air of Vasalla in a southeasterly direction through the plains, across rivers, through the forest in Neha, and finally into the frozen air of Greater Kaiiba-8, she found nothing more fulfilling, more satisfying than the very anticipation of arriving at the home of her half-father. However, now, as she was moments from it, she felt that once dizzying energy slowly draining from her as the life had from the landscape when she'd traversed from areas of plentiful and prosperous foliage to those of limited and dormant vegetation. When she left, the branches had been brimming with leaves of a vibrant green, but now staring at the trees around her on this barren landscape, she felt her insides cave-in as though something very vital keeping the other organs in place had suddenly deflated, or had perhaps been tugged out. It was a strange mix of feelings: the anticipation and the arrival. There was a certain enchantment, a certain pain, even a certain emptiness to it, but she would not let such bewildering contradictions taint this glorious moment, for there was still much left to anticipate, beyond the destination itself. It was natural to feel anxious, but, in such instances, it was best to focus on the excitement over the fear.

She slowed down as she approached the house that had been marked on her map with a red X. It was a simple, brown, three-story structure with a tiny overhanging roof over the front door, which Didi couldn't help but think added a whole element to the building that made it look like some kind of immense pastry. But then again, she hadn't eaten anything since lunchtime the day before. With this, she took a piece of Meiso bread that the O-bousan had given her from out of her pouch and broke it in half, taking a bit while feeding the horse the rest.

After dismounting, she untied the saddle and gave the horse the rest of its feed. As she removed the reins, the horse whinnied and bucked in response before bolting in the direction of the mountains. Watching the horse take off like that, Didi couldn't understand why Eihachiro had told her to set him free, or where the horse could possibly go in this terrible cold, unless it had a destiny of its own to fulfill. After all, he was very old—perhaps he was going somewhere to die, though she couldn't be sure. She wondered if he knew instinctively where to go and what to do now that he was free, but dismissed the thought quickly. After all, how could he?

Who ever does?

She watched the horse from behind for a long time, waving a tearful goodbye, before she turned back to look at the house. She knew now that she no longer had the option to turn back. Her cautious sensibilities were abandoning her, fleeing at a wild pace, one might say, for the mountains. What else could they do, after all? What more could she possibly have to lose? In a sense, she too, felt free.

She walked slowly to the pastry house. The hour was early, so she felt that it might have been presumptuous to knock. She stopped short of the front door, tightening the blankets around her shoulders. Though the path to the doorstep had been cleared, the snow was piled up on the doorstep to her knees, causing her to wonder what the purpose of clearing the pathway had served.

She contemplated this quietly as she waited outside the door for someone inside to notice her.

IV.

“Where’s my newspaper?” the woman demanded.

Didi looked up at her with a puzzled expression. Her cheeks were now numb and her whole body shivering as she’d been standing on the doorstep quietly for nearly 1 hour before she was noticed. During all this time, the house had remained quiet and not a sound could be heard, but for the occasional gust of wind that blew drifting snow into her face.

After some time waiting in silence, her teeth had started chattering.

The sound of the chattering had evidently set the proceeding chain of events into motion: The first thing she heard was the sound of a man and a woman talking. The woman had a particularly loud and exasperated tone of voice. This was followed by a loud metal clank and a correspondingly loud howl of pain. “Be careful,” the man said in response, “You’ll stub your toe. My father died of-“

“For God’s sake, Raju! I know!” the woman screeched in response, “How many times are you going to go on about your poor old Papa and how he died of a stubbed toe?!!” Didi could, then, hear the sound of a piece of furniture—a stool, perhaps—being dragged across the floor.

“Yuri! What are you-?”

“This time I’m going to catch the little bastard before he gets away!” The voices continued indistinguishably for moments, before Didi finally heard the sound of footsteps walking down a staircase. There was a loud crash and she could hear the woman scream, “Dammit! Bun-bun!”

Didi turned back and looked at the mountains, momentarily considering the possibility of trying to track down her horse, but before she had the chance to ponder the merits and downsides of doing so, the door swung open before her. A woman, who was much smaller and less imposing in actuality than her voice had sounded, now stood there, looking down at her sternly. “Well?” she said breathing heavily through her nose, “Explain yourself!”

“W-w-well I-“ Didi started to say, teeth still chattering.

“Where’s my newspaper?” the woman demanded.

“Y-your n-n-news-“

“Stop wasting my time, Girl, and spit it out! You stand outside my house like that making a terrible racket. Why if I were your mother-“

“But-“

“Don’t interrupt me! Don’t you know that’s rude?” the woman’s eyes widened.

Silence.

“Well?!!” the woman eyes peered down at her, “Speak up then! I asked you a question!”

“Well, the thing is-“

“What?” she thrust her head forward like a chicken in a cockfight.

“Well, if you let me-“

“Huh?”

“Could you please-“ Didi pleaded.

“You’re wasting my time!” She slammed the door shut, causing some snow from the roof to fall on Didi.

She knocked on the door.

The woman opened the door again. “Yes? What is—HEY! YOU’RE STILL HERE?“ It seemed as though the woman had momentarily forgotten about Didi, upon opening the door the second time. However it only took a split second for her to be reminded of why she’d slammed it in the first place. Now, her eyes stared intimidatingly into Didi’s. “Well...are you going to give it to me then?”

“Give what?”

“My newspaper.”

“I don’t have your-“

The woman put a hand to her head. “You really are too much!” She said quietly, her voice losing its potency, as though she were overwhelmingly stressed out by the situation. “What is it then? Huh? Want more money?”

“You don’t-“

“You tell Masafumi that I was supposed to start getting deliveries 2 months ago and-“

“Masafu-“

“Let me finish, you worthless child! Well...I-buh-I-uh-muh-tuh th-the manners on this girl!“ The woman was so outraged that she was now interrupting herself, sputtering unintelligibly in response to what she construed as a horrific trespass upon her refined sensibilities. “You tell Muh-muh-muh-Masafumi that if I don’t-“

“Will you please...LET ME TALK?“ Didi roared, her eyes closed, fists clenched, body shaking. The ground, too, suddenly started shaking as the voice echoed through the valley. A fresh clump of snow fell from the roof to the ground, some of it landing on Didi’s head.

“Hmmm... Must be an earthquake,” the woman uttered calmly, seemingly unfazed as she watched the snow dropping from the roof. “Damn that continental drift!“ She looked over Didi’s head at the mountains.

“Now then!“ Didi said emphatically with her teeth clenched. She was at wit’s end. “Are-we-ready-to-listen???”

“You’re a rather little creature, aren’t you?“ The woman remarked matter-of-factly, punctuating her insensibility to Didi’s words with a scrutinizing purse of the lips. Didi began to hyperventilate. She could hear the sound of someone coming down the stairs inside the house. The woman continued, “My, my! Those eyebrows are ghastly! I never thought they could grow so long. I’ll bet you can braid those suckers, can’t you? And that protruding forehead! Oh, dear...you really must do something about that. Not to mention that terrible odor you’re giving off! Well...sweets, I’m afraid you shan’t soon be the belle of the ball. What are you anyway? Some kind of troll? Level with me, lass!”

“I AM NOT-“ Didi said as the ground started shaking again.

“What’s going on here?” a voice interrupted. The shaking stopped. A man came from behind the woman. He was slightly taller, but more stocky and round. He had a huge tummy and wiry gray hair.

“Raju!” the woman squealed hysterically, “Masafumi sent this impudent little troll as his goon to try to squeeze us for more money!!!”

“Who’s Masafumi?” he responded.

“Is your name Raju?” Didi stepped forward.

Seemingly preoccupied by another matter, however, the man turned to his wife and said, “I could have sworn I felt the house shake.”

“CONTINENTAL DRIFT!” the woman screeched back at him, her eyes nearly popping out of her skull.

“Excuse me…” Didi said in a diminished, imploring tone to the man.

“Wow…” he continued as he scratched his head, “I can’t even remember what it used to look like without those mountains there. Remember when we first moved here, honey? Nowadays, it’s as though, every time you so much as look in that direction, the mountains suddenly seem to be towering over you. Didn’t Bunu used to play around that area where that rock formation is now? Things really do change, don’t they? Have to admit, though, you really can’t beat that view. Talk about value added. I wonder what that’ll do to our property va-”

“Raju…” the woman said in a tired voice.

“Do you think that-“

“Raju…now really!” she said tilting her head as though to indicate that he should know better. “You really are being rude.”

“Huh?”

“I believe the smelly troll had a question for you?”

“Oh…sorry,” his eyes peered down, “You were saying?”

“Are you-“

“You know,” the man said, “you look quite familiar. Are you from around here?”

“No, Vasalla,” Didi responded politely, “I’ve just arrived in town.”

“Dear me!” the woman’s voice suddenly jumped 2 octaves in delight. “A visitor from Vasalla? W-well… don’t stand out there in the cold like that! Come in!” She was suddenly very cordial, as she put an arm around Didi’s shoulder, lassoing her into the house. She rubbed Didi’s arms in a vain attempt to warm them before pulling up a chair from the kitchen table and pushing her down into it. The woman was now looking down with a sheepish grin, as her right hand pulled her hair down past her shoulders, while the left reached across and brushed it nervously. “I-I…well…I wasn’t…I certainly wasn’t expecting a visitor from Vasalla. This is quite a surprise. I’m sorry about the state of the house. We’re doing some renovations, right now. My name’s Yuri, by the way. And you are?”

“Didi.” She responded as she looked down at some of the wooden planks stacked by a gaping hole in the wall through which she could still feel a slight draft. Looking around, Didi was quite unaware of it, but the house had, in fact, changed profoundly in the past couple of years. Times were financially prosperous for the family and Yuri wanted to make sure that their good fortune was apparent to all who visited by

refurbishing the interiors and replacing the furnishings with some of the finest materials money could buy. She replaced the straw matted floors with a solid polished hardwood. The back porch, which had been virtually non-existent, soon became the site of their greenhouse, as well as their indoor Koi pond and garden. As for the upstairs, Yuri had put a lot of time and work into picking out the right color scheme and patterns for an addition that she decided to build as a nursery for *O.* as well as a guest room for anyone who happened to pop in from out of town. She spent months harassing the local fabrics shop owner day and night—at his shop and at his home, sometimes buttering him up until he put in another order, while, at other times, belittling him for dealing in such low quality merchandise—all in an attempt to obtain the finest grade Wormdroll Silk possible for the cushions in her meditation room. For her own room, she had coerced the young, but handy, O-bousan-144 to build a little powder blue make-up dresser with a mirror and tiny chair. As for the kitchen, she made sure that everything she used for the purposes of cooking was state-of-the-art. She even bought platinum-plated propane tanks in case she happened to replace the tank in front of any guests. And on the wall of the living room, she hung between the big framed portraits of her children an even larger portrait of Charismatic K, for whom she had a great affection.

“I’ll make some hot ocha,” Yuri now said. She rushed to get the kettle. “Want some?” she asked the man.

“Please,” he said as he sat down next to Didi at the table.

One of the reasons for the family’s recent financial success was that Yuri’s husband had changed careers from a sharecropper of Magenta to a permanent landowner and farmer of replacement organs. As the mountains were now approaching the town and tearing up the landscape, the best that could be hoped for in the long run was to get out of sharecropping and jump headfirst into this new and growing market, which literally involved the replication of organs to be used in medical transplants on humans.

The replication process had changed vastly from what it had once been during the pre-industrial era, which was to a large degree, the reason for its newfound prevalence. Originally, through a process of organic retro-coding, the nucleotide sequence required to replicate the necessary genes was duplicated by a relatively unpleasant looking creature of the subphylum B-987—known to the layman as the Heisenpig-8. The original replication process, too, was rather unpleasant as it required the Heisenpig-8 to actually swallow the organ whole and subsequently defecate the original along with its clone so that they could both be harvested by the farmer. However, in order for it to defecate after the process of replication had been carried out, the Heisenpig-8 required an excessive amount of stimulation, often sexual. This job was often left either to the farmer...or one of his *hands*, so to speak.

And it was, duly, no mistake that most organ farmers of the pre-industrial era had to live an existence plagued with the unfortunate stigma of being known to their neighbors, and notably amongst the children of the neighborhood as ‘filthy pig fuckers.’ These days, however, the stigma carried in the past by men of this profession had now been relegated to a humorous afterthought—an anecdote told about the primitive bumpkins who, regardless of their deviant sexual appetites, now had the luxury of basking in the reverence of the organ farming community as pioneers in the field, despite not having quite overcome the burdens inflicted upon them by the haunting moans of that Heisenpig-8, which plagued them relentlessly in recurring nightmares that lasted well into their retirement.

Their personal torments notwithstanding, it was due to the advances made by such men that the process was much less hair-raising, now, as all kinds of equipment had been designed for the very purpose of making the organ harvesting process simpler, less invasive, and greater in yield. And so, organ harvesting became the hottest new industry for people from many disciplines to break into: medical professionals, research scientists, businessmen and farmers alike saw a great deal of potential in it, with the foreseeable result that, due to an oversaturation of replacement organs on the market from suppliers both domestic and foreign, the government was faced with little recourse but to favor the domestic suppliers through the payment of grants and subsidies.

This, effectively, allowed them to undercut the prices of imports and, in many cases, pay some farmers for

not harvesting organs during a given season. And in order to ensure compliance, the Medical Harvest and Agriculture Ministry sent packages filled with documents weekly to be filled out in triplicate by the farmers receiving money from them. These documents, while truly serving no other functional purpose, except as a kind of receipt for payment to the Ministry, were often so time-consuming to fill out that they ended up keeping the farmer too busy to get any other work done around the farm.

Regardless, few, if any, complained.

The man now moved a loose stack of Ministry documentation from the kitchen table to a nearby chair, clearing a space in front of him and Didi. “So...” he said, “Just arrived in town, have you?”

“Uh-huh.”

“Well...it’s a long trip from Vasalla alone for a girl your age. How old are you?”

“Sixteen.” Didi blushed. The color was returning to her face now that she was indoors.

“Sixteen? Well...you certainly are...” the man paused, struggling to avoid saying something that might make the situation awkward, “...young...uh...for your age.” He giggled nervously.

“Well, I take after my half-father, I guess. He was a dwarf.”

“Who’s that?”

“Guni.”

“Guni?” the man leaned forward. “You’re Guni’s daughter?”

“Half-daughter.” She corrected.

“Hmmm...good ol’ Guni. What’s he up to these days?”

“He died four months ago.”

“Oh no!” the man said with a hint of sadness. “That’s terrible! I really can’t imagine Guni dying. He was a tough old guy. Was like a father to me! How’d he go?”

“Runny nose.”

“Yep,” the man sighed, “those’ll sneak up on you.” He nodded contemplatively for a moment before asking, “So, then...who’s your mom?”

“Josefina.”

“J-j-j-josefina?” the man stammered uncontrollably as beads of sweat appeared on his forehead. “I-is she...S-she isn’t here in Bahlia, is she?”

“Who’s Josefina?” Yuri asked as she poured ocha into the cups.

“Nobody, sweetheart!” the man called back. “Just a regular who used to come to Guni’s bar...uh, b-before we met.” He turned back to see a curious expression on Didi’s face. “I mean...” he back-pedaled a bit, “well...of course, she’s a lot more than simply that. She was...your mother!” He said nervously, laughing at his own foolishness. “So...uh...is she...uh... here in town?”

“No. She passed away a few years ago. Due to the after-effects of childbirth. You see, she was pregnant with me for about 32 years.”

“32 years?” Yuri exclaimed.

“Yeah!” Didi responded, “Can you imagine having to carry a full-grown child in your belly for that long? Certainly does a fair bit of damage to the body. I probably could have come out after 9 months, but from what I hear, I was frightfully scared to leave the womb. But I probably wouldn’t have been so scared if my mother hadn’t whispered into her belly every night about how dangerous and cold and sad the world really could be and how I was better off staying where I was. How much warmer and comfortable it was in my protective cocoon. Now, looking back at the whole situation, I’m not sure she really believed that. I just don’t think she wanted to deal with me. I think she wanted to live her own life. You know...without me in the picture.”

“Yeah...I’ll bet,” Yuri remarked from the kitchen, seemingly preoccupied by something else. Her back was to them, but she seemed to be tallying something invisibly in the air with her index finger. She was calculating something. “32 and 16...oh, so really you’d be 58 now, if you’d have been born on time. But you weren’t, so you’re 16.” She paused, “Well, you certainly *are* young for your age, aren’t you? 58 years ago...where were we? Well, we weren’t married yet. So, I do believe we were still in Vasalla at the time! Isn’t that right, Raju?”

“T-that’s right.” The man took a deep breath. He didn’t bother trying to correct Yuri’s mathematical error.

“58 years ago!” Yuri went on as she set the cups on a tray. “Those were the days. Remember that beard you used to have, Raju?”

“He had a beard?” Didi said wide-eyed. “I can’t imagine.”

“Don’t bother trying to imagine it either, dear,” Yuri responded. “It really wasn’t becoming. I tried for years to get him to shave it. It got to a point where it hung halfway down his chest. And it was really sticky and disgusting, especially in the summertime.”

“Eeech!” Didi responded.

“I forget, though. I couldn’t get you to shave it. But why did you decide to shave it in the end?” Yuri asked.

“I wanted to cry.” The man said nervously.

“Cry?” Didi asked.

“Men with beards just shouldn’t cry. It’s an unspoken rule. Have you ever seen a bearded man cry?”

“I can’t remember.” Didi said.

“Well...it’s probably because you haven’t seen it. It’s the saddest, loneliest thing you could imagine. So...at one particular moment, when I felt the urge to cry, I rushed to get my shaving kit and shaved my beard off as I bawled my eyes out.”

“Honestly Raju! Sometimes I wonder where you get these idiotic notions from!” Yuri said skeptically. “Anyway, dear, what brings you to Bahila?”

“Well...I was told that my other half-father lives in Bahlia.”

“Oh?” Yuri responded as she brought over a tray with the three cups of ocha. “Maybe we can help you find him. What’s his name?”

“Raju.”

The tray dropped to the floor.

V.

A silence loomed in the air.

And in the stillness, Raju couldn't help but give weight to his momentary suspicion that after many years of having pushed his eardrums to their limits of tolerance with respect to the volume of his wife's screams and rants, he had finally transcended the physical form to achieve a state of release that brought both equilibrium to the chaos of his personality and a pang of welcomed relief to his already well-worn patience—which is to say, that he'd entered a kind of Nirvana impenetrable to sound. But his fanciful musings were quickly dashed by the sound of the clock on the wall chiming the hour. It was the first sound to break through the deep freeze that had enveloped the room almost instantly when Yuri had finally stopped screaming, only to fold her arms with an expression on her face that was so sour and contorted as to cause all sounds uttered, in hopes of appealing to her sense of reason, to freeze in mid-air and fall to the floor with a resounding thud.

Didi listened to the chimes, as well, as she sat quietly at the table, still nursing her cold ocha. It was now three hours later and she couldn't have imagined being in a more uncomfortable situation. She had sat there watching the threatening hand gestures and listening to this woman's shrieks, too scared to talk, too afraid to get up from her seat, even though she'd wanted to use the toilet for the past hour and a half. And then when everything went silent, she didn't want to so much as move from the chair because the last thing she wanted to do was attract attention to herself. And so, deciding that the best way not to inflame the situation any further was to remain as inconspicuous as possible, she stayed seated and proceeded to wet herself. The decision to wet herself was a difficult one to make, but in the end, she knew that it had to be done for the good of all. And in so doing, it was, perhaps, more a selfless act than anything else. She only hoped that it would be viewed by the others that way. The urine dripped down to a puddle by the leg of the chair as Didi, deciding it best to say something, for no other reason than to take advantage of this opportunity created by the chimes of the clock to steer this situation in a positive direction, asked, "Is that clock from Vasalla?"

Yuri remained silent as Raju looked over at her, as though having completely forgotten that she'd been sitting there all this time. "Why, yes. Yes it is. Recognize the wood?"

"Not Grainless Oak! From Neha?"

"Indeed it is!" Raju said, now breaking a smile, seemingly forgetting about Yuri's sulking.

"Isn't that illegal?"

"Well, it pays to know the right people. We got the clock from the nice man who used to manage Mama Yuri's brothel. You might know him, actually. He used to be a regular at Guni's."

"Oh yeah? What's his name?"

"I was afraid you'd ask that. I'm really bad with names." He paused for a moment, concentrating. He hit his forehead with his hand repeatedly. "Come on! I know it's in here somewh- Eihachiro! That's it! His name is Eihachiro."

"Eihachiro? Why yes! In fact, he's the person who gave me the map to this house. And the horse! He sends his best." She looked at Yuri, who was still standing in the kitchen, looking away with her arms folded. "To both of you."

"Good old guy! And to think that, at one point, he had it in for Anup and me. Honey, remember that time

he threatened to slice Anup's balls off for roughing up one of his women?" Raju giggled as he said this to Yuri, who continued to ignore the two of them. "Anup did have a bit of a temper, though. Maybe more than just a *bit*. Some might even say he had issues with repressed rage. Ha! But 'you certainly can't take the jungle out of the cat,' as that one guy once said. You know, the one who people quote all the time! Anyway, I guess it couldn't be helped." He shrugged his shoulders with a warm smile. He looked at Didi and the smile disappeared from his lips. "What's wrong?"

"Did you just say...Anup?" Didi said slowly.

VI.

“No...no...no...” Didi whimpered repeatedly as she put a hand to her forehead. She sunk deep into the chair. “What have I gotten myself into?” she sobbed.

“OK...well. I can understand that’s not exactly what you wanted to hear, given the circumstances,” Raju backpedaled, speaking with incredible speed and intensity, “Don’t get me wrong! I’m not saying he was *justified* in plucking out their eyeballs and juggling them and then, uh... throwing them in the air and ... (ahem)... catching them in his mouth. He was just goofing around, that’s all! That’s *so* Anup! I guess you had to be there. You might have found it funnier if you had seen it with your own uh... eyes. Anyway, let’s not get sensitive about it, eh? After all, that elderly couple *did* owe him the money. But I understand. You owe him money, too, so naturally this concerns you. And you’re perfectly entitled to feel that way! I apologize! His sense of humor is probably not the best thing to talk about right now. My mistake. I imagine you think him a horrific sadist for committing these sorts of atrocities. Funny or not: I suppose he *does* get a bit carried away...” Another half hour had now passed and Raju was still trying to sell Didi on the finer points of Anup’s character: “...so, yes, he can have his terrifying moments, but that’s not all there is to him. If you knew him like I did, you would probably also know that he was still the kind of person who would move mountains to help his friends. This is something I still have no doubts about. He and I had struck up a friendship through my father after he became a regular patron of the saloon; Anup used to work there as an apprentice barkeep back in his younger days. I guess it’s kind of funny now to think that Anup had once worked for Guni. By the time I left Vasalla, the situation had probably reversed itself, considering Guni’s frequent business dealings with the Vasallan underworld and Anup’s growingly remarkable criminal talents. Anyway, back when I first met him, it was usually when I was out looking for my father so that we could finish up the chores at the farm. Anup would usually be tending bar and the two of us would have casual chats whenever the situation arose. My friendship with him deepened after the war between Ieyasu and Ryunosuke began. The market prices for Lesser Bison eggs had started to tumble putting my father and me into financial dire straits. My father was forced to sell off half his land just to make ends meet. To make matters worse, most of his livestock had been requisitioned by Ieyasu’s army for their food supply. My father soon became very depressed at his failure as a farmer and businessman and started drinking more heavily. He would sometimes disappear from the farm for days on end. Half of the time I was able to track him down; the other half, it was clear he didn’t want to be found. Whatever the case, he was still needed for the everyday operations of the farm. So, I went around to Guni’s saloon a couple times a day just to seek him out. Anup was usually there and I could always depend on him to let me know my father’s whereabouts, as he seemed to stop in for a drink at least 3 to 4 times a day. It wasn’t long before I, too, became a regular there and got to know both Anup and Guni very well. Sometimes, after closing time Anup would leave the back door unlocked and I would sneak in and the two of us would drink on the house, unbeknownst to Guni. That really was a nice time of my life. I sometimes miss those days. Vasalla was probably a different place then. I know that if I went back now, some of the people I knew may still be there, but it just wouldn’t be the same; we wouldn’t really be able to recapture that feeling we once had. I guess that’s what happens when you let your youth get behind you. I imagine that if we all met up now, all we could do is reminisce together about those days we lost. Anup would likely do the same; it was a pretty special time and place to be alive and young...but I suppose life moves on whether you like it or not. You know, when I think back to those times, those amazing memories I share with Anup, I can’t help but feel that the others have judged him too harshly. Really! I don’t know the details exactly, but I think he had a tough childhood, not unlike my wife...and it’s had lasting effects on his character. But I suppose that’s Anup. And that’s maybe a side of him most haven’t gotten to see yet. Which is understandable. I mean, he has a tendency to rub people the wrong way. I guess most people aren’t that quick to forgive someone who beheads and eviscerates his debtors for non-payment...and who then plucks their eyeballs out or takes their leftover body parts and makes fancy-dress costumes out of them. Sure, I can see why that might upset some people. But they just

misunderstand his personality, that's all! If you ask me, I think a lot of the things that he does are rooted in shyness. I guess the thing about him is he's wound so tight that he sometimes feels a bit awkward in social situations. As a result, some might mistake him for being some kind of sociopath. But if you ask me, I think he's just a bit bashful. He doesn't really know how to express himself properly and as a result his emotions tend to manifest themselves in other...perhaps, less conventional ways. I don't know, though. Maybe even I don't quite understand him. He's a rather complex individual. So, I think it's sometimes best to give the poor guy the benefit of the doubt. Someone has to. You know?"

"Raju?"

"So, while I understand your concerns about Anup, I really don't think you have anything to worry about. The obligations you bear are nothing to lose sleep over, especially now that you are here in the house of Anup's old friend. In fact, perhaps what he sought from you isn't as awful as you assumed it to be. He might have known that you were my half-daughter and simply sought to have you relay a greeting to me. It has been a long time since I saw him last, so it wouldn't be out of the realm of possibility. I don't know if that sounds too optimistic and far-fetched to you, but knowing what I know about him, I feel your fears are pessimistic and unjustified. Perhaps our approximations of the truth are different in that respect, but it is still important that we not rule out the possibilities, however unlikely. In any case, I know a lot has changed in his life. When I'd first met him, I never really saw him becoming a career criminal. Of course, he had a talent for it and there could be no doubt as to the sharpness of his mind and the ferocity of his ego. I guess I always saw him going in another direction. Actually, I think he had aspirations to be a football coach, for certainly this was a profession in which his ruthless sadism would serve him well. But people's situations change for one reason or another. After Yuri and I were married, I didn't see him as often, but I know that he started getting more and more involved with the criminal element that frequented Guni's bar. And apparently, soon enough, most in the underworld had come to fear him. His ability at invoking the same cruelty that most of us managed to suppress had earned him nothing short of their respect and propelled him to the top of their criminal hierarchy. Soon, he was overseeing the actions of crime bosses all over Kaiiba, ordering them around, administrating their movements and positions—much like a coach. Naturally, his business took him out of town frequently and so the mystique surrounding his persona grew larger and larger. That's about as much as I know about his criminal side though. Actually, I kind of wonder if Anup still plans to make the jump back to football. He always quite enjoyed the sport and his skills as a criminal mastermind might carry over well into the spectrum of game strategy and political diplomacy. I imagine he'd be fairly good at it...and it's never too late to make that jump. In any case, you have no reason to fear him while you are under my care. Under *our* care. OK? It's easy to allow our fears rooted in anticipation to get the better of us. I'm sure that that's what has happened with you. You've heard too many nasty rumors—it's all part of the mystique that surrounds Anup. But like I said, old Anup just has a bad reputation because he tends to be misunderstood. So, I don't think it's necessary to—"

"Raju!" Yuri said again.

"Hmmm?" He turned to look at her with this expression on his face as though he'd completely forgotten that she was standing there. She, too, didn't seem the least bit upset anymore. In fact, she seemed rather upbeat, as though that 3 hour long argument had never taken place. Didi wondered if this was some kind of habit that they'd acquired. The ability to reduce arguments to a kind of dormant state that would allow them to be invoked again at a later, more convenient time and with an equal or heightened intensity.

"Would you mind checking on Bunnu and *O*? I think they're in the attic."

"Right...right," Raju sighed.

"But before you do that, move those papers out of the way. We'll need that extra chair." She pointed at the stack of Ministry reports sitting on the chair.

"I'll get started on lunch," She turned to Didi, "Well...I don't quite share Raju's optimism about Anup, but

it seems we have no choice but to adopt you and all the burdens you bring upon our house. That's what it means to be a family, right? To share in each others burdens and obligations and blah blah blah. Dry your tears, girl! I'm not trying to get all sappy with you! In fact, I don't like this situation one bit, but I don't want to be the sort of monster who turns family away. That's just not the way I was raised. So, while this matter sorts itself out, we might as well put you to good use. Do you know how to make Aloo Magenta?" Didi shook her head, still in awe of how quickly her new stepmother had managed to adapt to this new situation. She wondered if, perhaps, the woman suffered from a kind of dementia or short-term memory loss. It was quite possible that the woman no longer possessed any knowledge of what had transpired in the last three and a half hours. "I'll show you."

As the ladies set to work, Raju picked up the papers and stared at them blankly. He'd had very little time to do them recently as the family was in the midst of a crisis regarding *O.*'s status as a legal non-entity. "Raju!" Yuri's voice pierced through his oblivion. "Are you going or not?"

"Oh...Right! Sorry."

"And change the Outlander's litter box while you're up there. It's starting to smell."

"Right...right."

Raju was about to make his way up when there was a knock at the front door. He opened it to see the chubby face of Motiwala. The boy was fatter than ever. "Ahhh...Master Motiwala! Back from our trip, are we?"

"Pardon?" the boy exclaimed.

"Bunnu's up in the attic with the Outlander."

"What?!! I can't hear you!"

"Indeed. Well, anyway...I was just going up there to-"

However, before Raju was able to finish this sentence, he could already hear the sound of little footsteps rushing down the stairs.

The Legal Non-Entity

Bunnu awoke to the sound of his mother screaming downstairs.

He opened his eyes to find that he was still in the attic. He'd fallen asleep on the floor by the oil stove, the night before, and was now looking at the book in which he'd slept facedown. The page was utterly soaked in drool.

"Finally awake, are we?" a voice said. He turned his head to see Rakesh-7 in his armchair, adjusting his glasses as he looked up from a book that he'd been reading. Bunnu sat up, placing a bookmark back inside his own book.

"How long have they been at it today?"

"I'd say about a good 3 hours. Must be something big. Haven't heard them go on like that for quite some time." He sighed as though this sort of thing made him feel nostalgic. "This one's a bit of a doozy too! If I'm not mistaken, I heard something about a *ménage trois* with a dwarf?" He laughed hysterically. "And I can't believe you managed to sleep through it!"

"Mmm," Bunnu yawned as he stretched, "What about you? Have you been sitting there all this time?"

"Afraid so," Rakesh-7 said with a giggle.

"Don't you ever sleep?"

"Oh yeah! Continually. Where I come from, we sleep and wake continually in rapid succession tens of thousands of times a day for intervals lasting up to a quarter-second each. Meaning that every second that passes, on average, one quarter of that second is dedicated to sleep. The other three-quarters of a second, we're awake, so it never quite seems like we're dozing off. Why! In the amount of time it took me to tell you this, I slept and woke up and fell asleep again about 30 times."

"Isn't that dangerous? Like, what if you doze off while you're swallowing food? Won't you start choking?"

"Not if you're used to it. Most things in life can be done automatically once one's become accustomed to them."

"What about dreams?"

"Dreams?"

"Do you dream?" Bunnu asked.

"Well, I guess you could call them dreams. It's a continuous moment spread out over those quarter-seconds. A moment that exists in another place, perhaps in another time. It could very well be another reality I'm existing in, rather than a dream. Or maybe it *is* just a dream. Or maybe it's both!"

"I don't understand."

“Neither do I!” Rakesh-7 said with a hysterical laugh, throwing up his hands. He often laughed like this, even when there was nothing funny to laugh at. Bunu never failed to be surprised by the Outlander’s outrageous behavior and often wondered if these sorts of mannerisms came with old age. After all, it seemed odd to imagine the Outlander as a young man exuding this kind of eccentricity out there as he lived in the world and among other people. It seemed evident that his was the kind of habitual and painstaking peculiarity reserved only for those compulsive and misanthropic enough to slip slowly into reclusion as he had. It had been a gradual change, apparently, as Bunu’s parents told it. He slowly began to spend more and more time up in the attic for what he referred to as his ‘strategic withdrawal from the outside world.’ It was perhaps the equivalent of renouncing one’s worldly life to seek a kind of greater wisdom or enlightenment, for example, in the mountains. And yet, in place of this life of asceticism, the Outlander had seemingly retreated to the attic of the house and metamorphosed into a kind of household pet—a squirrely and eccentric old creature who excreted in litter boxes that had to be cleaned out thrice each day and who seemed to possess, besides his warped sense of humor, a staggering repertoire of peculiar, yet compulsive habits that seemed to manifest themselves at inconvenient times (for example, when he happily presented the visiting O-busan-34 with a scale model of the temple that he had constructed from dead skin residue that he’d painstakingly scraped from the bottom of his feet everyday for the preceding 5 years. “It’s an expression of our interconnectedness!” he had said joyfully. “Can you imagine where in the Universe the particles and atoms that went into the creation of this model have been before? What stories they would have to tell—assuming they could talk, of course? I’ll bet you wonder the same about the particles that comprise the building blocks of your blessed temple! Maybe they came from the same source. Maybe we all did too!” The O-busan, however, had been less than pleased with these assertions impelling Yuri to invite him back to the house the following evening for a special dinner in apology for her ‘uncle’s rudeness’). And yet at the same time, when it came to the Outlander—and not to say, of course, that it only had to do with the fact that he was a man of the world—it was safe to say that he was in possession of an exceptional spirit that few, if any, could ever begin to properly fathom. He didn’t seem to have the cynicism or despair common among the reclusive, but in fact, a great enthusiasm for Life. It was this fact that Bunu liked most about the Outlander—something that he greatly admired: the ability to be not only resolute, but content, in one’s inability to be affected by one’s surroundings. Bunu, on the other hand, secretly despised himself for being so easily affected, so easily swayed by the opinions of others.

The screaming downstairs was starting to subside.

Bunu turned and looked at *O.*, who was sitting on the cushion next to him, and tried to determine whether he was sleeping or not. “Are you awake, *O.*?” While saying this, he looked into the reflection given off by *O.*’s skin, as he opened his mouth—which appeared much larger, due to its convex likeness—and picked at a piece of broccoli that was wedged between two teeth.

“There’s surely no way for us to know whether he is or isn’t,” Rakesh-7 said with a shrug, “The courts surely won’t decide in his favor unless he begins to show some visible signs of recognition. But I don’t even know why we’re bothering with the silly old courts in the first place. Who needs them sticking their noses in to confirm something we already know?” He laughed hysterically again as Bunu sighed.

The situation to which Rakesh-7 was referring had to do with the problems that the family had been experiencing for the past three and a half years in trying to add *O.* to their family register. The courts had undertaken an extensive process of examination, which was not limited simply to an investigation into the nature of the adoption itself, but also into the circumstances surrounding the discovery of the ‘*lost article*’ (the courts were careful to use the word *lost* in place of *abandoned* and the word *article* in place of *child*), as well as into those who played a part in entrusting said article to its *caretakers* (which was used in place of the word *parents*). The courts had sought to probe these elements in an attempt to make a clear determination as to whether *O.* was, in fact, an adopted *human* child, and thus, eligible to be granted entry into the family register under the Bunu-5 administration’s championed Adopted Orphan Act, or if, on the other hand, *O.* was some kind of object or pet, rendering utterly impossible his chances at—among other things—enrolling in a school, opening a bank account, entering a temple, being admitted into a hospital,

working for any company with a valid Tax ID, obtaining insurance, paying taxes, or having a grave in the family plot.

It was O-bousan-34 who appeared before the courts first to recount the day he found *O*. “Ladies and gentlemen of the court!” he had pleaded, “I stand before you not just as a participant in these matters, but also a witness! A witness to something that reminded me...that could remind us *all* of the greatness of the human spirit. Sure, us men of faith, we’re all suckers for acts of mercy. The virtue of showing mercy’s been drilled into us since a young age. Mercy this and mercy that! But the fact of the matter is that, even for us, we get a little weak in the knees when it starts to involve personal sacrifice. And I know I’m not just speaking for myself. Oh dear me...no!” He shook his head with a peaceful smile on his face, “We’re all like that. Even those of us who are slightly holier-than-thou. It’s human. We know better, but we think of ourselves first. And yet...sometimes! Sometimes, fate gives us a chance to prove ourselves, and we show the Big Man Upstairs just how much we really are capable of! What I witnessed that day was just that! It was maybe the most beautiful and inspirational act that, your Honor, any of us, with all our imperfections, greed, or selfishness, could possibly hope to achieve! It was an act of pure selflessness. Of Charity! Mr. Raju and his lovely wife Miss Yuri—nice ring by the way, sweetheart...goes beautifully with the earrings—they opened their hearts to this boy and their lives have never been the same since.

“I, for one, have been well acquainted with this family for some time and have known them through their ups and downs and don’t mind taking the liberty to comment openly—before God and everyone—upon how much trouble their marriage was in before this bundle of joy came along. Yuri was the frustrated wife who wanted to kill her husband and Raju was the hapless fool. It was a formula for disaster! Why there was even a point when Yuri came to me for advice on how to kill her husband. Can you imagine that? I mean, what is one supposed to say in that situation? I mean...really!

“But their marriage was in real trouble! Even their son, Bunu—that witless little creature—was no consolation for them as he was heavily influenced by Raju’s careless ways and as such, prone to causing them both more worry than anything else. Yes, their marriage was undeniably a sham...and it was no coincidence that Yuri’s eye started to wander a bit. Sometimes I could even see it in the way she was staring at me! She had an appetite for something and she wanted me to give it to her. And give it to her good!” He smiled complacently, “You see, your Honor, I know women! I can almost hear their lustful yearnings calling out to me sometimes. Their pleas for me to hold them and caress their bodies and grant them discrete pleasures with my manhood. It’s uncanny! Like this one time, there was this girl who came to visit me on a daily basis soon after her uncle passed away. Maybe 16 or 17 at the most. You can barely call her a girl, though. I mean...she was a woman! Anyway, I knew from the moment I saw her that she was trouble. She had this hungry look in her eye. And I was right: it wasn’t long before she began to have elaborate fantasies about the two of us wrestling in—“

“What are you talking about?” Yuri cried out from her seat.

“O-bousan-34! Where are you going with this?” the judge demanded.

“Sorry. I was trying to illustrate a point, but I might have gotten carried away. The fact of the matter is that *O*. has made all the difference in their lives. He’s given them a sense of purpose.” O-bousan-34 paused for a moment, “I guess that’s what I was trying to say. ‘He gave them a sense of purpose.’ It reminds me of something I said the day that they found him. I said, ‘Our salvation often comes from mysterious places. As does our sense of purpose. Sometimes they are two ends of the very same vine—one of those long vines that twist and fold around themselves and other objects until their ends become obscured. And yet, when we find those ends and where they lead, they become the defining roles in all of our most crucial human relationships.’” He smiled happily as though waiting to be praised for his words.

“And what does that mean?” the judge responded.

“Well...I think it rather speaks for itself, doesn’t it?” the O-bousan said proudly.

“O-bousan-34, your testimony, thus far, has proved inconclusive. Emotional attachment doesn’t necessarily occur just between humans.”

“I beg your pardon?” the O-bousan said mystified.

“Well...for example,” the judge said scratching his head, “My little girl has a dog that she loves to death. One could say, just as well, that her life has changed because of the dog. I bought my wife an expensive coat which she adores. We’re talking about a pet and an object here. Same effect. How can you say for certain that you, too, aren’t talking about a pet?”

“Well...I...” the O-bousan said contemplatively, “I...suppose I can’t. Maybe he is a pet. Well, it would certainly make a lot more sense. Wouldn’t it?” The people in the courtroom started muttering uncontrollably.

“Thank you, O-bousan-34.” the judge said.

“Your Honor.” He bowed his head as he stepped down.

The deliberations continued for over a year, but no arguments could be made to the satisfaction of the courts, leading to the ultimate decision that *O.* was to be designated the status of a ‘Legal Non-Entity,’ thus barring him from entry into the family registry.

And now, amidst the appeals process, the whole family had undertaken a study of Bahlian Registry law using the volumes of law books that Rakesh-7 happened to have amongst his belongings in the attic. They had wanted to obtain a lawyer to help with the petitioning and appeals process, but as there were no lawyers who specialized in Registry Law in Bahlia that they could afford, they decided that, in the meantime, the best they could hope to do was to find the solution themselves. Despite Raju’s misgivings, Yuri remained firm in her resolve that somewhere in those books was the answer that would allow *O.* to be granted a firm place in the family registry.

So it was that Bunu began to spend more and more time in the attic, skimming through books he couldn’t understand because of all the big words, for no other reason than to feel like he, too, was lending a hand in the family’s efforts. No headway had been made yet, but that never stopped him from running right up to the attic and lying on the floor to page through the books, while Rakesh-7 sat quietly in his armchair and did the same. Which brings us back to this morning.

Bunu, having finally removed the piece of broccoli from between his teeth, now looked away from his reflection and back up at Rakesh-7, asking, “Why do you think the situation’s not going to improve?”

“Well, it’s actually something I’m going to need to talk to your father about. I found a clause in one of the newer editions and it doesn’t look promising. This legal battle is going to bankrupt him.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, let’s just say that unless your kid brother starts crying, or laughing, or making some kind of human-like noise or movement and soon, your mother’s beloved Charismatic K and his administration have got the upper hand on your father. And they’ll keep pushing him further and further until he’s got nothing left to pay in court fees.”

What Rakesh-7 had, in fact, found had to do with the determinations set out by Charismatic K’s administration as to what could actually be considered human according to Registry Law. The passage that he had found in the book had been riddled with ambiguities and contradictions only reserved for those most valiant in overriding their legalistic forbearance into a necessary frenzy that would allow them to suitably work up a case for one side or the other on how the Law, without the possibility of misinterpretation, states *If ABC, then DEF*—or for the sake of acknowledging the counterargument first as

a courtroom tactic, the case might also be made that the Law states the antithesis of the aforementioned *If ABC, then DEF*, but gives allowance within reasonable parameters for a provisional *XYZ* to be granted in exceptional cases. And thus, it was a matter not so much of making one's case in a clear and logical sense, but one for the lawyers to battle out in the arena of *pathos*, as it was clearly the emotional pleas that could evoke a sense of sympathy in the courtroom and overturn otherwise painstaking endeavors at using the tools at hand to make pleas based upon incontrovertible facts.

However, it was even these incontrovertible facts that were most puzzling for Rakesh-7, as they were difficult to ascertain, regardless of the court's repeated attempts to make the process of investigation simpler and less subject to gray areas. For one, the court had enlisted the aid of a team of behavioral scientists in deciding what sorts of traits or behaviors could be deemed unarguably as human. The team of scientists spent months experimenting with humans and other creatures and another few years deliberating over their results to finally work up a list of criteria that the courts, after several rejections, due to requested addendums and omissions, found to their satisfaction. These criteria, however specific, seemed to encompass the ability to express happiness, sadness, love, boredom, guilt, pride, loneliness, fear, as well as a number of other emotions in a decidedly human way. However, as determining one's capacity to emote *humanly* in a general sense was rather difficult, a number of situational abilities compiled by the behavioral scientists were utilized in making their determinations. These included (but were not limited to): the ability to cry real tears out of happiness or sadness, to be romantic, to be unwittingly selfless, to seek commitment, to argue for the sake of arguing, to reconcile for the sake of reconciliation, to be too proud to admit one is wrong, to get bored with someone, to be *wittingly* selfish, to feel shame despite being too proud to admit it, to regret the past, to laugh at one's own foolishness, to laugh at other's shortcomings, to laugh at the hopelessness of one's situation, to laugh in the mirth of new beginnings, to dream of something better for oneself, to have hope that things will get better, to feel satisfied when things do, to get caught up in the moment, to lose perspective, to lose touch with nature, to forget the context of one's existence, to carry on traditions despite forgetting their importance, to feel disconnected from the rest of one's kind, to question whether something is wrong with oneself, to have high or low self-esteem, to enjoy the company of others just for the sake of their company, to engage in repartee so as to avoid an uncomfortable situation, to make a joke, to force a laugh at a joke one doesn't understand or think is funny if only to spare embarrassment for all involved, to want to feel accepted, to harbor a morbid fascination with dramatic situations or gossip, to feel humiliated, to feel out of place, to feel lonely even when in the company of others, to feel either empowered, guilty, or humbled by the very thought of one's own humanity, to self-analyze, to underestimate one's own potential, to feel at the mercy of others, to fear that one may suffer due to a misstep taken here or there, to take whatever actions necessary to avoid such suffering, to come to grips with one's mortality, to crave power over others, to have it all and still want more, to want to feel unique or special, to seek to outdo oneself, to look for meaning in all things big and small, to substitute objects for happiness, to seek answers to one's existence, to seek an end to one's pain, to feel empty, to see the error of one's ways, to wish one were young again ...just to name a few.

Rakesh-7, while appreciating the efforts put forth by the experts, found the specificity of their agreed-upon criteria perplexing, for he couldn't think of a person he knew that could prove in a court of law that, for example, that he were capable of coming to grips with his own mortality. How could one do even that without a mountain of evidence and the testimony of credible witnesses to support one's case? And that was just one of many criteria that had to be satisfied before the courts in order for one to be declared, by their standards, a 'legal entity.' The proceedings were likely to continue for years, maybe well into *O.*'s adulthood at such a rate, giving way to a very long and expensive legal battle, the success of which could not be guaranteed. After all, it was not the facts that were truly important, so much as how the facts were argued before the courts. And how was one to argue such things without the appropriate legal counsel? Even if one were able to afford it, this wouldn't include the expense of having tests performed by a real behavioral scientist, recognized by the courts, not to speak of the costs incurred in finding one that would take *O.* on as a research subject. None of this, of course, took into consideration the time and expense required just for filling out the initial petitions to get the process started, which was, in itself, a rather encumbering task. The system was set up to bankrupt those in appeals, if not ruin their hopes at ever having anything left to pass on as an inheritance to the *person* they sought to have in their register.

Rakesh-7 had, thus, seen the whole exercise as foolish, at best, and now sought to convince Raju to reconsider, so as to prevent all this from reaching a point in which the proceedings and their repercussions would be beyond their immediate control.

“Can you go get your Papa before they start arguing again? You can leave *O.* here with me,” Rakesh-7 now said to Bunu.

There was a knock at the front door downstairs. They could hear Raju’s voice as he greeted someone in a friendly tone of voice.

“OK, but-“ Bunu started to say. He stopped speaking for a moment as his expression went blank. He was listening to the voices downstairs. His eyes widened with excitement. “I’ll bet that’s Motiwala!” He jumped up.

“Ah...back from his trip, is he?” Rakesh-7 remarked.

“Uh-huh!” Bunu said excitedly as he ran for the stairs.

“Don’t forget to get your Papa for me!”

His Friend, Motiwala

As Bunu made his way down the steps to the first floor, he saw his father standing at the front door next to Motiwala, while his mother was sitting at the kitchen table peeling potatoes with some girl with a protruding forehead. “No...no. You’re doing it all wrong,” his mother said to the girl. “Let me show you. Actually, why don’t you just let me do this! Go and put the meat in the marinade. When I’m finished with this, we can start on the roast. Ah! Bun-bun, darling! Have you met your quarter-sister from Vasalla? She’s going to live with us!”

“Hi.” Bunu said distractedly, shifting his eyes between the girl and Motiwala, whom he hadn’t seen for 6 months. Motiwala had been traveling with his uncle, the viceroy, to various towns around the kingdom and finally to the palace where he was to meet Charismatic K. Bunu slowed his pace and walked carefully down the stairs, so as not to make it seem as though he were rushing in the direction of his friend.

The girl smiled at Bunu sweetly, “I have a little brother? I’ve always wanted a little brother! Hi, Bun-bun! My name’s Didi. I’m your new quarter-sister. I was conceived 48 years ago in a three-way that my mom had with Mr. Raju and Mr. Guni. Oops...I guess I shouldn’t say that when we have company. Sorry about that!” She said as she blushed and giggled, putting a hand to her mouth.

“Uh-huh...that’s great.” Bunu said flatly as he reached the bottom of the stairs. He turned to Motiwala and chirped excitedly, “So, when did you get back?”

“This morning.” He looked over Bunu’s shoulder at Didi. “So, who’s the babe?”

“I dunno. Friend from Vasalla or something.”

“Huh. So, Papa wants to have one of his talks again. Can you come over?”

Bunu looked up at Raju, who smiled back, messing up his hair. “Just be back by lunchtime...”

“Oh no you don’t!” Yuri called from the table. “You haven’t washed your face, brushed your teeth, or-“

“Just let him go, Yuri,” Raju said. “The boy’s father is waiting.”

“What did they say?” Motiwala asked Bunu.

“Nevermind. Let’s go. Oh yeah! Papa, the Outlander says he needs to talk to you about something. He’s upstairs with O.”

“OK. I’ll go up and talk to him. Be care-“ The door slammed behind them cutting off the last of what Raju said.

The two walked quickly along the snowy roads to the village, not seeming to mind the coldness at all, in their eagerness to catch up with one another.

“So, what’s Charismatic K like?”

“No different from Bunu-5, I suppose. He doesn’t really seem to know much about ruling a kingdom, so

he's terribly dependent on his ministers to enact policies. But he's so insulated in his palace and out of contact with the outside world that he doesn't fundamentally understand what the policies he's enacting are meant to do. This, of course, works to the advantage of the ministers, who, themselves, have inherited their posts from their fathers and their fathers' fathers. They are the ones who make the decisions. Not only that, they have incredible control over the everyday operations of the palace, right down to the minutest detail of the king's affairs. The king is, in fact, like a child to them. An only child, perhaps: incredibly self-absorbed to the point of obsession, for he knows no other way to think than to assume that he is a direct descendant of God. A man of incredible power. And yet, he can see no alternative than to act within the confines of the role circumscribed for him by tradition. The Ministry serves to remind him how far he is to assert himself and what aspects of governance he mustn't worry about and instead leave to the political machinery to be taken care of—political machinery which has, no doubt, been in place as a consequence of ascension through lineage since Time Immemorial. The Ministry, in fact, have social functions which exclude him, though they are careful to minimize these affairs as being 'beneath the King,' so as to give them the functional flexibility as a group to dictate policy from behind closed doors without having to worry about any kind of interference.

"Recently, I'm told they are struggling to keep up with the demands of their proposed infrastructure. Lack of manpower is slowing down the building and maintenance of the public utilities. To compound that, delays on the procurement of resources from other lands are slowing down production. And even when they do have the resources, factories require more hands for faster output, but lack the funds to expand their operations. Overall, the economy is inefficient and mismanaged. We need more hands to organize allocation, procurement, transport, production, as well as distribution. At the bottom level, we have migrant labor, but what we require is more people to aid in the administration of the labor in order to maximize its efficiency. And yet, all this must be maintained strictly by the government, which makes it necessary to establish several more layers of administration. This is causing some to contend that the economy should be further decentralized and public services thereupon privatized, in order to maximize efficiency, but the Ministry is worried about giving too much flexibility and power to corporations, so they are looking at the possibility of doing away with the lottery system altogether and simply drafting anyone who's ever bought a lottery ticket into civil service straightaway. That way, they maintain control. K, of course, is unaware that all of this is going on. At least, that's what the Ministers say...or that's what I *think* they say. To be honest, I have a *slight* hearing problem, so a lot of what I understand about the situation has required a bit of guesswork."

"Yes, I know. So...is Charismatic K really that much removed from the decision-making process? I mean...what about the Mumta soaps? And the trade routes?" Bunu responded. "Those were his initiatives, weren't they? I thought Charismatic K liked the Mumta."

"That he does. Certainly! But that's another story altogether. Occasionally, the administration has to let the little child have his way, so as to maintain certain necessary illusions. I think they must have been worried about his Mumta fetish, but it turned out for the best in the end."

"Mumta fetish?"

"Oh. K's as fruity as they come. His throne room reeks of ghastly Mumta perfumes. It's horrible! And don't even get me started on the two little Mumta servant boys he keeps with him at all times."

"Mumta *boys*?"

"Yes, yes. Not for eating, mind you...I shan't forget what became of your esteemed dinner guests, by the way. No...no...he keeps these boys around for other...rather unseemly purposes for a man of his upbringing. You see, the King, despite his charming façade is really more of a disgustingly twisted ninny, whose mind is irreparably warped—though he couldn't even possibly come to grips with *how* warped, as he is no more so than the rest of the Royal Family. From the perspective of any rational human, however, he's downright creepy. Even *I* was afraid to be alone in the same room—"

As Motiwala continued to talk endlessly about the king, Bunu looked closely at him. He had changed in these six months. He was still chubby. In fact, bigger than he had been to the point that his belly hung down over his belt. But his nature had become more calculating. He was, one might say, more watchful and careful in his choice of words. He was not as loquacious as he'd once been, but more reserved, despite having become even more harsh in his judgments.

“-picks his nose at the dinner table. Can you believe the behavior they let him-“ Well, perhaps he was still a tad bit talkative. Yet, Bunu couldn't help but admire him for his strength and his ability to express himself in such an outspoken and articulate way, especially given his relative youth. And yet beneath all the polished arrogance that Motiwala seemed to possess, there seemed this underlying bitterness that Bunu couldn't quite seem to understand. A kind of growing cynicism, the roots of which were beyond his grasp.

“-made them wear these loin cloths!” Motiwala stopped to breathe for a moment.

“Interesting,” Bunu remarked, not knowing quite what else to say.

“Well... enough about him. I've talked your ear off enough. I'm trying to be more careful about that. So, what about you? How did these 6 months treat you? Has your situation at school improved? Any new friends?”

Motiwala's reason for asking about new friends was simple: Bunu didn't have any friends at his school. Not to say that this had always been the case. In fact, for a period of time until about a year and a half earlier, it had been a rather fashionable thing to have someone like Bunu as one's friend, if such a thing could be said. More precisely, having *anything* Vasallan was all the rage. From clothing, to accessories, to water clocks. The reason for Vasalla's sudden surge in popularity had to do with the trade routes that had been established between the towns, causing a greater traffic of Vasallan merchants to and from Bahlia. But it wasn't so much their merchandise, as it had been their strong dialects, which had caught on with the children.

The Vasallan dialect had a certain directness: a nature to it that broke down barriers between people, bringing those of varying social status to an equal level, causing the pursuit of discourse to happen in a seamless and uninhibited way that didn't give weight to power structures, thus, allowing for a greater sense of comfort all around. In stark contrast to the Vasallan dialect, the standard dialect that had prevailed through the region, at that time, had been that of Karasujima, which was the birthplace of Bunu-5 and the summer home of the royal family. This dialect, as it was structured upon the assumption that one must, inevitably, one day, engage in discourse with individuals of the highest echelons of society, is highly sensitive to power relationships between people and, as such, requires one, in all situations, to always consider the position of the other person before uttering a word, if only to limit that sense of embarrassment that might arise should one breach protocol.

But it wasn't the Vasallan dialect itself, so much as it was certain expressions, words, and shortened endings with masculine tones that seemed to catch on. Children started using it in schools, as it became a trendy way to make what one was saying sound more colorful. However, educators and officials in the schools, concerned that the standard dialect was in danger of becoming bastardized into a kind of pidgin language, contacted their regional governments, who, thereupon, mandated that the standard dialect be the language of education, infusing teachers with the responsibility of breaking the will of those who insisted on using the Vasallan dialect, by whatever means necessary. If this wasn't enough, educators were further endowed with the liberty to marginalize users of the dialect whenever possible in front of the other children—perhaps, for example, by calling them *bumpkins* or *tramps*—so as to set an example and designate them as targets for playground mockery. And so it was, that Bunu, who couldn't help but use the Vasallan dialect, due to his upbringing, became a kind of outcast among his schoolmates.

Motiwala didn't go to the same school as Bunu and, therefore, hadn't been there to see any of it happening. But upon hearing about it, he had been surprisingly supportive of Bunu. “Those weak-

minded idiots! They can't even see that they're being manipulated by the teachers. The teachers are just trying to avoid a student revolt because they can clearly see that if the Vasallan dialect catches on, they will lose control of the classroom. Not giving due linguistic consideration to the established power structures can cause one to question their merit. What the teachers and administration desire is allegiance to their authority and that is why they banned the Vasallan dialect. Power structures carry no weight in your language, and thus, those who use it in discourse have a greater proclivity for questioning authority and in many cases, circumventing it.

“But these Bahlian kids! They're so ingrained in their traditions that they can't see the real purpose behind this ban. Gives you a pretty basic idea of what kind of people they'll end up being when they join the rest of society. Never mind trying to fit in, Bunu! Do you really want to fit in with such people? It's the outcasts, the people who are feared because we're different. We're the ones who can see through the deceptions that are there to control us. Why? Because we are bearing the brunt of those deceptions. By marginalizing you, they are, in effect, marginalizing your culture. Making it out to be an absurdity that manifested itself through backwards living and an inborn deviancy. That is to say, they are making a mockery of everything of which your identity consists by creating the mystique of Vasallan culture as being inappropriate and irrelevant to their everyday existence, therefore causing you to feel guilty for even having that identity. Because it's too provincial. Or maybe too exotic. You aren't enough like them to fit in. Just like me with my hearing impediment. Not that anyone would dream of saying that to me. Not with my social standing. Nevertheless, I can understand what you're going through. You remember this experience always! Don't worry...I'll be around to make sure you don't!” And with that, Motiwala had taken a great interest in Bunu's battle to maintain his identity in the Bahlian public school system.

But despite his appreciation for Motiwala's concerns, Bunu hadn't been able to understand why Motiwala had felt the way he did about the students, the teachers, and administration of his school. Of course, he had felt heartened by his words. For Motiwala to take such an active interest in his identity filled him with a kind of validation. And yet, that didn't change the fact that he'd wanted to be accepted. Not just accepted, but to fit in. Maybe even, to be revered...but perhaps that was too much to hope for. And yet, the best that he truly *could* hope for at that point was to be ignored. And so, on the playground in the afternoons, to escape the taunts and the bullying, he had retreated to the shade of a tree by a fence on the far side of the playground. For almost a year, he watched quietly in tears as the other children ran around and laughed. He started to dread going to the playground everyday

That is, until a few months ago, when he'd first met a rather interesting individual, who soon became a good friend and confidante: a captain in the Royal Fleet who went by the name of Coronado.

His Friend, Coronado

I.

Bunnu had first encountered Coronado not so long after the plumbing had been installed in their house. He had been brushing his teeth before bedtime when he suddenly heard the sound of someone groaning: “Ohhhh!”

He jumped back in shock. The sound had emanated woefully and sluggishly from the drain of the bathroom sink. It was a grown man’s voice. Afraid to move or say anything, Bunnu stood still listening. It carried on in drawn-out tones, “Awww...oh man! Oh...! Awwwwwwwww ...ma-”

The voice suddenly stopped and Bunnu leaned forward, trying to peek down the drain.

“MAN!” the voice suddenly screamed. Bunnu jumped, but stayed close to the sink, this time, picking up a candle and shining it close to the drain. “Hey!” the voice said in a lazy drawl, “Where’s that light coming from?”

“Mister,” Bunnu said, “Do you need help?” He thought that maybe someone was trapped in the sewers.

“Pussy...I need me some hot pussy. Awwww...yeah. Baby! You know any fine ladies that’ll make it alright? I’m really hurtin’ for some, if you know what I’m sayin’!”

“You’re hurt?”

“Don’t you know it, brother!” the man said coolly, “I need me a fine lady to make it feel alright.”

“When I’m hurt my Mama always makes it alright!” Bunnu responded.

“Oh baby! Now you speakin’ my language! What’s yo’ name kid?”

“Bunnu.”

“Well, Bunnu! I’d really like to get to know yo’ Mama and good!”

“Sure. I’ll introduce you sometime!”

That said, Bunnu had made a new friend that he could talk to whenever he went to the bathroom. On subsequent visits, he found out that the man’s name was Coronado, a famous explorer for the Royal Fleet of Charismatic K and a lover of ladies of all persuasions. Every night, Coronado told Bunnu of some of his exploits as a sexy man in colonies full of repressed, sex-starved women. And in return, Bunnu would dangle a pair of his mother’s panties over the drain, which he’d stolen from her drawer on Coronado’s behalf. “Oh yeah! That’s the shit! I can almost smell ‘em!”

Coronado’s stories of the Royal Navy got Bunnu’s imagination going. And as he sat in the shade of that tree at lunchtime everyday, watching the other kids running around, laughing and screaming, he began to imagine them as members of his crew when he, as a captain in the Royal Fleet of Charismatic K, would be

sent to the far reaches of the world to keep the peace! It was something he looked forward to everyday. Watching the other kids run around, he daydreamed.

His men were putting down a resistance of barbaric natives as he sipped at some wine and watched from the deck of his ship. The barbarians howled for reinforcements as his men laughed and threw them to the ground, taking their gold earrings and necklaces, separating them from their women, and charging the whole insurgent lot with incitement to rebellion under the penalty of lifelong servitude as a slave in the kingdom of His Grace the Lord Keisuke-610. Well...perhaps, not slavery...surely, that would be going too far. OK...they shall be laborers. Laborers made to tend to those filthy Heisenpigs on Papa's farm.

"We have secured the land!" Bunu told his first mate. "Prepare my boat and save me a few of the women. I want the first taste!" He didn't really know what it meant to say that, but he'd heard from Coronado that that was what the captains usually said to their crew upon establishing order with the indigenous savages.

These missions to establish order with the savages were commissioned by the *Kaiiba-East Mumtaz Company*, which was on the move through all the neighboring territories, on a special charter from Charismatic K, securing resources and establishing what they liked to refer to as a 'negotiating leverage' over its peoples. Their continued success was brought about by their ability to bring stability, order, and civilization to regions which otherwise had a propensity for barbarism and violent altercations between its opposing factions and tribes. It was this need for their military and economic presence that cemented their interests and brought the resources, goods, and cheap labor prevalent in these areas to parts of the kingdom in which there was a genuine demand. Needless to say, on occasions, the more nefarious and ignorant elements among the savages saw this military presence as a kind of suppression of their people and staged uprisings so as to incite the locals to a kind of lawless frenzy to fight and oppose the order that their foreign comrades were doing their best to instill into them.

It was these captains. These people like Coronado who had been charged with the duty of making it clear to the savages, by whatever means necessary, that their presence in these regions was truly for the good of all concerned. There, after all, was no arguing the kind of improvements that were being brought to these lands. The railroads, advanced farming techniques, public water and sewage systems, education and even venues for public entertainment, such as sports arenas, theatres, and casinos. And yet, despite all these improvements, there were still some insurgent strongholds comprised of ingrates with a case of sour grapes, denounced even by their own governments, that had to be smacked on the nose every so often, as one might do to a dog with a rolled-up newspaper, so as to establish a sense of discipline and order throughout the populace and make it clear just how important *civilization* is to the good of the people. And Bunu hoped as he smiled from the shade of the trees, watching the kids play, to get out of Bahlia, one day, and be a part of that fight to bring civilization to those poor, self-destructive savages.

II.

“Well?” Motiwala said to him impatiently.

“Hmmm?”

“Any luck making friends?”

“Not at school. No. But...as a matter of fact, I did make a new friend!”

“Who?”

“His name is Coronado.”

“Coronado?”

Upon telling Motiwala the details about Coronado and how his everyday life had changed since, Bunu’s enthusiasm was met with a sneer. “He’s clearly some kind of imaginary friend. How childish!”

“Imaginary friend? Coronado?”

“I mean, really! Do you expect me to believe the man lives in the sewers and has nothing better to do with his time than talk to the likes of you? He’s an imaginary friend. Not only that, he’s using you to get to your mother. You’re being manipulated by your imaginary friend!” Motiwala started laughing derisively. “You sad little fool! You can’t even imagine a true friend into existence!”

Bunu sighed.

“Don’t worry though,” Motiwala patted him on the shoulder. “You still have me! Right? Or rather...I’m stuck with you. But feel free to consider me your friend, if you like.”

“Really?” Bunu asked. “You mean, you like me?”

“Well...let’s just say that we need each other. ‘Like’ doesn’t really enter into the equation here. You need a friend. I need an interpreter. *Quid pro quo*. Works very nicely, wouldn’t you say?”

On a street leading to the estate, they saw two boys with bright blue uniforms and caps walking bicycles through the snow. The both of them saluted Motiwala. Motiwala sighed and nodded. “The fools,” he said, when they’d passed. “The Royal Youth Guard. I want to know whose bright idea that was. A youth organization dedicated to patrolling the streets to ensure the future of the rule of Charismatic K? That’s certainly a worthwhile expense. Really! How much allegiance can one man take? He already has two Mumta boys to jack him off. Does he really need the nation’s youth to do the same? I suppose a little nationalism never hurt anyone. Surely that’s the intent here: to keep us all happy and loyal and law-abiding. It’s just despicable how very little is needed to garner the loyalties of the common man, but that’s the whole idea, right? The common man is something to be feared for he still retains the ability to usurp authority for himself through violent or anarchistic means, so something is needed to gain his sympathies and maintain his subservience to authority. Protection of power is of greater priority than the protection of those over whom power is exerted. You catch my meaning?”

Bunu remained silent for a moment, before responding, “I like their uniforms.”

“Now there’s a surprise!”

At the House of Diogenes

“...and so, upon spreading her cheeks, as one is poised to push one’s cock into her round, beautiful rump, the question one mustn’t be afraid to ask oneself is, ‘Am I maximizing the amount of pleasure I could be having at this very moment?’ If the answer to this question is a resounding ‘no,’ it is very simple to signal a change to a position more reliable for giving pleasure to both, without effectively destroying the moment. However, if one still imagines there to be a kind of enhanced sensation to be found by plunging between those cheeks, it might be worth exploring, while keeping in the back of one’s mind that there is a notable risk involved. Regardless, the experience is a valuable one and certainly worth considering for no other reason than to keep it interesting. Although, I can only stress *ad nauseum* the importance of making sure the woman has both properly evacuated her bowels and bathed—preferably in that order—before initiating any of this. If one isn’t careful, after all, one may run the risk of contracting what the experts collectively refer to as *Fudge-packer’s Remorse*.” Bunu repeated Diogenes’s words verbatim to Motiwala, trying to maintain his composure.

“Thank you, my boy!” Diogenes said through a speaking tube from inside the rubber suit that his brother, the viceroy, had brought back for him as a gift from Charismatic K. The suit was composed of a transparent rubber that encapsulated the naked Diogenes whole and contained a kind of clear pink fluid that was pumped in through a hose connected to a vast glass dome in the middle of the Grand Ballroom that contained tens of thousands of drowned kittens floating around in a pink herbal tea. Swimming amongst the kittens, were two skin divers, who moved about in synchronous, yet opposing and symmetrical figure-eight’s, so as to create an agitation—a current, rather—in the fluid, as they reached out with their hands and meticulously moved each kitten that crossed their path, in a seeming effort to create the illusion that all the submerged kittens were, in fact, still alive and swimming merrily along through the liquid. Inside the suit itself, wires pierced Diogenes’s flesh at specific points to allow for the fluid to enter his system. Another hose bifurcated, one end hooking over his penis, while another entered Diogenes’s backside, which Bunu imagined, was there for the purposes of allowing excrement to leave his body without creating a need for him to remove the suit.

“Sir, if you don’t mind my saying...that’s a very nice suit.” Bunu said, deciding it best to acknowledge his host’s new attire.

“While, I’m sure he’d appreciate your bumbling attempt at being a polite guest, he can’t hear you,” Motiwala said. “It’s a Desensitization suit.”

“You mean...a Sensory Deprivation suit?”

“No, I mean...really. It’s a Desensitization suit. It overloads the senses as it desensitizes your emotions to the harmful effects of the people and things around you. Which essentially means that you become capable of filtering out anything, if not everything, that might elicit a negative emotional response. It normalizes you to painful or traumatic situations, causing them to be processed merely as facts, rather than stimuli. I guess you could say it kind of makes you numb to the sadness and grief that surrounds us. I mean grief is a rather painful sensation. Physically and emotionally! And a tiring one, at that! How is one to go about one’s everyday life, if one is plagued with despair? And if you have a tendency to brood things over, as my father does, measures like this are necessary. Don’t you think? He has a tendency to really let things affect him. Like this one time, Sanchez had some Untouchable reciting poetry at one of his parties. You

know Sanchez, don't you? The conceptual artist?"

Bunnu nodded even though he didn't know him.

"Great guy! You should meet him sometime. Anyway, it was a great party! And that Untouchable was an absolute riot! But my father was so intimidated by the Untouchable's stage presence that he went through this self-loathing phase for about a week. I don't know! He's just so sensitive! He crumbles so easily... and he really can't seem to let these things go. But this suit here...this marvelous suit has the ability to deaden his sensitivity to any bad vibes that might hurt him, in favor of keeping the mind sensitive to anything that can initiate a feeling of blissful oblivion. So, that's where the kittens and the herbal tea come in. Papa loves kittens! And herbal tea really helps sooth his aching soul."

"Is your father sick?" Bunnu asked, slightly concerned.

"Well...Papa's been a little more depressed than usual lately, so my uncle thought this sort of apparatus might help. The Queen has one, too, apparently. It's been quite helpful in controlling her... uh... moods."

Diogenes's depression in recent years had stemmed from his failures as an aspiring playwright. As the brother of the viceroy, he understood the necessity of trying to step out of himself to create and frame a universe beyond his own everyday perceptions and, thus, for a brief period of time, had decided it best to make a conscious attempt to suffer for his art. So, he purposefully drove his loving wife to madness and his faithful dog to suicide, shortly before taking up full-time residence by himself in the Grand Ballroom. He had had all the furniture cleared, but for one large throne that he kept for himself, placed in the middle of this enormous room of marble floors and columns with arching sculptures of his own likeness. Above the entrance, there was one giant stained glass window that took up half the wall and curved at the top at the same arc as the roof of the building. Once a day, around noon, the heavy iron doors below it swung open and a xylophone player came in to play him soothing nursery music, so that he might 'ease his conscience.' The rest of the day, his hours were spent in solitude with his elbow on the arm of the throne, propping up his head, as he examined the *in's* the *out's*: the very nature of his own self-pity. "God made me flawed! Oh yes, he did! What kind of man am I? What kind of flawed, sick man drives his loving wife to madness and his faithful dog to suicide? Why did God make me into such a wretched, unwholesome creature? Oh dear, oh dear... it's such a curse..." he whispered over and over to himself as he shook his head.

Recently, all of this had begun to take a bad turn, as his brother, who in all his good intentions, had decided to have a theatre built in Bahlia to bring the work of Diogenes to the people. However, as all of his works were incomplete, Diogenes hadn't been able to prepare anything good in time for the theatre's opening and as a result, his rival and arch-enemy, the wicked Sir Natsume, had seen to it that he had a troupe of actors on hand and rehearsed with one of his own scripts just in time to steal Diogenes's big debut away from him. And it was because of this that Sir Natsume had been able to garner all of the acclaim that had been meant for Diogenes, leaving no recourse for his already fragile spirits but to plunge even deeper into despair.

"Is the suit doing him any good?" Bunnu asked.

"Well...he doesn't feel much of anything now. I do have to say, though, I've never seen him at such peace before. I'm not sure if it's doing any good. But it seems to be making some kind of difference. Just look at him!"

Diogenes stared ahead blankly from inside his suit, as two of his servants squeezed him back into the seat of his throne. There was this look about him, as though he were allowing himself the momentary luxury of forgetting just where he was and what had been troubling him before putting the suit on. The apparatus seemed to be working wonders!

"Well..." Bunnu said slowly as he stroked his chin. "At least, he's stopped crying all the time."

“Right?” Motiwala responded.

“But what’s the purpose of the kittens and the herbal tea? Does it really make him feel better?”

“Chemically, it has no effect. There aren’t any therapeutic properties to the liquid, per se, as it’s more likely attributable to the spiritual energy that it gives off. Call it a placebo effect, or what you will, but that energy has enough intensity to keep Papa stimulated enough—maybe even overstimulated enough—to ignore his surroundings. And watch this.” Motiwala nodded at a nearby servant who was holding a slim wooden case flatly upon the palms of his two hands, which were turned inward and touching at the tips of the middle fingers, thumbs forward. The man bowed his head as he presented the case to Motiwala, who opened the lid to produce a tiny syringe and a vial. He opened the vial and drew some of the liquid within into the syringe.

“What’s that?”

“New invention. They call it a *syringe*.”

“No, I mean inside of that thing.”

“Oh, yes. The Divine Nectar. Fresh from the banks of Placenta-C. It was a gift from the Morellan envoy, who had arrived in Karasujima a fortnight after we got there.” Motiwala responded as he walked over to the rubber hose that connected his father’s Desensitization Suit to the apparatus.

He injected some of the fluid into an insertion point in the hose, no sooner doing so than his father began to shake as he screamed out, “Oh...uh...ohhhhhh!” The whole throne started to vibrate with his motions, its legs scraping and rattling against the floor of the Grand Ballroom. Bunu started to move forward in an attempt to help him, but stopped as Motiwala held up a hand. Suddenly the motions ceased with a resounding, “Haaaahh!” and Diogenes’s whole body relaxed. He sunk down into his chair, out of breath. “Thank you and a good day to you, Madam,” he uttered into the oblivion.

“Is he OK?” Bunu asked Motiwala.

“Man...is he *ever*!” Motiwala said, as he shook his head and snickered.

On the Relevance of Principles

Bunnu found out, shortly before he left, that another thing that Diogenes had wanted to talk to Motiwala about was the fact that the viceroy was suggesting that Diogenes send him abroad to a special school to continue his education. “My ministers tell me that the schools in Bela have the best education a boy of his age can find,” Charismatic K had told the viceroy. “What this kingdom needs are successors with a more worldly sense to engage in diplomacy with other nations. Successors who have a great deal of initiative, but who are loyal to their people. Successors who can take us into the next generation as the greatest civilization to grace this world! And apparently, these schools, from what I’m told, can cure young Motiwala of his hearing affliction!” Motiwala had been flabbergasted by the news and insisted that he didn’t want to go, but he knew that there was nothing he could do to change it. Bunnu, too, shared in the feeling.

And when Bunnu reached home, just after lunchtime, Yuri took one look at his face and, instead of scolding him for missing lunch, pulled out a plate and served him some of the leftovers, saying gently, “You can take it upstairs with you, if you like. Just bring it down when you’ve finished.”

His first thought had been to go and talk to Coronado. What he needed now was someone to confide in and Coronado was a good listener. Yet, at the same time, the thought of eating lunch in the bathroom didn’t sound too appealing to him. So, instead, he walked up the stairs to the attic to see the Outlander.

“Ah...Bunnu!” The Outlander said with mild surprise, “Back already, are we? How was our good friend Motiwala?”

“OK...I guess...” he said softly as he sat down on the floor and looked vacantly down at his Aloo Magenta. The Outlander, however, failed to notice Bunnu’s disappointment, as his mind seemed to be on something else. Suddenly, Bunnu remembered. “Oh...Did you talk to Dad about *O*.?”

“Yes. But your poor father is convinced that he has no other choice but to keep at it, even though, the most logical recourse would be to give up.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, Bunnu, I’m sure you, too, want to do everything within your means to try to get your brother into the family register. That does *seem* like the most logical action to take. And if circumstances were different, I certainly would agree with you. On the surface, it would seem foolish for your father to give up. To do nothing would be like an admission that *O*. isn’t human and that the family simply accepts the court’s decision. And as a result, as long as there’s no definitive refusal of his chances at affecting a change, as long as there is any hope, however minute, of being successful in an appeal and having *O*.’s designation as a legal non-entity overturned, your father must continue! That’s one way of looking at it.

“But here’s where what may seem a matter of principle becomes more of a dilemma rooted in stubbornness than anything else: There’s simply no way to win!” He laughed as he said this, “The best he can hope for is to minimize the financial burden. Considering the fact that *O*. hasn’t moved or uttered a sound since he’s arrived here, how can we really make a convincing argument that he’s truly a human and not simply a reflective silver ball? What’s to change the court’s mind? Or for that matter, what behavioral scientist in his right mind would view him as human? We view him as human because, frankly speaking,

we've gotten used to him. He's a part of the family. But the law is blind to that. But above and beyond *O.*'s chances at having his status overturned, one has to ask oneself if this legal battle is really and truly important. After all, what's *O.* to gain from all of this? So, what if he doesn't enter the family register? Is it really *that* important? I understand your parents' feelings regarding this matter, but I think this legal battle is becoming more a battle of principle than one of pragmatism."

"What's wrong with that?"

"Fundamentally, nothing. Principles are good to have when they are worthwhile. But sometimes we have to ask ourselves about the relevance of our principles. Those, too, are worth questioning. Are they not?"

Bunnu shrugged.

"Well, naturally, it is not often that we have occasion to question our principles, much less our own values. Yet when we find it within our power to do so, we have to take a serious step back and think about what is truly for the Greater Good. In this case, for example, we would be foolish not to ask ourselves what the outcome would be for either course of action—that is, for continuing with the appeals process versus giving up entirely—and whether the relevance that we ascribe to our principles becomes worthwhile in the end. Now we can consider the outcome from various perspectives. From the financial standpoint: this legal battle is going to cost a lot of money. It could bankrupt the family. But then again, what price can one put on family? One must be willing to accept any price. That is the nature of family, is it not? One simply can't refuse something that can be done for the welfare of one's children because the price is too high. And yet, just how much would the child benefit financially? He might, for example, be eligible for a kind of social welfare in the future, but this is still a pittance in comparison to the legal costs incurred by the appeals process.

"Which brings us to the legal standpoint: the fundamental basis by which the court's decision might be made is, in itself, imperfect and subject to contradictions. There is very little consideration given to *a priori* knowledge regarding the circumstances being presented and as a result, arguments must be made empirically, under the assumption that *assumptions* themselves are, in fact, likely to give way to specious reasoning. For that very reason, *O.* cannot be assumed to be human, or even a living creature until the court has, to its own satisfaction, investigated the matter thoroughly. For example, they must, until proven otherwise, refer to *O.* as an *entrusted article* rather than an adopted child, for fear that if they regard *O.* using any other kind of nomenclature, the validity of the proceedings may fall under question. And thus, decisions must be made meticulously and according to specific, yet immeasurable criteria that can only be further manipulated by any cunning lawyer with the ability to make emotional pleas based on a requisite amount of inconsequential evidence to affect a decision beneficial to his clients. And so, in this respect, the law is capable of proving nothing except that its absurd attention to detail is really a kind of a façade meant to cover up the fact that a truly logical and just way to deal with such matters has not yet been devised. And the absence of adequate definition to its principles has given way to a kind of apathy among the men employed by the courts, who want nothing more now than to make a living for themselves and their families and not work themselves into too much of a frenzy about how little can be changed through their own initiative. Thus things aren't likely to.

"That being said, let us analyze the repercussions of these legal proceedings from the metaphysical standpoint: *O.*, if forced to live out his life as a Non-Entity, will struggle with the implications of his own existence. He might, for example, come to understand himself not just as a Legal Non-Entity, but as a physical and spiritual Non-Entity, as well. That is to say, he won't think of himself as anything. He'll be a microcosmic oblivion: an empty baby universe, deprived of self-image and unaware of his own existence, even if the parts from which he's composed sought to personify him—or even, deify him—so as to impart him with whims before which they could fall to their knees humbly, for no other reason than to give their own individual existences meaning. Or maybe he'll merely be a hollow bubble in the larger, surrounding sphere of Space-Time, sensing and reflecting all things that encompass the infinitesimal spherical gap in meaningful Creation that is Him. And with this small place in the larger order, he may

simply become that which senses and reflects...and nothing more—not subject to individual consciousness, but subservient to the vast and infinite forces of Reason that bind the Cosmos.”

He laughed again.

Prophecies from the Outlander

“So...then. What do we do?” Bunu asked.

The Outlander snickered, “My boy, you’ve been at this day and night. *O.* too! The both of you are missing out on your lives.”

“Well...what do you expect us to do? We can’t just pretend that none of this is happening.”

“You’re right there. None of us can. But this is a grown-up matter. Let the grown-ups handle it!” He giggled, “You should be out there playing. If I hadn’t already withdrawn from the outside world, I might be able to join you, but I guess there’s no turning back once you’ve done it.” He shrugged his shoulders as he laughed hysterically.

Bunu remained silent.

“Are you OK? You look a little down,” the Outlander said with a hint of concern.

Bunu hesitated for a moment before sighing, “Motiwala’s going away. To some special school out in Bela.”

“Well...that’ll be good for him, I imagine. But I suppose you’ll miss him, right? The two of you are very close, yes?”

“It’s not that! It’s just that everyone’s life is going somewhere...and-“

“And yours isn’t...” the Outlander said, solemnly scratching his chin. “I see what you’re saying...” He smiled. “You don’t want to be *just a kid* anymore. And I suppose the last thing you need is some old wart like me telling you not to get involved in *grown-up matters*. I understand your impatience, my boy. I do...but, out of curiosity, just what do you think it is that’s out there waiting for you?”

“I don’t know. But I feel like I’m the only one without something from the outside world to hold on to. You and Coronado always have these great stories about what lies out there in the world. But it’s not just you. It’s everyone! My parents: they have Vasalla. Motiwala: he’ll have Bela. And *O.*: well...I don’t know where he comes from, exactly, but it certainly isn’t here!”

“And now you have your quarter-sister from Vasalla...” Rakesh-7 continued.

“Who?”

“The girl! You met her, right? Didi?”

The boy’s head tilted. He looked confused.

“Nevermind...Bunu, what you’re feeling is common in the children of immigrants. That feeling of missing out on something that you just know is a part of you. That insatiable urge to go out and discover it. My boy, you are not the only one who feels this way. Either way, you have your own fate to fulfill. As do I, as does this Coronado character. As do your parents, *O.*, and your quarter-sister. We each have our

paths. And for you, it may not start right away, but your life will surely begin...and much sooner than you think.”

“You think so?”

“I know so.”

“Right! Of course you do! You’ve done my horoscope!”

“Well...yes, but...” the Outlander hesitated.

“Tell me about my future! Where am I going to be? When do I finally get to leave this place?”

“Yes...well,” Rakesh-7 shifted in his chair uncomfortably, “it’s an imperfect science, so I don’t want you complaining later that I misled you or influenced you in any way. I’ve had enough complaints from your parents about self-fulfilling prophecies.”

“Am I going to be a ship captain like Coronado?”

Rakesh-7 giggled. “You really are too much. Now listen! I can’t go into details, because...well, there’s just too much information to filter through. I can, however, say this: you shall have many, many experiences in this life. Too many to explain simply. Too many to say which will prove to be good and which will prove to be bad. Too many to know which are significant and which are insignificant. But I can say with a fair bit of certainty that you, dear Bunu, will grow and grow and keep growing until you get so big the world can’t even contain you anymore.”

“Wow...”

“But there will be times in which things appear hopeless. You will begin to doubt everything around you. You will even begin to doubt yourself. You will think things will never look up and you may be in the deepest, darkest, loneliest place in the world. Everything which had once been infused with wonder may appear disappointing and harsh. You may grow cynical and come to believe that this is simply the way the world is...that one must bear with the unforgiving realities of the world and only hope that it doesn’t get worse. You might grow suspicious of others, as adults tend to do, and close yourself off from the rest of the world. You might just look to the past and reminisce about better days...or you might just dwell in one place for a little too long and become nostalgic for the future. Just remember—regardless of where you are, what experiences you have, and who you have become—that there will always be those who have loved you. Those whom you may have taken for granted, but have nonetheless, always had you in their hearts and in their hopes and wishes. Lives that you have touched: whether you realize it or not. To separation you may venture, but indissolubly in union shall you drift. You take them with you wherever you go. And they take you with them. This, however, may not always be a source of comfort for you.”

“I don’t understand...”

“Of course not.”

“But I want to know details. At least tell me something...”

“My boy, you will always be at the whims of forces, both great and small, and far beyond your capacity to control. That’s how all our stories go. Innumerable arcs intersect and scatter into a vast indefinite sea. So, let’s not speak of certainties. Are you familiar with the Algorithmist painter Carlotta Wakefield? I imagine not. She once said, ‘Mediocre painters portray that which they *understand*. Fabulous painters: that which they surmise.’ You get the meaning?”

“I’m not sure. Maybe...”

“Good answer.”

“Huh?”

Rakesh-7 erupted into an ear-splitting cackle. “But enough about the future! You’ve got plenty of time. Plenty of time to sit here with your old Uncle Rakesh-7 and talk about all the possibilities. Speaking of which: it’s been quite some time since I’ve told you a story, hasn’t it?”

“Yes...but where’s *O*.? Maybe he’d like to listen, as well.”

“Your father took him downstairs. I think he’s meeting your new sister...”

“Who?”

“I said he’s-“

“OK...” Bunu shrugged. “We can start without him. Tell me a good one!”

“Right...” the Outlander tapped his chin. “Well...have I ever told you about the Mole Flies?”

“Mole Flies...?”

“I guess I haven’t then,” Rakesh-7 said with a smile. He tapped his chin, “OK...where to begin...”

The Snow Globe

And as Rakesh-7 regaled Bunu with possibilities unexplored, Didi stood in *O.*'s nursery, staring hypnotically out the window at the gusts outside blowing up clouds of fine white powder. The Karakaze seemed violent and harsh in a way that seemed both consistent and familiar to her and, yet, now in the warm stillness of the pastry house, it seemed more a distant memory: a dream, that she may once have had that lacked a functional place in this reality she'd entered. The wind was forceful and belligerent like some drunkard tossing about an alley, smashing glasses, knocking over trash bins, screaming unintelligibly, and yet she could hear nothing—not even a gust much less a whistle, as though she were looking from the outside into a self-contained world. Into a snow globe, perhaps.

Looking out there, she imagined that this world inside the snow globe most likely operated upon dynamics that didn't have any effect here and vice versa. It was a system, after all, enclosed by glass through which none of its violence, harshness, forcefulness, or belligerence could escape into the surrounding reality.

She was safe from it. Protected by this wonderful pastry house.

“Didi?” she heard a voice say. It was Raju. He was standing at the door, holding *O.* in his arms. She didn't hear his footsteps, which caused her to wonder how long he'd been standing there. “I see you've found *O.*'s nursery.”

“Yes. I was just having a look around.”

“Well, if you like, you can use this room. Or Bunu's. No one's using either one, since the boys usually end up sleeping in the attic. Unless you prefer the guest room.”

“No. This room would be fine.”

“OK...well, I'll go into town then and pick up some supplies. We should be able to have a bed in here for you by the evening.”

“You really don't have to go to the trouble.”

“No trouble at all! You're my daughter. I've always wanted a daughter!”

A tear came to Didi's eye. “Mr. Raju?”

“Papa.”

“Papa?” she smiled as she wiped away the tear. “Thanks. No one's ever said that to me. Not my Mama. Not Guni. Not anyone.”

“No?” he said as his voice broke. He, too, was crying, “Well. They should have.” He tried to wipe his own tears, but had difficulty as he was holding *O.* She took *O.* into her arms and held him. “Have you met your little brother, *O.*?”

She looked surprised, “This is my little...brother?” She looked down to see her reflection in his skin.

“Well...yes. I know it seems a little unusual at first. You know being a reflective ball and all. It’s not quite how one would expect a child to look. But really...he’s a great kid. Very well-behaved. Never cries...although, the Outlander tells me that the fact he doesn’t may prove to be a problem for us.”

Didi looked up. “I don’t understa-“

“Anyway...I’ll let you two get acquainted.” Raju said and he left the room.

Cradling *O.* in her arms, Didi said in a gentle voice, “Hi there, *O.*! I’m your quarter-sister, Didi!” She looked back down at her reflection and sighed. “You don’t say much, do you? All I can see when I look at you is myself reflected back at me. If you hide your face from me like that, how can I know what you’re thinking?” She smiled. “Well...I suppose you’re just a little shy, aren’t you? It’s difficult to show your face to the world sometimes. To show your insides. Can I tell you a secret? Sometimes, I’m afraid, too. Even now...I’m afraid to show too much of myself. To get too comfortable with the people around me, because they always seem to abandon me. I’m afraid to get my hopes up. The world is a scary place. You know? I mean, I was even afraid to be born. It took me 32 years to work up the nerve to do just that! So, I guess I can kind of understand why you’re so reserved. You’re just the introspective type. Until you start to feel comfortable, you just keep it all in. I’m the same way. But I guess I feel comfortable with you. But then again, I can see that you’re a good listener. And I know that you won’t judge me or abandon me. At least...so long as you don’t have arms and legs.

“*O.*, I don’t know where you came from exactly, but I guess you never imagined you would end up here, one day, did you? Well, the same is certainly true for me. I keep thinking to myself that fate brought me here. And I’m not sure whether to be relieved or depressed by the thought of it. It makes me want to laugh and cry all at once. I guess I shouldn’t overthink it, though. I mean, we all kind of end up where we end up, huh? It’s up to us to see it how we wish to see it.”

Didi stared again out the window at the windblown snow as it sprayed out over the landscape. She imagined each snowflake in the spray. Where it must have started and where it ended up. Could it have been a purposeful act to drop them wherever they happened to fall, or would it be overvaluing each snowflake’s importance to assume that it had to start and end a certain way and across a certain trajectory when, in fact, none of it was, at all, important? And might it have conceivably been a kind of arrogance that caused one to cling to the idea that each snowflake was so inexorably important to the flawless and pristine order that simply *must* underscore the very mechanics of the Cosmos, that Fate, itself, had meticulously and unflinchingly defined the properties that constitute that snowflake’s essence, as well as its inclination to drift, ever so delicately, as to render absurd the very notion that the snowflake’s existence could begin and end a microsecond too early or too late, or for that matter, that it could somehow deviate from its predetermined course, thereby, unraveling the very fabric of all Space-Time?

Looking out into that cloud of snow dust, that seemed to drift out eternally and indistinguishably—those particles swirling and colliding in the gusts of the Karakaze as they momentarily merged with and scattered from the vast white void—Didi could see, through them, the town of Bahlia. And she remembered the snow globe in her bag. It had been a keepsake, an heirloom of her mother. Her mother, too, could very possibly have inherited it from someone of a preceding generation. And the originator of this snow globe as an heirloom could very well have treasured its permanence. That village inside the snow globe never changed. Neither did the snowflakes. Time was simply shaken up, allowed to proceed to stagnancy and shaken up again: continually and endlessly into eternity. And the snowflakes, too, momentarily merged with and scattered from an indistinguishable white void. And where they fell, didn’t really matter, for the whole system was bound to be shaken up again. Continually and endlessly into eternity...

After all, it was an heirloom! One day, she too would pass it on, but for now, it was hers to shake.

“You know what, *O.*?” she said suddenly, as a realization dawned upon her. “I actually feel much better now that we talked.” She put *O.* in his crib, happening to notice as she did so, that the pillows, blankets,

sheets and even the crib, itself, all bore the likeness of Charismatic K.

She picked up her bag. She opened it and took out the snow globe, turning it over in her hands, looking at it from different angles. She walked over to the window and tried to compare it to the view of the village that *O.*'s window overlooked and came to the immediate conclusion that the village inside the snow globe wasn't at all a representation of this village and, certainly, not one of her fate. She smiled as she shook it up and put it on the windowsill.

She could now understand why her mother had kept it.

Part Two

SPRING

On the Banks of Placenta-C

Drumbeats tumble over the riverside.

The sound waves, in fact, collide—they dance together in mid-air—to create an indistinguishable warble of shifting, layered rhythms. The drumbeats, themselves, emanate from below these dusty, yellow patchwork tents lined haphazardly along the opposite bank of the sacred river, Placenta-C. The tents belong to a tribe of Melic half-breeds who, cast out by their own society, have come together to form their own community of wandering nomads who no longer wander. This nomadic spirit of theirs, this passion for freedom has taken a less assertive form and inclined itself to manifestation through a tonal release into the surrounding atmosphere.

In those layered patterns of waves—which seem to melt together to form a kind of deep hypnotic buzz, like that of a foghorn—a liberated hum of dull, unenlightened timbre fizzles out into the vast reaches of the Cosmos, as a story is told of the half-breeds' centuries-long journey along the Melic archipelago to the lands outlying it and back again. This long, yet unsuccessful migration had been a failed attempt at escaping the persecution and injustices they'd suffered at the hands of their half-brethren; historians and reputed scholars alike have come to attribute this botched exodus to the absence of organization or definitive leadership among the half-breeds—in some cases, indicating that the group lacked focus, which inclined them to, in many cases, seek the protection of others, rather than achieve even a moderate level of self-sufficiency for themselves as a society, making their day-to-day livings as beggars, plantation workers, and even petty thieves.

The inevitable result brought forth by this was that after many trials and tribulations, divisions and secessions, after drifting about by land and sea for generation upon generation to the limits of the frontier, the remaining half-breeds—that is, those who hadn't finally decided to settle abroad—found themselves in a position in which they'd had to return to their homeland to ask for asylum from the governing theocracy. The Melic Papacy was accommodating, but only as much as one might expect them to be with their unwanted half-children. They couldn't really be taken in as refugees. Neither could they be looked upon as citizens. And so, without an acceptable precedent in place, the government had no choice but to grant them a special provisional status, similar to that of guest workers. These half-breeds were, therefore, allowed back into their homeland, but made to endure a condition of living not much different from that of indentured servitude, which despite its seeming hardships, managed not to diminish the spirit that had guided them throughout their many voyages.

And yet the passion of this spirit, the buzz created by their confluence of rhythms, now, still manages to be compliant like that of a drone speaking honorifics in the presence of its queen; accommodating and meek—as they have eventually become after centuries of living as perpetual guests in foreign lands and, more recently, as guests in their *own* land. Yet beyond that, there is another layer to that buzz. It isn't a sense of resignation, but, more likely, a kind of transcendental delight—a whimsical carelessness toward the prospect of an existence that strips them of their cultural identity; an existence that has scraped away the very concept of social status; an existence now peeled to its core, right down to its very essence. They

didn't have much in the way of money, or possessions, and little, if any, influence on their surroundings, but instead a kind of happy-go-lucky appreciation for having a place to stay, people to love, and whenever possible, food to eat.

Upon their return to their homeland, the half-breeds had found Melic society unrelenting in its religious protocols. The social codes, which seemed to take a rather narrow interpretation on the teachings of the Prophet Morell, had apparently given way to a highly sophisticated and specialized hierarchy of roles by which their society functioned. This religious infrastructure permeated every aspect of their daily life to the extent that the duties of its people were invariably prescribed in nearly every imaginable context and with such remarkable clarity and detail that it left little to chance, doubt or imagination. There was only one way to lead a religious life in Melic society and any deviations from it were dealt with severely. Naturally, this left its citizens with no recourse but to adopt and maintain an attitude that was both humble and God-fearing without really knowing why. And yet their social constructions of reality had been perpetuated for so long that this need for faith without conviction had come to be intuitively accepted by its people.

Thus, the repatriation of these half-breeds didn't seem to make logical sense to the average Melic citizen. That reckless demeanor—that wild, mischievous spirit that had guided them aimlessly into dangerous, often life-threatening circumstances: it was simply misunderstood. And so, the returning half-breeds had had no comprehensible place in the Melic reality. They didn't have a specified trade or craft. They weren't formally educated. At best, they were maybe mediocre artisans, but not of the conventional sort. Thus, in a society as steeped in religious and traditional lifestyle as the Melic, they could only manage to co-exist however they could, the most rational solution being as servants to the pure breeds—those who'd managed not to see a connection as a race between themselves and those who'd been the children of captured and enslaved comfort women during the wars.

These half-breeds had once been the scraps of conquest: the forgotten cost of cultural expansion. And now, they were back in greater numbers, lost children from a wayward path with stories to tell. The Melic people were, however, unimpressed by this, as the half-breeds had a greater significance to them as cheap labor. Their common heritage was unimportant; common ground: there simply was no common ground, for the scriptures never mentioned that there should be. These half-breeds were the help and their co-existence was acceptable, so long as they stayed in line.

At the same time, in accordance with Morellan ideology, Melic citizens understood that they had to be accommodating to the lifestyles of the half-breeds, however bizarre and savage they may have seemed. After all, the half-breeds, as with all lower creatures, were purposeful to the ebb and flow of the ecosystem, and were, thus, to be left to their own natural inclinations unmolested. And so, they were allowed to continue indulging in their bizarre traditions and rituals of living, without fear of retribution. Thus, there was no fuel for hatred and, certainly, none for persecution.

The lost children had come home.

And to this day, their traditions have endured.

They meet by the river daily and they tell their stories in patterns of drumbeats and warbles, encoding a rhythm with layered implications; a rhythm that tells a story that they've carried with them for centuries on their travels and yet, one that'd left no traces, no remains of itself in any of the places they'd visited.

A story that booms and reverberates and dampens, before finally evaporating into the surrounding atmosphere.

A story lost in its own echoes.

Echoes

Echoes scatter in every which direction, leaving no traces of themselves.

“We all have to step out of our comfort zones, now and again.” the Coach now sighed to himself facetiously as he looked in the direction of the yellowed tents. He turned to Bunu, who had been standing next to him quietly in an awkward stance. “Even when they aren’t so comfortable. I have to admire them, though: The Drawans. You *do* call them *Drawans* where you’re from, yes?”

“Mumta.” Bunu responded quietly.

“Mumta...?” Ottoman-13 reacted from behind them. “Actually, Mr. Bunu, the Mumta are not quite the same thing. The Mumta were composed of the dissident tribes who broke off from the main group of Melic migrants to roam the lands neighboring Kaiiba. Eventually, they created their own series of settlements bordering the outskirts of Bahlia and, by King Bunu-5’s reign, their population had grown large enough for them to form their own kingdom. When Charismatic K took to the throne, trade relationships were forged between Kaiiba and the Kingdom of Mumtaz. Apparently, the Mumta were a good deal more scientifically and culturally advanced than the Kaiibans had been at the time, to the surprise of many. But they remained weaker militarily and were, thus, at the whims of their Kaiiban overlords. When the Republic annexed the countries of Kaiiba and Mumtaz, years later, apparently a lot of their historians dedicated their studies to tracing the origins of both cultures. According to what I’ve read, it seems that both Kaiibans and Mumta were originally descendants of the ancient Melic—the people of that country right there across the river. Actually, Bahlians, Vasallans, Karasujimans, Saruyamans and Mumta alike are all distant relatives of the ancients who occupied the floodplains right here along Placenta-C. They each split off from the main group to form their own story, but they all descended, as we do, from the same Drawan vine. So, actually, it wouldn’t necessarily be accurate to equate the modern Mumta with these half-breed Melic blokes here any more than it would be accurate to equate either of the two cultures with the modern Kaiibans, regardless of our common Drawan heritage. But of course I’m basing all my assertions on the historical accounts of the Republic. Hard to say if their assessments have been accurate.”

“My, oh my...” The Coach said, seemingly ignoring Ottoman altogether. “My dear Bunu...” His voice had a wistful tone to it, giving Bunu this feeling that the Coach was suddenly distant, perhaps adrift in his own memories and speaking to him from another time.

“Have we met?” Bunu asked, inhaling sharply and then slowly exhaling in the silence that pervaded in lieu of a response. It occurred to him that the Coach may not have known *how* to respond to such a question. The Coach’s head was oblong with tiny slits that served as eyes, which drifted in tides slowly inward, as though the face itself were the sea or, in fact, a soup of macromolecules through which objects might drift, leaving in their wake, ripples of nothingness. The eyes—they floated adrift like land masses before locking in symmetrically at seemingly prescribed positions off-center, while managing to be so closely drawn into the very middle of the face section that it might have seemed unnecessary for there to have been two eyes when, quite likely, one would easily have sufficed. These aimless, floating eyes were not the Coach’s only distinctive feature—for, in fact, connected to the interior of each eyelid by a web-like layer of rubbery pink tissue was a kind of snout which, unlike the eyes, remained fixed in its position

among the tides of the face, arcing narrowly inward at the edges of its sharp extremities into a serrated beak-like projection that hooked downward at its tip, in a fashion similar to that of a falcon's beak. This snout—or beak, rather—was, in fact, so long and came to such a fine point that as the eyes swirled through the soup of macromolecules that comprised the man's face, it almost appeared—due to the seeming thinness of the pink tissue—that the eyes functioned as kinds of optical tether balls that moved synchronously across the face like mirror images of one another.

“I wore my lizard mask as I entered the tram, last evening, and people found me fearless,” the Coach remarked, enunciating each word carefully through the hollow *clack-clacking* sound of his beak, as its edges clapped together. “I might have exchanged it for that of an ox and then thought better. A lizard goes best with scales, don't you think?” Bunu nodded as he quietly wondered how the Coach could manage to fit that phallic monstrosity of a beak into any kind of mask, unless, in fact, this disguise of which he spoke, had been specially designed for his face and divided into sections in such a way that they could be readily attached to different areas—as though one were assembling a new face—in overlapping layers, so as to veil, or perhaps even amplify certain distinguishable features. All the same, in doing so, one could only imagine this lizard mask to be enormous to the extent that it would be disproportionate with the rest of the Coach's body. But then, there were ways to mask space, as well—to bend light, perhaps, to create the illusion that something was perceptibly larger or smaller, wider or narrower, rounder or more linear than it was in actuality. That is to say, any form of prosthesis designed for the purposes of affecting remedial space might, for example, have had the capability of creating the appearance of a gap of void in occupied space. An ornament hangs from the chin, let's say, as an accessory meant to contour smoothly inward what might otherwise appear to be hanging jowls. This surely wouldn't be the exact use that the Coach would have for such a device—as he had no jowls to speak of—though he could certainly see the benefit of the accessory's ingenuity. This being said, the lizard mask might have appeared natural rather than disproportionate given the right set of circumstances. Whatever the case, there was no way of even knowing if the Coach wasn't, in fact, already wearing a mask, at this very moment, rendering Bunu's initial appraisal of his character—as determined by a rudimentary physiognomic analysis of his features—a matter now subject to doubt. And thus, any conjecture that could be made with respect to the dimensions or components of a lizard mask—not to speak of the motives of its wearer—seemed not only impractical, but also irrelevant at this point in time.

“This mask...” Bunu said contemplatively, “it allowed you to escape your comfort zone?” He was uncertain about whether the Coach expected him to acknowledge the lizard mask or not, though he most certainly preferred to get straight to the point. Nonetheless, there was some kind of otherworldly aspect about this bizarre creature that wouldn't allow him to change the subject without, first, investigating the matter thoroughly. It was within the realm of possibility that the mask carried some kind of significance with respect to whatever business the Coach may have had with him. The rest of the Coach's outfit was equally mismatched. He wore a red football jersey and shorts; around his neck hung a whistle. His garb was actually pretty typical for a coach from the Greater Kaiiba-8 Football Association, which led Bunu to the assumption that the Coach was here to speak to him on the League's behalf. However, over top of this uniform, he wore a long black silk robe that hung lazily over the football uniform and seemed to clash almost humorously with the pasty white toothpick legs that shone like twin beacons from below his shorts. The buttons on the robe were of what appeared to be some kind of animal bone and were round and white with black hexagonal spots. From the sleeves of the robe projected thin, bony hands with long, needlelike digits that seemed abnormally long for a man of the Coach's proportions, but still not as unusual as his beak.

Bunu paused, wondering if the Coach hadn't heard him the first time. He opened his mouth again to repeat his query, only to be met with a cold, unforgiving sneer—not really from the Coach, so much as from his beak. It seemed odd to distinguish between the two, and yet at the moment, it would have been stranger not to do so, since it appeared as though the Coach had remained indifferent to Bunu's statement, while the ire of his beak had somehow been raised—perhaps it *was* a mask. The beak, in fact, seemed rather annoyed by Bunu's assertion, as though perhaps it were being mocked, though Bunu

couldn't quite figure out what might have led it to this reasoning. And yet, he found himself mildly relieved at the beak's reaction, as though it revealed a weakness—a lack of control, perhaps—on the part of the Coach that hadn't previously manifested itself in his heretofore stoic demeanor. Regardless, it certainly hadn't been his intention to offend the Coach's beak.

There was a long silence and, somewhere in its midst, the Coach clacked his beak together again rapidly, as though chattering his teeth. Bunu remained quiet, though silently admonishing himself for not doing otherwise. His silence implied compliance with the circumstances, when, in fact, he should have been protesting them and demanding to be told why he'd been brought here. He was about to open his mouth to say something—anything to protest—when the Coach started speaking again, “Do you smell that in the air?” His eyes had surfaced again from that soupy face of his and, this time, they were not looking at Bunu, but back in the direction of Ottoman-13.

Ottoman, too, appeared to be slightly taken aback at having been addressed by the Coach as it seemed that their implicit understanding had been that they were not connected directly to one another, but rather, in actuality, through the existence of Bunu, who had somehow come to be the common living denominator of their respective vested interests. Ottoman presumably had no affiliation with the Coach, but had only brought Bunu here because his superiors had ordered him to do so, and thus he had probably done so out of duty. Yet now it appeared that he was just as mystified as Bunu as to the nature of this odd creature. In particular, he seemed unsure about how he was to regard it. Was he to maintain his air of authority, or was he to feign compliance to this being for the sake of satisfying his superiors? It didn't matter what sort of individual this Coach was, so much as the power dynamic that was expected to exist between the two of them. How indeed was he to carry himself in the face of this new player? With a tone of supplication? With commanding and uncompromising austerity? What was a man in this role expected to do? The quandaries of an actor were many! “Er...” Ottoman now stammered awkwardly, as he sniffed at the air, “Well...no...I don't suppose I do. What am I-?”

“Of course you can. You just don't know what it is specifically that I'm asking about.” The Coach said disapprovingly, “How can you answer my question without, at least, asking me what smell I was referring to?”

“Well I-“

“Your answer is unimportant,” the Coach said with a wave of his hand. “I know for a fact that you can smell it, but I also know that you fail to notice what it is because you've grown accustomed to the aroma and have, perhaps, lost the ability to distinguish its presence from its absence. This, of course, is a natural consequence of adaptation. Why would the brain process a given stimulus as something distinguishable, when the stimulus is, in fact, all-pervading and ever-present?”

“Like a repetitive sound?” Ottoman responded.

“Let's not confuse the matter any further,” Bunu snapped. He turned to the Coach. “What are we getting at here, exactly? Where are you going with this?” He felt strange for insisting that the Coach continue, but at the same time, eager to see the logic behind his assertions.

“You'll notice the smell more when it's gone,” the Coach said dryly. He pointed again in the direction of the tents. “Residing safely among the Melic half-breeds across the river are the Hentai Chefs. They labor ceremoniously over pots and pans piled high with food. Typically, common sense would dictate that there should be no flaw in doing so...yet, deep in their soul, they harbor this secret perverse desire. You see, in Melic society, it is strictly forbidden to eat in public. To the point that the average Melic is absolutely repulsed by even the very thought of it. In fact, eating in public carries such a heavy taboo that one is ultimately left with no choice but to eat one's food in a private stall. The penalties for doing otherwise are, as you can imagine, quite harsh. However, these Hentai Chefs knew that by mixing with the half-breeds, they could indulge in any unconventional practices they sought to, since the government gives the half-

breeds special permission to engage in their rituals unabated.”

“People can’t eat in public?” Bunu responded in disbelief.

“Across the river is Melic-ruled territory,” Ottoman interjected. “Their laws don’t apply here in the Morellan Intercultural Settlement. Eating in public is strictly forbidden by the Melic and those who violate the law are subject to imprisonment or hefty fines. On the other hand, public defecation, despite whatever health hazards it seems to pose, is not at all regulated as there are no teachings of Morell that have dealt specifically with the subject.” He pointed across the river to a middle-aged businessman who was squatting in the crosswalk of a paved street with his pants around his ankles, as pedestrians passed on either side of him unaffected.

“So, these Hentai Chefs,” the Coach continued after some silence, “they watch people eat the food they’d prepared for them through peepholes in the food stalls. With each bite, chew, swallow, and burp, they feel a flood of nervous excitement surging through them. They shudder and hyperventilate with two palms flat against the outside wall of the stalls, their eyes struggling to get wider as though this might somehow improve the acuity of their vision. They want their eyes to process every molecule of flavor that beckons to the taste buds. In their voyeuristic zeal, they seek to light up the same centers of the brain visually that are being stimulated by the food they’ve prepared. And those who can’t even bear to leave the more subtle and insignificant tastes to the imagination often go so far as to use a special telescopic lens that allows them to get a close-up look at the mouths of the people who are eating the food they’ve prepared. To compound the matter even further, we have, what have generally come to be known as *masticating exhibitionists*—and I assure you that the practice is certainly every bit as lewd and depraved as the name suggests. These people, who seem to know they’re being watched, and perhaps have even come to crave it, make an intentional effort to exaggerate the motions of the mouth and the tongue as they chew their food, at times smacking their lips and making these distinct noises of appreciation with each bite they delicately place in their mouths. And so, the chefs and the exhibitionists have a sort of symbiotic relationship, similar to other creatures who share the same ecosystem. But how did this come about? Were they biologically predisposed to be this way? Was it a process of mutual evolution over the course of generations? Surely, there can be no clear answer to that.

“However, in order to shed whatever light we can upon these circumstances, we are forced to analyze the psychology of The Chefs. What is at work, here, is conceivably some kind of an addiction to taboos. The concept of violating a social code for one’s personal satisfaction, which in and of itself, serves to be emotionally—and thus, physiologically—gratifying. And then we have a community of enablers, which includes not only the Hentai Chefs, but also the masticating exhibitionists, as well as the Melic half-breeds: all of them seeming to encourage this behavior through their lack of condemnation and, at the same time, confirming one another’s participation in a social faction that gives them a highly-specialized identity—and abidingly, a kind of license to see themselves as better than the norm. And yet, the Hentai Chefs themselves: they understand the ignominious nature of their actions. In fact, they feel terribly guilty for the act itself and for their encroachment upon the privacy of the eater, but the guilt serves to turn them on even more. Their collective guilt is, in fact, a binding force of their social faction. And yet, in a very peculiar way, their psychology and behaviors seem almost frighteningly similar to those of some of the most pious clerics among the Melic community. They are bound as a congregation by their collective fear and shame: a fear of unattainable ideals, a fear of untold repercussions, a shame at...well, I suppose nothing in particular. A general pervading, indefinable shame that need not be specific or well-understood, but is nonetheless, essential to their struggle for a collective meaning. In this regard, the act of voyeurism is almost cleansing. Highly individual, yet retaining elements of commonality with a group. One might say that the Hentai Chefs aren’t at all any different from the holy rollers who bathe here in the sacred waters of Placenta-C.

“And herein lies the mystery, though I don’t see it as a mystery at all: they seek to light up the same centers of the brain as those who are subject to their voyeurism. They could eat the food themselves and

experience the same sensations physiologically. Why take the extra care and preparation, just to watch someone else eat it? More importantly, why is the person they choose to eat it so important? I ask this because your average Hentai Chef is very particular about choosing the person that he cooks for. Mostly we are talking about moderately plump females who can't help but salivate at the mere smell of the food. They're the most common target as the anticipation that gives way to their salivating seems to be a kind of digestive foreplay for the Chefs, who seem to envision the saliva oozing in bursts from the glands to penetrate the morsels and break them down to smaller and smaller pieces until each sensation upon the tongue comes to be separate and independent from all the others. In fact, the salivation of the female subjects infuses the air with these pheromones that serve to enhance the experience for the Chefs greatly. And yet, we're still talking about the moderates. These Chefs are a bit on the conservative side, but then on the fringes of the Hentai Chef community, we have these real genuinely decadent individuals who are looking for something a little more extreme. Chefs who cook for children, getting their kicks by cooking up something extra messy just to watch the kids lick the sauce from their fingers. And then there are those who even have it in for the sweaty business types—Men, slightly overweight with a questionable sense of hygiene and low self-esteem; men who've taken on the trades of their fathers, without a clear direction in terms of their own identity, despite being the pride of their family. I'm told these men are particularly sloppy eaters, because—though repressed among the masses of everyday society—in the privacy of a food stall, they lose their sense of social anxiety and regress to the uninhibited days of their babyhood, becoming flatulent, slobbering messes.

“Decadent...maybe. And yet, illuminating. What I'm getting at here is that to the Chefs all of this unattainable fantasy. Unattainable ideal, but on a deeper level, it's something more. It's a misdirected attempt at empathy, a secret yearning to re-establish a lost connection; a connection lost in the formation of a society with rules and strict religious norms.”

“So, their actions are rooted in the same desires as those of the Melic clerics?” Ottoman posited.

“A lost connection...” Bunu uttered slowly.

A gust of wind blew dust down over the steps and through the riverbank from the streets of the Dowa District. At the top of the stairs, a group of Untouchable children gathered pieces of broken glass, rusty cans, discarded razors, syringes, and old shit-stained newspapers swirling about in the breeze. Bunu couldn't figure out if they were planning to use these objects for play or if they'd been made to come out here and do this.

The Coach turned to Bunu and said, “You must understand now and once and for all, that there is, in fact, a smell in the air, because when it's gone, you just might try to seek it out without really understanding why.”

One of the children screamed as blood poured down from the palm of his hand.

Nectar-13

A swarm of old withered addicts clawed like scavenging alley cats at the faces of the children. A syringe hung out from the screaming boy's palm just long enough for one of the addicts to seize upon it. In the chamber of the syringe, there were still a few lingering drops of Nectar-13—a substance synthetically created to mimic closely the state of ecstatic euphoria that the Divine Nectar initiated when injected into the bloodstream.

The effects of Nectar-13, of course, were somewhat different from those of the Divine Nectar as the high tended to be shorter in duration. In addition, Nectar-13 had been shown to accelerate the aging process in the addict to an alarming rate, as well as cause unstable mood swings and an inability to metaphysically comprehend the existence of certain numerical quantities in base-10 (including the number '13,' which, ironically, made it rather difficult for the chronic user to obtain more of the substance without first going through a rigorous detoxification regimen, or—in dire circumstances—to even seek out a druggist well enough aware of the substance's effects that he could make sense of the user's pleadings for *Nectar-1101* by means of a simple binary-to-base-10 conversion).

The Divine Nectar, on the other hand, seemed to have fewer harmful effects upon the system. Being the limited commodity that it was, however, it was extremely difficult to get a hold of, as it was often used for religious rites and could only be acquired clandestinely by way of an Orthodox Morellan shaman. This was assuming that the shaman in question was willing to sell it, which—in most cases—he wasn't. As a result, numerous mercenaries had attempted to penetrate the Orthodox Morellan faith so as to gain access to the tantric rites through which the Divine Nectar was concocted and learn the secrets of its creation. But the Orthodox Morellans were a relatively closed order and any attempts to infiltrate their group were countered by the austerity of the Order's endeavors at making a newly-entered brother into a pure and unquestioning devotee of their faith. Nevertheless, not all the shamans were capable of rejecting absolutely the lures of material objects and, as a consequence, there was a pipeline, however minimal, of the Divine Nectar available to well-connected, well-financed merchants. The end result was a substance of incredibly limited supply that was only accessible to users at the highest echelons of society.

On the other hand, the substitute, Nectar-13, was a benevolent aristocratic scientist's attempt at bringing that same ecstasy to the masses, by attempting to extract and subsequently replicate the active agent. However, with a limited scientific knowledge and the inability to synthesize the substance effectively, he had to settle for something close enough and ended up developing a substance that targeted the same areas of the nervous system, albeit with inevitable and sometimes catastrophic side-effects. Nectar-13 was, of course, the product of many previous incarnations that continually needed to be improved upon. And now, the '*Common Man's Nectar*' had become a thriving industry that manifested itself in many forms, from additives in brand beverages and confectionaries to snake oil cure-alls and finally, more recently, to the more concentrated extract, which could be injected directly into the bloodstream.

In the Dowa District, however, the effects of this substance had been monstrous, as evidenced by this scuffle between the addicts and the Untouchable children. Ottoman-13 now looked up at them and said quietly to himself, "That, my friend, is what we call survival..."

"Well..." the Coach said to Bunu, glancing at Ottoman, "it seems our friend here has a bit more insight

than I'd given him credit for..."

"Are we still talking about the smell?" Bunu asked quietly.

"In a manner of speaking, yes."

"I've tried very hard to entertain your point-of-view," Bunu sighed, "but it seems that I still don't quite understand where you're going with this. Nor do I understand, for that matter, why I've been brought here." Bunu then turned and said to Ottoman, who was standing with his back to him, watching the scuffle, "I don't even know what I've been charged with."

"Well, my dear Bunu, I'm afraid you're trying too hard," the Coach said matter-of-factly. "I urge you to find something else in your environment—anything!—and adjust your perceptions to match it."

Bunu looked down the bank to see Ottoman's men and the Coach's men having a smoke and laughing at something together. Further beyond them was the old Orthodox Morellan woman who had performed the Tantric rites with the upper-class women, earlier on, in order to collect ingredients for the Divine Nectar. Apparently she had already passed the bowl on to one of the Orthodox shamans; now she was pushing a wheelbarrow full of geodesic abacuses in the direction of another set of stairs next to a bridge. Trailing behind her, but attempting to stay in step was a sacred *pig-like* creature—though not a sacred pig, precisely, as it seemed to possess fins and whiskers, as well as tail feathers—who seemed to be questioning irately the validity of the newly devised system of taxonomic classification that the Republic had recently taken to endorsing, as it designated his kind as a regional variety of Lesser Bison-144 (presumably, for the purposes of having more simplified categories by which the government might keep track of its available domestic resources), when, in fact, his was a sacred and divine species that had, until recently, remained safely distinct from the countless lesser creatures that had now come to be lumped into the same category with them. In response to this, the woman produced, from a pocket in her ceremonial robe, a pair of rusty hooks which she used to perforate the ends of his ears, attaching to the other side of each hook a length of chain, which she, thereupon, hung from a nearby tree branch. Through all this, the sacred pig—the Lesser Bison-144 rather—flailed and squealed uncontrollably, attempting to run away, despite being suspended in mid-air. The woman, then, reached into the wheelbarrow and produced, from underneath the abacuses, a chalkboard and easel. She set it up in front of the terrified pig and proceeded to teach him about differential equations, proclaiming in a haughty, high-pitched tone that contrasted greatly with the crude, raspy screech she had taken with the upper class women earlier, "...and if we were to correlate the equation underlying the necessity of taxonomic classification systems with the existing algorithm for population dynamics, as defined by the Amimu Minanga principle, we see ranges in which values coincide, with seeming gaps of randomness in between that one can only take to be a sign of Divine Intervention. We call these gaps the 'Interstices', but they are more commonly referred to by the layman as the 'Trenches of Absconditus.'"

"Well..." the Coach remarked, "it seems we have a closet Algorithmist in our midst. I don't suppose her Order would like that one bit! But OK...let's forget the sacred pig, Bunu. He seems to be getting us off track. Let me give you a bit of guidance. Listen: I ask that you—and I hope I am not asking too much in saying this—I ask that you re-align your perceptions to those of a lizard, or perhaps, even a Mole Fly. You'd know a bit about the Mole Fly's sense of smell, would you not?"

"Yes..." Bunu said contemplatively as he heard, as though spiraling in at him slowly and from a distance, the voice of Rakesh-7 on a brisk winter's eve in the attic of their house. "Yes, I think I do."

On the Perceptions of Mole Flies

Bunnu sat before the Outlander upon a cushion in the dim light. He could feel the warmth of the oil stove on his lower back, as he lifted his shirt. A single candle flickered behind the head of Rakesh-7 like a halo, immersing his face in shadow, as he settled back in the armchair and blew out a cloud of vanilla tobacco, leaving Bunnu with the distinct impression that he had somehow come to be immersed in a kind of field of particles undergoing incredible shifts in energy. All the light had come to be absorbed into darkened corners of the attic, leaving only Bunnu and the silhouette of Rakesh-7 to float aimlessly in a soft band of luminescence. Amidst the gusts of the Karakaze buzzed an absurd and inaccurate approximation of the Outlander's voice. Bunnu couldn't seem to escape the feeling that this voice was particularly odd. So odd, in fact, that he couldn't be sure it was truly the Outlander speaking. And yet he still felt compelled to listen. He rocked back and forth on the cushion, as the silhouette in the armchair remained still, watching him. And it was then that Bunnu realized that not only was this silhouette not talking, but it wasn't Rakesh-7.

It sat and it watched him silently as a voice radiating from nowhere in particular, seemingly wrapped in the winds of the Karakaze, went on in drawn-out tones: "Sound waves, regardless of their frequency or intensity, can only be detected by the Mole Fly's acute sense of smell—it is a little known fact that the Mole Fly's auditory receptors do not, in fact, have a corresponding center in the brain designated for the purposes of processing sensory stimuli and so, these stimuli, instead of being siphoned out as noise, bypass the filters to be translated, oddly enough, by the part of the brain that processes smell. Consequently, the Mole Fly's brain, in its inevitable confusion, understands sound as an aroma, rendering the boundary line between the auditory and olfactory sense indistinguishable.

"Sounds, thus, come in a variety of scents with an intensity proportional to its frequency. Sounds of shorter wavelength, for example, are particularly pungent. What results is a species of creature that cannot conceptualize the possibility that sound and smell are separate entities, despite its ability to discriminate between the exactitudes of pitch, timbre, tone, scent, and flavor to an alarming degree of precision. Yet, despite this ability to hyper-analyze, they lack the cognitive skill to laterally link successions of either sound or smell into a meaningful context, resulting in the equivalent of a data overflow.

"And this may be the most defining element of the Mole Fly's behavior: a blatant disregard for the context of perception, in favor of analyzing those remote and diminutive properties that distinguish one element from another. While sensory continuity seems logical to their visual perception, as things are subject to change from moment-to-moment, such is not the case with their olfactory sense, as delays in sensing new smells are granted a degree of normality by the brain. Thus, the Mole Fly's olfactory-auditory complex seems to be deprived of the sensory continuity otherwise afforded in the auditory senses of other species. And so, instead of sensing aromas and sounds continuously over a period of time—for example, instead of sensing them 24-30 times per second, as would be the case with their visual perception—they tend to process changes in sound and smell much more slowly, thereby preventing them from effectively plotting the variations thereof into an array or any kind of meaningful framework that would allow the information provided by their olfactory and auditory stimuli to be lasting in their usefulness.

"The Mole flies, themselves, being the structurally-obsessed and compulsive creatures that they are, in all their habitual collecting, organizing, and re-organizing of found objects into mammoth installations of optimal functional value, are remarkably easy to control, especially as they are given to a rather false and arbitrary sense of hierarchy, ascribing positions—that are otherwise trivial, yet necessarily mundane if

only to obscure their true purpose—with an unfathomable amount of honor, to the logical extreme that the few chosen to serve in their most esteemed ranks are imbued with a kind of obligatory arrogance that begins in the pupal stages and extends indefinitely, as they are further nurtured well into adulthood by a society that infuses its heroes of middle management with an immeasurable sense of importance—a kind of celebrity status recognized by the masses as a living embodiment of their ideals. And yet, despite this culture of celebrity worship and vicarious living, all whims and impulses fall subservient, dropping humbly to the knees—yes, Mole Flies do, in fact, have knees!—before the grace of the merciful Queen, who is, in actuality, just a puppet dictator installed by the Melic papacy, using an old recycled Damsel fly-fishing lure. The dummy is crude, but convincing, as the Mole flies treat it as they would their true-born queen.

“As the Damsel fly-fishing lure is, in fact, a dummy, and thus, unable to communicate with the queen’s subjects on its own, a remote access console is used by the Melic shamans to generate vibrations from a device concealed beneath the dummy’s wings. This device has the capability to create sound waves almost indistinguishable from the scented communiqués of a genuine queen to her subjects. The sound waves permeate through the hive, as though an aromatic announcement from the Queen. Through this process, the Melic can use the power of the throne to control the migration patterns of the Mole flies, as well as affect necessary booms and bottlenecks in their populations.

“These patterns and fluctuations in Mole Fly populations serve as a long-term coded communiqué, in and of itself: a years-long transmission of code from the Melic papacy to its sleeper cell operatives living among the Gautama and the Morellans. These encoded messages typically take decades to decipher and often provide instructions to the insurgency regarding the objectives, details, and timing of their upcoming covert operations. These population trends, thus, serve ends external to the Mole Flies’ perceptions...or faculties of reason.”

The candle dimmed and the Karakaze subsided.

The Way of Things

The Coach chattered his beak again as Bunu reemerged from his daze to find himself back on the banks of Placenta-C.

“My dear Bunu...” he said softly. “There is much at work in the way of things of which, I fear, we can know very little. And sometimes it’s there. It’s all around us, but we fail to notice. You understand?”

“I do.”

Sunset

I.

The sun had crept behind the buildings to the south. A brisk wind now gusted over the river, causing the tents on the opposite side to flap.

“You understand then, that it would be ill-advised to neglect the possibility of something, beyond your awareness and capacity to inductively reason, having a profound influence upon your Will, regardless of how you might struggle against it.”

“That’s not something I can control, but...yes, I do regard the phenomenon as plausible.” Bunu said with a sigh.

“Do you say this with conviction?” the Coach chattered suspiciously as his beak smiled menacingly at Bunu, “Or, simply to appease me, so that I’ll get to the point? Tell me, dear Bunu. Tell me why you regard the phenomenon as *plausible*.”

“I believe...well I don’t know truly what I believe...” Bunu said slowly and carefully, “In the context of free will and independent action versus that of fate and cosmic determinism, there is a lot that could be said. Surely, you wish to know of the motivations that guide my will and my actions. I cannot say that I am completely an agent of self-determined free will, nor am I willing to admit that I am a slave to some inscrutable deterministic machine. My take on such things is, actually, admittedly convoluted...and, well...I don’t know quite how to put this without sounding like an Algorithmist—which, I assure you, is not my intention—but I think we are limited in our ability to ascertain the true mechanisms behind even our own behavior and action. We cannot expect to understand our own drives, desires and inclinations any more than the Mole Flies do, for we are just as dependent on our flawed and stultifying perceptions. I equate our perceptions to those of the Mole Flies because it may very well be that our constructs of reality, as decoded by our physical perceptions and re-encoded by our mechanisms for expression and discourse, are done so in distinct, albeit disconnected and disjointed fragments and are, thus, subject to providing not exactly a clear and definitive understanding of the elements that pervade Awareness, but rather, an approximation. If one were to look at our perceptions as a means of determining the parameters of Truth, one can only get so close, while still remaining at a distance—which isn’t to say that we *can’t* get close. We most certainly can, but perhaps we can only approach the Truth of our circumstances by degrees. It’s a bit like that mathematical paradox in which we attempt to reduce a numerical value to 0 by splitting it repeatedly and infinitely into halves. Half of a half of a half...but we never quite reach zero. And so, we are left with gaps...”

“Trenches?” the Coach persisted with a saturnine smile.

“I don’t know. Maybe...to be honest, there is very little, at this point, that I am able to say about it with complete conviction. I can, however, say that it is not simple to understand that which guides behavior.”

“I see...and what, dear Bunu, would you say if I told you that somewhere in certain indeterminate...*gaps* of your past, you have, in sum total, committed atrocities unimaginable, but have, until now, failed to

see them as atrocities, or even addends thereof. That you have, in fact, either been misled or somehow managed to remain insensible to the unconscionable nature of your acts over the course of time.”

“I would say that that, too, is plausible...but the matter of which you speak, as well as its implicit severity, may also be a matter of perception. We cannot equate our actions to a universal sense of truth or morality without resorting to subjective idealization. Again, we are insensible to that which truly guides behavior and action. Whatever atrocities I have allegedly committed are only atrocities according to human constructs of virtue and justice: in particular, to jurisprudence. Whatever I have done, my intentions were not malicious, but born of what I assumed, at the time, to be my independent will. All the same, the purportedly atrocious nature of my behavior could also very well have been as instinctual as the Mole Flies’ responses to their Queen’s aromatic directives. If this is the case, what other recourse would I have had, but to commit these very actions?”

“Ah...so I see you understand the nature of the smell. And yet, I must caution on your behalf that matters, seen to unwittingly, often bear brute and devastating consequences that the conscious mind would otherwise be hard-pressed to concoct knowingly, when left to its own devices. We cannot excuse ourselves for the consequences of all our actions. Don’t you agree?”

“So...then, what is it exactly that I’ve done unwittingly that has had such severe repercussions?”

“I cannot say specifically. A consequence bears a series of causes, though none of them can stand alone perfectly. Your actions are entrenched in circumstance. That much is certain. Therefore, I am unable to state specifically whether one act or the other has been fundamentally right or wrong by human constructs of virtue or justice because I do not know enough details about each situation to make such a determination. I am, however, at liberty to say that, in sum, the atrocities with which you have been charged are linked to consequences brought about by actions or a series of actions over time that you may have undertaken willfully or found yourself committed to without seeing their long-term effects. But ignorance to such things does not grant one immunity to the human institutions of law and so, you must be charged. Or so I am given to understand.”

“Right...then, what am I being charged with?”

“Before we get to that,” the Coach said, “I would like to offer my assistance. That is why I have asked to meet with you before you are charged. I do not agree with your actions and cannot offer my full assistance. Additionally, the amount that I can give depends largely on what you can do for me. I do, however, have a certain degree of influence over local politicians who can overturn many of these charges. But you must understand that I want something in return.”

“Why are you willing to help me?”

“Because you are a member of the League. And because I am now in a position to resolve, with your assistance, a certain matter that has been in my charge.”

“I’m not a member of the League anymore. My connections to them have been severed. At the moment, I have no associations or acquaintanceships that I can be held to. I am an individual entity, free from the obligations of a group. The actions I take are my own.”

“That’s not your decision to make.” The Coach shook his head slowly. His beak seemed to be gloating about something. Bunu felt surging through him a vehement hatred for the beak. Not so much for the Coach, but just the beak, as if they were rivals, though he couldn’t quite understand for what.

“Right!” Bunu threw his hands up in frustration. “Let’s get down to brass tacks here. Who are you and what’ll you have of me? Why am I even here?”

The Coach's eyes disappeared again into the soup of macromolecules that comprised his face. He inhaled deeply and his arms rose slowly and gracefully at his sides. "I speak to you..." he said in a voice that seemed to emerge from behind what sounded like a thin curtain of falling water, "from a place far away: through spectral fields of such vastness that I am a mere particle, spinning about in orbit—sometimes evolving, sometimes devolving in evanescent sentience over a probabilistic course of uncertain trajectory. For brief intervals of time, semblance descends upon the frontiers of my awareness and I feel myself diffuse to the perimeters of what had been the interstices of a larger, more static superstructure, until I breathe again to fulfill a single, unalterable purpose: to collect on debts unsettled. I am an ambiguous spirit in an unambiguous state, left to settle the affairs outstanding of an entity I once may have been. And what remains of my previous incarnation is a seemingly innocuous light: dim, yet piercing as it penetrates my opaque, cloud-like myopia into a shimmering dusk light that slowly widens to incredible scope and clarity, as reminiscences alight upon me softly like snowflakes. I remember this reality and it remembers me. I emerge again in the very same moment that I had left behind eons ago, but no one detects my absence and I feel a renewed, unquenchable sense of purpose..."

"To collect on debts unsettled..." Bunu mused.

"Precisely," the Coach said with a slow bow.

II.

“It is not of money that I speak. The monetary obligations of the debt have already been paid in full, albeit not by those parties from whom payment was sought. The matter now extends beyond mere payment, itself, to the very epicenter of a sense of satisfaction that remains unfulfilled. It is a matter of principle, because it was not the debtor that endeavored to satisfy the obligation, but an organization of investors that extended beyond the scope of this situation: a group of bearded men in top hats and tuxedos who intervened in this matter to pay off the monetary obligations of the debt, thus, leaving the creditor unable to gain the sense of personal fulfillment that had been sought. And so, an incomplete feeling remains. It is thus that I must know the whereabouts of your sister. How long has it been since you’ve seen her?” the Coach said, sticking his chest out with his back arched and elbows out, the palms of his hands seeming to support the lower back, causing him—clad in that bizarre robe—to look like some kind of aging rooster druid.

“Who?” Bunu responded mystified.

“Didi! DIDI!” Ottoman-13 piped in immediately from behind, seemingly annoyed at something, though it wasn’t very clear what it could have been.

“Oh. She’s not-”

“How long?” the Coach insisted.

“God...I don’t know. Didi, eh? I guess about 220 years or so?”

“Let a little time slip by you then.” Ottoman said matter-of-factly.

“You know how these things can be,” Bunu said shaking his head, only to be met by silence. Apparently, both Ottoman and the Coach were expecting him to say something more about it. But he had nothing more to say. “What...?”

“Nothing...” Ottoman said slowly with a sigh. “For a moment there, I thought you were going to explain something...*more*.” Ottoman seemed upset about something.

Bunu looked past him to see giant flatworms creeping along the mud of the banks, some burrowing out of holes in the ground, some descending downward in a spiral along the trunk of a tree: all of them converging on the tree branch from which hung the sacred pig—the Lesser Bison-144 rather—who was now in the process of giving his own lecture in a voice that could best be described as a droll attempt at an academic sounding accent of indeterminate origin. Suspended in mid-air by the hooks attached to his ears, this pig-like creature now used a pointer to motion toward the blackboard on its easel, proclaiming enthusiastically to his audience of flatworms, “Und hier, ve haf ze Amimu Minanga matrix of ersatz realities, vich shows us truly zat all high mathematics zerves to do is to beget higher mathematics. Ze mathematical language of ze universe can only describe disjointed parts of ze theoretical whole! In zeeking to understand ze fundamental elements zat underlie ze Universe, we zeek truly to understand ourselves. And zus, it is a never-ending process of zelf-discovery. Just like flatworm reproduction, no? You know? Ahhh...you hermaphrodites haf no zense of humor! Go back to your penis fencing, or vatever veird zex rituals you filthy creatures engage in to decide vich one of you plays ze role of ze man und vich one ze role of ze woman venn you are knocking ze boots!”

“Filthy pig...” Bunu uttered contemptuously under his breath.

The Coach ignored the sacred pig, “A debt remains unsettled, my dear Bunu. See to it, by whatever

means necessary that this matter is taken care of and I can use the leverage of the League to clear you of many of the atrocities you have unwittingly committed. And when I say, 'by whatever means necessary...' I mean that you must take whatever measures you see fit to settle this debt. You must understand that this is a matter of principle. The terms of the debt itself are no longer important."

"I have no idea what you expect me to do," Bunu said shaking his head. He was starting to feel tired and his head was pounding. "Anyway, I don't know what I'm being charged with."

The Coach turned silently to Ottoman, who seemed to be preoccupied by something. He immediately snapped to attention and nodded, before proclaiming in a formal tone, "Mr. Bunu, you have been charged by the Republic with one count of defamation of character in the first degree--"

"Defamation of--" Bunu sputtered, "b-but...that's outrageous. Whose character have I defamed?"

"Your own," Ottoman said in a simple dutiful tone. "You have also been charged with one count of harboring an imaginary friend without a license. The imaginary friend, in question, a Mr. Cornelius--"

"Coronado!"

"Pardon...a Mr. Coronado, who is also wanted for questioning, in regards to reports of an illicit affair with a married woman."

"I can't speak to that claim. You'll have to talk to him about that."

"We certainly will," Ottoman said in a polite, yet formal tone, "In addition to the aforementioned charges, we also have aiding and abetting a known war criminal. You lent money to a Mr. Motiwala shortly before he disappeared."

"In his letter, he told me he was sick..."

"Nonetheless, what you did is an arrestable offense," Ottoman retorted, seeming to lose his composure slightly.

"Yeah...OK."

Ottoman took a deep breath and allowed his muscles to relax, so as to shed aside that tone of authority he had taken on up until now and address Bunu person-to-person, "We aren't trying to vilify you. I know it may seem that way, but the law also seeks to be reasonable. To be honest, the way the criminal proceedings are going these days, the courts are throwing out these sorts of charges claiming them as petty misdemeanors. The judges seem to feel that these little, insignificant charges only serve to create unnecessary paperwork and tie up the courtrooms without reasonable cause. So, you could probably get off with a fine, or a warning, if you get a judge who's willing to listen to you plead your case."

"Well...that's good to know."

"It would be. But there are other charges I haven't told you about. Serious ones."

"Well, then, I prithee to proceed."

Ottoman nodded as he held his breath to regain his composure. He continued again in an official tone, "Mr. Bunu, you have also been charged with one count of harboring, one count of affiliation with, and sixty-two thousand seven hundred and thirty-nine counts of conspiracy to aid in the sustenance and care of a known Legal Non-Entity..."

"*Legal Non-Entity?*" Bunu responded mystified, "*O!* You're talking about *O.*, aren't you? Are you

implying that my association with him as my adopted brother bears criminal charges?”

“We are, indeed, talking about *O.*” the Ottoman said in his human voice, “Your adopted brother. The wealthy industrialist. The Legal Non-Entity.”

“Wealthy industrialist...?” the Coach said with a chatter of the beak, “You’re being too kind, Officer Ottoman. Unless you are talking about a different *O.* from the one with whom history will now invariably be forever acquainted. *O.*, the robber baron and notorious war profiteer...in the eyes of the Republic, a nasty figure indeed!”

“War profiteer?” Bunu responded in shock. “Well, you certainly can’t say that I’m responsible for that. How is any of this an atrocity? We were his family! And what about you, Ottoman? Who are you to talk of past atrocities? You killed off your whole village!”

“I did what I had to do in order to survive...” Ottoman responded mechanically. “But don’t tell me you’re comparing your situation to mine. That’s...rather insulting.”

“Insulting...right! And you, Coach! I’ve heard stories about you! Beheadings? Eviscerations? Certainly not actions befitting of a coach. You, if anyone, should be put on trial. Not me.”

“My dear Bunu...” the Coach said with a pitying sigh, “I’m afraid you fail to see the severity of your own actions. A terrible fate may yet befall you, should you fail to realize the repercussions of what you have done.”

Across the river, the drumbeats ceased. The sky had darkened and shadows of half-breeds and Hentai Chefs were packing up and taking down the tents.

“I thank you both kindly for your time. Officer, you are free to go about your business,” the Coach said to Ottoman. He turned to Bunu, his beak seeming to gleam in the moonlight, as though taking great pleasure at his forthcoming misery. “Bunu, you and I will meet again in due time. In the meantime, you have much to think about.”

Bunu remained silent, seemingly mesmerized by the beak.

“It’s time to go.” Ottoman said grabbing Bunu’s arm again and squeezing it firmly.

Ottoman-13 signaled to his subordinates, who were still having a chat with the Coach’s men further down the bank and the four of them made their way back up the stairs and into the Dowa District. The sweet melody of a tiny bird reached Bunu’s ears as he climbed.

Spring would surely be here soon.

III.

The four men reached the top of the stairs to find the bodies of Untouchable children strewn about the streets. The addicts had mauled them and taken the syringes, leaving them to die. The sacks that the children had used for collecting had now been emptied onto the street next to them in piles. From the sky, it began to rain garbanzo beans—the first garbanzo rain of the year. The beans fell with little *plip-plipping* sounds amidst the backlight of the glowing streetlamps—which had recently been installed as a part of an urban renewal project to clean up the Dowa Districts, as a result of recent criticism from activist groups that the social mobility and conditions of living of Untouchables, since the caste system was abolished, had not at all changed. Huddled together nearby, in the shadow of a lamp post, were three addicts, bug-eyed and stooping over a fourth man, who was sitting on his knees, draining the syringes into an empty tin can. One caught Bannu's eye and, seeing that he was being escorted by the police, smiled and nodded, as though to indicate in a friendly manner that the two of them were somehow in the same situation, though it was difficult to understand how he might have arrived at this conclusion. And yet, Bannu couldn't help but feel it too and he found himself empathizing with the addicts.

On some level, he and the addicts: they had both been betrayed.

Bannu brushed by the body of a little girl who had been laying facedown on the street and suddenly she seemed to come back to life, struggling to respire. Her breaths were shallow and congested as though her lungs were completely filled with fluid. She was drowning. As her face slowly rose and her chin rested against the street, she shivered as blood poured from her mouth and she made this horrible guttural sound with her eyes closed, like she wanted to say something.

Bannu heard the bird's song again. He looked up. An enormous metal crane towered at an angle into the evening sky so high it nearly broke the clouds. It droned and squeaked endlessly, puffing out steam in whistles as it labored to build a new housing project.

Atop it, a tiny bird was perched singing a curious song to the surrounding nature.

The Streets at Night

The streets had become nearly deserted, causing Bunu to wonder where all the people who had crowded the area, earlier, could have gone. Surely, they can't have gone to sleep at such an early hour. And, even if they were, where were they sleeping? A great many of them had been of a lower social class and surely couldn't afford a flat in any of the buildings. He thought about this as they passed rows of makeshift houses of cardboard and tarpaulin, from which hung clotheslines. Now and again, from inside these houses, dim lights glimmered, but for the most part, they were dark and seemingly devoid of life. Nothing to hear. Nothing to see.

Where had everyone gone?

And yet, he couldn't seem to get the feeling that he was absolutely alone. Somehow, he felt that there were people all around him in great numbers, as there had been in the streets earlier in the day, but now they were hidden in dark corners. Squatting in shadows. Watching surreptitiously with their backs lined against the wall along dark, narrow alleyways, which were themselves long, curving and intersecting passageways to deep, forgotten Quarters of the city, now overrun by militant resistance groups who rarely emerged upon the main avenues for fear that their interaction with everyday people may prove to befoul the sanctity of their core beliefs—which is to say that they preferred to remain insulated in their collective anger, by the numerous walls, the labyrinth of alleyways and dead end roads that separated them from the surrounding reality.

Here on—what one could only assume to be—the main avenue, dim street lamps lined each side of the street, seeming really to serve no purpose as no one was here. A pack of stray dogs rummaged through a pile of trash, occasionally fighting fiercely for ownership of the more worthwhile scraps.

The lights: they may well have been for the benefit of the dogs.

The garbanzo beans had stopped falling, leaving very little in the way of precipitation upon the streets. Nonetheless, it was nearly impossible to avoid squashing the beans underfoot as the four men made their way back to the police station. Bunu and Ottoman walked together in front, as they had earlier, while Ottoman's men followed behind. Throughout the Dowa Districts, the four of them had remained silent, but as they crossed over back into the Protozoan Quarter, one of Ottoman's men exclaimed joyfully to the other, "Never thought we'd get out of there. Eh, mate?"

"Intolerable. That smell!" the other responded with a guffaw. "Oy, you manage to get on that bird the other night. The Druggist's daughter?"

"The retarded girl? She put me off a bit, mate. Don't know if I—"

"But they're the most fun! The retards! Me uncle adopted himself one. Lives a bit out in the countryside. So, whenever he wants a bit of action, he gets out his ol' Stanley and tells the girl it's a lolly. A proper caution, he is!" They both laughed raucously.

"Tell you what, though, some of these Untouchable kids can be pretty tasty, yeah? Don't put up much of a fight either. In fact, they kind of crave the social contact. Especially the young ones. They haven't

become embittered in their isolation, just yet.”

“You don’t touch the little shit piles, do you?”

“Oh, what? So, you draw the line there? Well pardon me, Mr. High-and-Mighty!”

“No offense meant there, mate. But there are certainly other worthwhile conquests to be had. No shortage of ‘suspects’ who are willing to do what is necessary to avert suspicion...”

“Been dipping into the *till*, have we?” he said, and then laughed at his own choice of words.

“Amazing how much of a panic you can get people into by implying they was complicit in the commission of some misdemeanor or the other. I think people, in general—'specially the wealthy types—don’t fancy having a black mark on their record. That black mark, after all, extends beyond them. To their families, to their friends, and associates. The law can be pretty unforgiving, after all. So, I gives them an alternative, I do. I look the other way if they pay a price. Of course, it’d be downright immoral to accept money or gifts. So, anything they can do for me on the spot to show their appreciation would be—”

“Thus, you take the matter into your own hands.”

“And shouldn’t we all, instead of leaving the fate of men in the hands of so very few? What I offer is an alternative solution. It’s their choice whether they decide to pursue it or not. And if they opt out, well... they’ll be prosecuted to the fullest extent of the law.”

“So, you’re getting some from some higher class birds, then?”

“Well, the influence of the law only extends so far, so I have t’ be careful. I am within legal means, though...so long as I do not extend the authority of the law beyond its ability to insulate the elite.”

“Naturally.”

Ottoman, through all of this, had remained quiet, as though bored by the conversation. Finally, he turned to Bunu and asked in a seemingly casual manner, “What do you suppose he was on about with all that talk of smells?”

Bunu sighed, but said nothing.

Approaching the Station

The atmosphere of the Zero Quarter of the Morellan Intercultural Settlement was different from that of other areas. The streets were now crowded with young people in fashionable get-ups, some of them cruising around in automobiles, others perusing the lit-up displays in store windows. Bunu, looking at the cars now, found himself reminded of Motiwala for some reason. He had had a carriage and driver at his disposal, but always seemed inclined to walk everywhere, even in the bitterest conditions. In his childhood, it had never occurred to Bunu to ask him why he chose to do this, though he imagined it to be because of Motiwala's secret desire to do something about his weight problem. Assuming, of course, he considered it to be a problem.

He suddenly found himself missing his friend, though he hadn't thought about him very much in recent years. For some time, they had lived in different worlds. Associated with different circles. Yet, now here they were again, complicit in matters Bunu had no knowledge of, though he could imagine what they had to do with. He remembered the letter that he had received during the Republic's campaign against the Gautama. It was from Motiwala. He hadn't written in years, but now he was asking for money, though he didn't explain what it was for. But Bunu had heard through the grapevine that Motiwala had become a key member of the Kaiiban National Liberation Front, which was funding insurgent operations in Morell and aiding the Gautama in their defenses against the Republic's overwhelming forces—all in an attempt to return their country of Kaiiba to independent rule.

Bunu, in fact, had no problem with the Republic. In fact, he was happy with the improvements that they had brought to everyday life and didn't have any strong sense of national pride that prevented him from being able to appreciate it. But when he'd received the letter, he understood that his friend was in need and sent him the money in goodwill in the hopes that it would somehow help him and not some violent insurgent cause. Yet, he could only trust Motiwala in having enough wisdom to know how best to use the money and didn't feel comfortable asking him to use it in any specific way. And yet, regardless of what resulted or how Motiwala had actually used the money, in the Republic's eyes, they were now both complicit in treason and consequently, Bunu couldn't help but feel a renewed bond between them.

How he missed his old friend!

"...so I ask the old bag what her type was. And she just looks at me, probably in her dementia, thinking she was still in her youth and says to me, 'Whatever you got, I'm willing to take, Mister!'"

"Well...must have got around when she was young, then!"

"Must have, right? So I says, 'In that case, spread 'em, love. I'll give your dementia-addled noggin something to remember!'"

"Haha! Good one, that is!"

Ottoman sighed loudly through his mustache. Bunu looked at him. His eyes looked sad, as though powerless to stop this display of hyper-masculinity from his subordinates. It seemed strange to Bunu that Ottoman would see his position as powerless to the ogre-like sensibilities of his men, but then he remembered that Ottoman, too, was bound by protocol and was, thus, left with little recourse but to sulk

authoritatively at the intolerable behavior of his men. Bunu marveled at the ability of Ottoman's mustache to lend its own power to making his sulk conspicuously authoritative. And yet, the men seemed to be ignoring his cues.

"Excuse me," Bunu said turning to the men. "I think your behavior is very inappropriate. You are still on-duty and should be paying attention to your responsibilities, not be going on like a couple of overgrown teenagers."

The men froze, horrified at these words. Bunu momentarily felt like somehow he had gotten through. That is, until one of the men, pointed at him and addressed Ottoman accusingly, "What's this bloke on about?"

"Mr. Bunu..." Ottoman said quietly. "Really. You mustn't!"

"Oh..." said the other, "I see we're playing the victim again, ain't we, Chief! Well the boys will certainly get a kick out of-

"There's no need to bring *the boys* into it," Ottoman said frantically, "The suspect spoke of his own volition."

"Well...I beg to differ on that one, Chief." One of them said.

"Yeah," nodded the other in assent, "Seemed a little forced didn't it? Like you put the bloke up to it! Don't have the bollocks to say it yourself?"

"I beg your pardon," Bunu said, "but I said it myself because I thought your behavior was very rude. I don't take orders from your commander."

"Well, I don't know about that, lad," one said, "I was afraid we might have offended the Chief. He's a bit of a romantic, after all. The boys say that-

"Enough about the boys!" Ottoman exclaimed, "I said we don't need to involve them. Anyway, do you trust every bit of gossip that goes on in that locker room?"

"Who are *the boys*?" Bunu asked.

"You'll have to excuse us," Ottoman said quietly, "We don't have any females in our division, so I'm sure you can imagine what happens to the level of conversation."

"It happens..." Bunu said with a nod, thinking back to his days in the Football League. "So, I gather you don't partake in these enlightening discussions?"

"Of course not! Hoo hoo..." grinned one of the men like an ape, "Mr. Monogamy lost his bollocks in the fur years ago, didn't he!"

"No, she's got them stored up somewhere. Maybe in a hat box. Your bird fancy hats, Chief?"

"Ignore them," Ottoman said to Bunu apologetically. He paused contemplatively before asking, "What's the last you heard from *O.*?" He squeezed Bunu's arm as he said this, again seeming to accentuate certain sounds.

"Hard to say. Am I being questioned?"

"This is strictly off the record." He said, giving one long squeeze to accentuate the word '*off.*'

“Well, I don’t know. We went through the legal process for a few years to get him into our family register, but that did no good. Then, we got some kind of patent lawyer involved in the dispute. I don’t really know what came of that. Nothing, I imagine. He was trying to convince my parents that they could file for legal protection for him as intellectual property. Which they did...and then...”

“And then?”

“I don’t remember. I was preoccupied by other things by that time. One day, a group of old bearded men in top hats and tuxedos arrived at our doorstep. They talked to my father for a long time and he gave them permission to take *O.* with them. Apparently, they sought to incorporate him somehow into their business strategy. Whatever that means...”

“So, you’re father just let them take him?”

“I guess he had his reasons. Maybe he didn’t have any choice. Again, I’m not really clear on the situation, though. You’ll have to ask my parents.”

“We plan to. However, at the moment, we’re having trouble finding them. It seems that our beloved town of Bahlia has disappeared from the map. I can’t begin to tell you how much that pains me! To lose another hometown...” Ottoman said with a sigh.

“No, it’s most certainly there. It’s been a very long time since I’ve been back, but from what I hear, the town’s completely underwater now. Don’t let that discourage you though. I reckon you can still seek out my parents with the proper diving equipment.”

“Right...I’ll look into it. So, what happened after the men in top hats took *O.* away?”

“I don’t know. I never saw him after that. I knew he’d become well-to-do, but I certainly didn’t figure him for a war profiteer. But then again, I don’t suppose he’s the sort to take sides in matters of politics. Anyway, if all of this is off-the-record, why are you bothering to ask me? Won’t this be covered in my deposition?”

“I have interests in this matter, as well. Interests that extend outside of the law.”

“What sort of interests?”

Ottoman looked furtively about the streets and squeezed Bunu's arm without saying a word, as though this were sufficient as an answer, “And what of your sister?”

“Who?”

“Didi.”

“Oh...” Bunu took a deep breath and thought for a second, “Well, as the Coach said, her debts to my father’s friend, Anup, were paid off by that same group of men with the top hats and tuxedos. Perhaps their payment on our family’s behalf was some sort of investment in *O.*’s potential—from the sound of it, they must have gotten quite a return on their initial outlay. At any rate, as far as I knew, the financial obligations of the debt were settled, but it seems that that wasn’t enough. But the last I heard, Didi was running around with that pack of vampires that follow that fool, Sanchez, wherever he goes. That was years ago, though. I don’t know what she’s doing now. She was a bit of a wild girl.”

Ottoman, then, paused and sighed. He glanced back at his men, who had turned their attention back to their discussion. “Rather free-spirited, yes. So, I gather you weren’t lying to the Coach, then.”

“No. I really don’t know what’s happening with her.”

“What if...” Ottoman started to say and then hesitated. Bunu nodded as though to indicate he wanted to hear what he had to say. Ottoman paused uncomfortably before starting again, “What if...I told you I knew where she was? Off-the-record, that is.”

“You mean, you know where she is now?”

“Off the record?” Ottoman confirmed. Bunu nodded.

“Yes, I do. And she knows of your arrest. She’s very worried about you.” He gave a double squeeze as though to indicate the degree to which Didi seemed to have been worried. “You may not realize it, but *family* is very important to her. From what it seems, much more important to her than it has been to you.” He said this last bit accusingly.

This prompted Bunu to stop in his tracks and turn directly to face Ottoman. “What are you telling me?” he whispered, “You’ve kidnapped her again?”

“Not quite,” Ottoman said, motioning to the steps of the police station with his free arm.

There was a preacher from Baba City—or, at least, one could only assume that he was a preacher—on the stone steps, emphatically imploring his audience of young, ornamented society darlings and their stiff-collared, gem-buttoned gentleman escorts to change their ways. The men looked to the ladies with a knowing nod, causing some to suppress a giggle. To them, the man was a lark. “Boo-ga the Calamity! Fast the 22 on thither Midnight Snackpark!” the preacher wailed on like an old bitch in the night. He clearly had a bone to pick. “Replicate the Rucksack with a Fanny to thine Lightning Moves! Rub a Doo-dad to Brick Walls and ask Forgiveness! The Manufactured smell of Beef-concepts with Marsupial-Class Spit-bombs of the Stratosphere! Do you Moose Tear your way to Armistice, Lady and Gentle Man? The Phantom Wig-wam: wherefore smacketh thee in the Brainstorm? Lackeys and Tulips make food for the Conscience. Hamster Fist shapes a Rattle in the Punitive Dentist chair for the Cartons of Mayhem unsung in the Battle of Winkie-Doo. Languish pussy cats! Vindicate thine Interstate Bypass with Sour Cream and Dignity!” One of the gentlemen shook his head in disbelief with a smirk. The preacher seemed to take mental note of this before continuing, “Intuit the Colostomy of the Pleasure Hole and the Nannies will sleep well in dire straits-“

“Alright then!” interrupted one of Ottoman’s men, running up the stairs and grabbing the preacher by the collar. “Enough grandstanding for today, mate!”

Ottoman led Bunu up the steps and opened the door for him. He stood to the side, as though to indicate that he would not be accompanying Bunu into the station. “Well...Mr. Bunu, this is it. It’s been a pleasure.”

Bunu nodded silently. A part of him felt happy to be leaving one friendly acquaintance behind him in the world. At least he had that. It had not been his intention to isolate himself from his friends and family for these many years, but perhaps it was too late to do anything about that now. When he had first left Bahlia, he had merely sought his own path of self-determination, had sought to branch off from the main vine and make his own destiny—much like the ancient Melic migrants had once done. And through his own personal migrations, this is simply the way that things had turned out for him. There was no clear reason for his parting ways with them, for to his mind, they had never truly parted. To separation he had ventured and would continue to venture, but, through it all, thoughts of his loved ones remained with him wherever he went and would remain with him wherever he was to go—or so he hoped. And he now missed them all greatly: Rakesh-7, Yuri, Raju, O., Motiwala, Didi...even Diogenes and the O-bousan! Of course this was to say nothing of all the other people he had met on his travels these past 220 years, though very few among them had meant very much to him. Anyway, he knew that it would be some time before he’d see any of the people he truly cared about again, if at all. And even if he had the chance to do so in the future, it remained possible that, by then, he will have become a different sort of person from who he

was now. There was no way around this. To a certain extent, one life was ending and another beginning. He had experienced this feeling once before on that fateful day when he had left Bahlia once and for all. And he knew then just like he knew now that there would be no going back.

Just thinking of all this, he suddenly felt very lonely.

He took a deep breath before walking up to the doorway of the station. Before entering, he turned back to Ottoman once more and asked, “What did you *mean*, when you said, ‘Not quite?’ Did you kidnap Didi or not?” He realized as he asked this that he had quite suddenly and, for the first time since meeting her, become very concerned for Didi’s safety. He hadn’t been a good quarter-brother to her, all these years, even though she had tried very hard with him. If there was anything to regret now, he regretted that he hadn’t been a better sibling...and for that matter, a better son to his parents. He had had many chances to reconnect with them, but there was always something more immediate preventing him from being there right with them through the good moments and the bad—it was a shame how much time was wasted between them. But he had made his choices—and whether he had chosen to leave Bahlia or not, a sacrifice would have been imminent either way. Yet, he hoped for the moment that there would be a way for him to reestablish that lost connection once his circumstances have been adequately resolved—that is, *if* they could be resolved. Surely there would be a great deal on which they could all catch up: presumably there had been countless developments in the lives of his family, these many years, about which he had no knowledge. He suddenly wished to know all the details immediately. For the most part, however, his concerns right now were with the welfare of Didi. Had she been abducted again without his knowing?

Ottoman now grinned through his mustache in response to the query, slightly embarrassed. “No, I didn’t kidnap her...” He shrugged his shoulders, as Bunu, satisfied by this answer, breathed a deep sigh of relief and proceeded to walk alone through the door. Although his back was to him, he now felt Ottoman’s eyes on him. He wondered what the old detective must have been thinking. Perhaps it had seemed silly for Bunu to show concern so suddenly and after so much time apart from his sister. From anyone else’s point of view, surely it would seem as though too much time had already passed for him to show any hint of genuine concern without it being rooted in his own selfish sense of guilt. It would not be strange for Ottoman to think this and moreover it would be difficult to say that he was completely wrong.

In any case, it might have been too late to change anything either way. It might have been too late, for Bunu had his own fate and Didi surely had hers. At this point, regrets would only serve to muddle the purity of this moment, for this, too, had an importance all its own that it would have been foolish to miss. Now, Bunu stood just inside the doorway and peered into the dark corridor which loomed before him.

It was time for him to go now.

The sound of the singing bird reached his ears again. It sang sweetly and questioningly, as it had earlier when it was perched upon the construction crane. He wished so much that he could keep the song of that bird in his memory for later, for he was sure that it could bring him hope when he needed it most. Somewhere down the road, he heard the laughter of children playing on the sidewalk. He wished he could capture this sound too, for something about it made him remember his youth with great fondness. But he knew these sounds couldn’t be captured, nor could they be called upon later in his mind with any degree of fidelity to the originals. The mind was too feeble to do anything beyond warping them to suit the context of the moments at which these recollections would be summoned. Thus, there was a purity to them which couldn’t be replicated. It was all so beautiful, so fleeting. He wished, at the very least, that he could freeze this moment, but, of course, this would not be possible either. He took one last deep breath, wondering, as he did, if this spring would be as beautiful as the last had been. Judging by the sounds, it seemed like it would be.

But there were other sounds as well...and not all of them were of the sort that he wished to remember. From behind him came the sound of Ottomen’s men pulling the preacher dramatically and forcefully down

the stairs in a fashion only befitting the Performing Arts Division of the police department. Beyond this was the sound of the audience cheering at the climax of this entertaining scene and then commenting to one another raucously before starting to disperse. From somewhere far in the distance came the urgent chirp of a solitary cricket, abruptly screeching out a warning Bunu was incapable of comprehending. It was a loud and piercing and uneasy chirp which caused him to feel that maybe it were somehow meant to advise him of an imminent danger.

And amidst it all came the voice of Detective Ottoman-13, murderer, kidnapper, untouchable, and actor, calling out three words which would occasionally haunt Bunu's thoughts over the course of the next nine years.

"I married her!"

With this, the heavy door suddenly shut behind Bunu and all the sounds from the outside world immediately went silent.

Detained

Two years had passed before Bunu, who was still awaiting trial in the detention facility in the Morellan town of Asoka Plains, began to suspect that he was slowly starting to shrink in size.

Now, in his cell, he laid back on his mattress, watching an ant crawl from his fingertip, up the wrist, to disappear into the forest of hair that adorned his forearm. Bringing his arm up to eye level, he scanned through carefully in search of the elusive mite, as he craned his neck upward from the rock hard surface of his pillow. Unable to find it, he wondered where it could have gone and, more importantly, how it had ended up here in the first place.

He relaxed his neck again with a sigh as his head fell back against the pillow. The detention center was said to be impenetrable to the outside world. Airtight: or so the claim went. Normally, he wouldn't mind that a mere ant had managed to break through the defenses of this facility, but he had been under the impression that this place was the perfect controlled environment. But how could he go on thinking this were true? Certainly, it used to disturb him that this facility was meant to be isolated from the influences of the outside world. In fact, it had been a source of great despair for him in those first few months. To be so removed from the mechanisms of civilization that one could only assume oneself to be a kind of rusted old gear, no longer necessary to the workings of humankind and, thus, made to waste away in dormancy amongst other such gears in a forgotten pile of scraps: how could one possibly feel a sense of purpose in these circumstances?

But this initial cynicism eventually wore away, as he realized it would be of no benefit to view the matter from this perspective. And thus, he soon came to embrace the insulated quality of this facility from the outside. There was something pristine and unreachable about it. Something that allowed him to feel a sense of peace, as it was closed off from the existence that he had known.

And thus, there was a freshness to this atmosphere, despite the darkness that seemed to pervade in his cell, the shadows that dominated his surroundings; a familiarity encapsulated him in the tight quarters of a receptacle that had been designed for those relegated to obsolescence, affording him a comfort in the absence of light that could scarcely impel him to crave anything more. The light, in fact, shimmered in dully from the hallway through a thick frosted glass window on the cell door—that was so densely layered with sand-blasted frost that, in its opaqueness, it ceased to even be a window anymore—causing the inbound rays to separate through a tiny translucent perforation in the exterior of this glass into colored bands of the light spectrum that spread across the wall opposite. Bands of light and dark oriented themselves like patchwork as they had upon Bunu's face on that day in the washroom of the inn. *What connected those patches of light and dark? Where did one end and the next begin?* Bunu had asked himself these sorts of questions, in the past, to be left with no answers, but only with more questions. Yet, now relishing the darkness that persisted amidst the rainbow of colors that adorned the wall of his cell, Bunu could imagine that the patches of light and dark weren't at all, in fact, connected, but were entities that flourished independent of one another.

Light and Dark: each was unaware that the other existed.

Bunu was, hence, prone to dwell in the bands of dark as the colors that emblazoned his surroundings

seemed luminous in their curiosity, probing depths of him that he sought to keep private. To reveal them would be to grant access to that core of him which had until now remained secure in its state of sanctity. The darkness was not so imposing as the light, since Bunu had seemed to garner from the former—albeit not from the latter—a tacit understanding that the depths of him were not to be approached, nor tainted by aspects of the outside. And in rejecting these entreaties by light and dark, it was Bunu himself who came to be obsessed with the prospect of probing the inner reaches of his own core—a realm which, in and of itself, could only be advanced upon through internal dives of immeasurable distance, but which was not so distant in the way one would perceive in the tangible world, for the process of diving down into oneself was tantamount to an intentional reduction of one's Self along infinitesimal increments that occurred over what seemed like vast expanses of time until one became tiny enough to probe the very interstices of consciousness. In this way, his core remained a realm upon which neither darkness nor light could prevail, but one for which he held an undiminished and inexplicable fascination.

Bunu, thus, dived down into himself frequently, settling to the depths in search not truly of an answer, but of something that made the very concept of an *answer* seem a trivial concept. In fact, he had no concrete reason to search, except that he knew something was in there, deep in the recesses that sought to be probed and dissected and reduced to smaller and smaller pieces: sliced and bisected and further stripped of its superfluties and, thus, shredded down to its rudimentary components, which would thereupon be eviscerated until one was as close to the boundaries that separated Reason from its absence as one could possibly be. Bunu had, by way of this introspective process, dived and searched and chopped and dismembered, but always seemed to return to the surface, his quarry lost and settling, in its reduced state, further down into the Trenches, while he was left struggling to keep his head above water and gasping for air. The process had, until now, proven a failure, but to expect success may have been unreasonable. Yet, he understood that it was necessary that he keep trying. To him, this precious solitude with which he had been endowed could only have been a result of destiny as it was apparent that he was meant to be given this opportunity at self-realization.

It had now been 222 years since he had left his life in Bahlia behind and, in that time, Bunu had had a variety of life experiences, all of which had brought him here. In that time, his experiences had transfigured his constructs of reason: all of them crucial to realizations that had manifested in his lifetime—some as minute turning points, others as full-blown epiphanies. There were times in which what had seemed interminable in its progression and irrefutable in its significance had given way to a kind of lingering abscess upon the conscience which soon hardened to form encrusted debris to be scraped away and later forgotten. The exaggeration of these fleeting blisters upon the perception was likely inescapable even upon one's sudden realization of their triviality, as they were part and parcel of the Moment and nothing else, in one's immediate discernment, could possibly be deemed important in comparison. Thus, he was inexorably bound to understand, regardless of the seeming relevance of each instant, that, later on, all that he had viewed as meaningful and noteworthy would largely end up being minimal and fundamentally vacant over the course of time. Nonetheless, he approximated that this illusion of significance that was attached to it could only have been useful to him, insofar as the experiences themselves would be reference points for future events and were, despite their ephemeral nature, carved intricately into the façade of his perceptions. Carved like ancient texts, perhaps. Inscribed: whether it was as an abstract portrayal of his *allegiance* to the diplomatic agenda of the Greater Kaiiba-8 Football Association prior to his falling out with Takeo, or a still-life of his subsequent turn as a vagrant in Baba City. There they were, his experiences: carved upon ancient corridors of his mind. His entrance into the workforce—a time in which he coexisted uncomfortably with other new hires in the company dorm of the RavanAlloy Mining Company: this was a rendering which could only pale in comparison to the etching of his failed marriage with Pinky Satyajit—the beautiful vaudeville dancer-*cum*-spy for the Intelligence Ministry of the Republic. One follows these pictorial representations, gazing upon the countless images, leaving nothing omitted as the walls of the corridor upon which these impressions lie could not bear to disregard his stint as a zookeeper in Gautama City in the course that it plotted to the dark recesses of the Moment in consequence. All of these experiences had served to shape his current perceptions.

All of these experiences had served to bring him here to Asoka Plains.

Consequently, he couldn't help but be filled with an intense elation at the prospect that he had been brought to this exact place for this very important purpose. To envisage that this controlled environment that now encapsulated him came about, similarly, as a result of a series of very important causal events, which now came to coincide with his own circumstances, was something that had, until recently, managed to elude him. Yet, it now seemed abundantly clear that Asoka Plains, with its rich and complex history, could only have come to be the sort of place it was now through the exact juxtaposition of events that were now relegated to the status of legend: events which may not directly have had anything to do with Bunu solely, but which have nonetheless made their impact upon the environment surrounding him. And so, to be in this corner of creation, in this moment, felt greatly auspicious. Meaningful even, for destiny had brought him here by the magnanimity of God's grace. Thus, this seclusion was essential to the greater scheme of things: both for him and for all that existed out there beyond the walls of the facility.

And with time, the prospect of his imprisonment being an act of divine providence started to make more and more sense to him, until he could finally understand in very plain terms that this experience was truly important. That day on the river bank, he hadn't been able to conceive of the possibility that he had done something wrong and, therefore, couldn't see any reason for his incarceration, as he had no sins for which he had to atone. But over time, he came to realize that this wasn't a sensible way to look at the situation: it wasn't a matter of right or wrong. In fact, the concepts of *right* and *wrong*—though he could only assume these to have been sophistic entities conjured in parallax of his circumstances—didn't seem to factor in at all and were, thus, irrelevant. What mattered was that he was *here*. That much was clear to him. Nothing could have been clearer. All events in his past could only have culminated in him ending up here. There was no way around that. In fact, any attempts on his part to reverse the effects of what had been done in the past would only have caused the natural predetermined order of events—human or otherwise—to adapt accordingly so as to counteract such attempts, leading him thusly and without even the slightest variation to the same end result: imprisonment. Such was necessary to maintain the equilibrium of causality. His imprisonment, too, was also necessary to maintain some kind of equilibrium in the outside world and within himself. Hence, everything in *the heretofore* had been a prelude to this and all that would happen from *the here-on-out* could be said to have had its origins here. One could only hope for the Cosmos to be so systematic in its devices. And the Asoka Plains Detention Facility, being the controlled environment that it was, exemplified the same sort of cohesive configuration as that of the surrounding Universe, albeit on a micro-scale.

Yet, now, with the appearance of this incessant little ant, which he could feel upon his skin rooting around for something amidst that jungle of hair, Bunu had to contend with the possibility that a tiny aperture had been found in the system that enclosed him. An isolation that he had assumed to be self-contained and closed off in its defenses had been pierced through, allowing for exposure to outside molecules in the form of an insect. The system had been contaminated and every moment that the ant remained served as a reminder of the noxious air that he was now breathing, air he could no longer trust, as it came from a world that had grown stale and distant from him with the passage of time: a decomposing world of people and things and events that his previous Self had once inhabited and that he had—in this facility—sentenced to a forgettable and petty demise, which is not to say that he, in doing so, had managed to immerse himself completely in solitude. Of course, there were other people, things and events all around him, right here in the facility. Other elements of time having moved on from the exhausted, withered incarnations of its previous Self. But these elements, too, had managed to remain a part of this self-contained system and were, thus, preserved beyond any hint of decay. And therefore, before the incursion of this six-legged harbinger from the outside, he had been able to live amidst these people and these events, amidst the noise of his surroundings and still deem his condition as being one of seclusion.

In fact, there were people all around him in great numbers. Chattering voices that bounced off walls and crept into his cell, making it simply impossible to feel as though he were utterly alone. One couldn't just hear the chatters, after all. There was also the coughing and the farting and the snoring, which was so

loud, at times, that one might have thought the snorer in question to have been sharing the very same bed. And, of course, now and again, he could also hear the crying. Sometimes there was that, too. However, Bunu did his best to ignore it, because it always seemed to give him a headache.

It was the sound of crying that bothered him most.

The Design of the Facility

Life was, in fact, all around him and the concrete walls, despite their thickness, managed to be incredibly poor at blocking out sound, though it seemed plausible that this could have been an intentional consideration in the design of this facility. The administrators were, after all, of the belief that the social unity of the inmates was a crucial step in the process of rehabilitation, as it required one to fall in line with a certain sense of obligation to others, which was seen as healthy from the perspective of therapeutic experts.

Other detention facilities, after all, were veritable pressure cookers: the men inside stewing in the juices of their own misconceptions, hemmed in by their own hell cries which bounced off the solitary walls to come back at them louder and louder still until they were swept away by a chorus of demons of their own creation. Then the doors would open, letting the steam out and the men would erupt into a collective battle cry as they ran out in the direction of perceived adversaries to engage in violent, untamed combat. Faces hit the pavement of the prison yard, which was really simply a desert of broken bones amidst oases of blood and sweat. Hands pulled at hair grown into filthy masculine beards that dribbled down to chest hair. Teeth emerged as fangs and nails as claws and the beasts clashed, for neither would cede to the other for dominance. Solitary clumps of flesh ravaged one another to the core, leaving indistinguishable mounds of hair, teeth, and blood upon the battlefield. Cries of pain interspersed themselves with pent-up rage as a fog settled over the grounds and one beast screamed for the heavens victorious, the blood and tears of devastation dripping from his claws and fangs. And in the silence that ensued, the weaker would seek protection from the stronger until aggregates formed around the alpha males. However, the alpha males had to be impressed in order to win their friendship, so one seeking to do so had to either attack or humiliate the rivals of the alpha male, in question, if for no other reason than to curry his favor. And so the aggregates became clans. These clans protected their own, cooperatively strategizing ways by which they might overcome outside aggressors, sometimes plotting outright offensives. The factions: they battled endlessly to seek submission from one another, so as to grow in size. The larger the faction, the more complex the hierarchy: which would only serve to intensify the impact of their influence and escalate the importance of those at the top. Factions clashed endlessly as violence was the most essential component of their vitality as a group.

With this in mind, the founders of the Asoka Plains Detention Facility sought to avoid this pattern of chaos as the factions were perceived as too powerful and violent for the administrators to manage effectively. So, instead, they designed a facility that allowed for seamless interaction between the prisoners, which served to strengthen their bonds with one another and limit any betrayal, primarily through a sense of obligation to the collective. Transactions of obligation were thereupon allowed to manifest themselves through the facilitation of free love amongst the inmates. That is, sexual favors became the common currency by which social debts could be established and fulfilled. For example, one inmate who may feel a sense of indebtedness to another may engage in fellatio to satisfy that debt. However, this action, in and of itself, may arouse the jealousy of a third inmate, causing the other two to feel obligated to him, giving way to a three-way. A fourth inmate jumps into the mix and we have a four-way, then a five-way and so on, to the logical extreme that the whole community's bond with one another was reinforced by way of group intercourse. And so, the encouragement of these sexual favors raised the level of intimacy by which *hello's, good-bye's, thank you's, I'm sorry's, and I owe you one's* came to pass back and forth between inmates. And what better way was there to say "Top of the morning" than by licking someone's balls? Or,

could there possibly have been a friendlier “Pleased to make your acquaintance” than to sniff the feces in the dirty diapers of one’s counterpart? And certainly one would be remiss if one didn’t say, through the maneuvering of one’s fingertip upon the perennial divide, “Enjoy the rest of your day!” This sort of interaction, most assuredly, served to successfully limit aggression, avert the formation of factions, and keep violent entanglements to a minimum.

As such, the benefits of this facility’s design could now be witnessed by the ease with which conversations took place between the inmates, all of whom happened to be occupying different cells. Their social dynamic was one of non-confrontation, occasioning them to go to absurd extremes to avoid upsetting one another. Naturally, this caused them all to view their fellow inmates as *comrades* and accordingly, the walls couldn’t contain their enthusiasm to interact with one another. So, the conversations, the giggling, the overall commotion would continue day and night. And despite Bunnu’s best attempts, he simply couldn’t help but be privy to details about the other inmates he would not have cared to know otherwise. Though he wasn’t interested in the details of the conversations, he had somehow managed to get to know the surrounding inmates by name and their corresponding topics of interest. He knew their voices and could almost anticipate what they were going to say next, though he didn’t seek to do so intentionally.

Some inmates, for example, would speak of their families or their lives and ambitions on the outside. The man in the cell next to him, for example: the others called him Vikram. And Bunnu had come to understand that this man spent most of his time waiting for something that he wasn’t likely to get. Nonetheless, the man went on constantly in a smooth, dreamy voice about how no taste was finer than that of Honey Ocha from his hometown of Mehta, or how the smell of the flowers in the window of his childhood sweetheart’s home was heavenly, or how the women in the town of Medvar were incomparable to any other he’d encountered anywhere. The sound of waves, the feel of a woman’s neck against his fingertips, the taste of Spring: the man was a romantic soul. He spoke of sounds, scents, and tastes as though everything that had once seemed mundane had ascended to a superlative status. Vikram’s experiences on the outside had managed to become so built up in his own mind that the memories of what they truly were had somehow been supplanted by an image of a vague and indistinguishable *something*: a something that simply couldn’t possibly be attained. Bunnu admired him for his ideals and his propensity to dream, but found himself worried that the man should see such sweetness, now, in that which had once seemed commonplace. Would it not be possible for him to once again get bored with such things with the passage of time? Transcendent beauty had seemed to manifest itself in the form of these memories and thus, from Bunnu’s perspective, it seemed best that this man stay in the prison (and out of reach of these places) for his own good, as the truth could only prove to be disappointing, propelling him, out of the madness of betrayal, to destroy either the object of his affections...or himself. This was one breed of inmate in the facility.

Another kind—as evidenced by Yoshio, who resided two cells away—did not make even the slightest mention of life on the outside and certainly didn’t make any grand sweeping generalizations thereof. This sort of inmate was a little bit similar to Bunnu, insofar as the outside was as good as forgotten. The one difference being that, unlike Bunnu, inmates like Yoshio had ambitions on the inside—in terms of sexual conquests, business opportunities, or their ability to gain dominance over others. These were the things Yoshio would go on about in that menacing, gravelly voice of his—which Bunnu could only imagine belonged to a big, lumbering beast so accustomed to prison culture that he didn’t have aspirations to go back. Yoshio claimed to have been an inmate of at least 15 other facilities and as a veteran of prison life, found this initiative of free love that the administration saw fit to force upon them as unseemly, though he understood that this may have been an unpopular view. In fact, men like Yoshio were the polar opposites of those like Vikram insofar as they didn’t spend most of their time fantasizing about something ideal that existed outside the scope of their immediate reality. These men were more pragmatic about their situation and saw it fit to make a solid go of their available opportunities. Yoshio was, therefore, an ambitious man that sought to be at the top of the pecking order, regardless of what administration was pulling the strings. Free love or not, he sought to be the man running the show, though it seemed painfully clear that he wouldn’t have nearly as much influence upon the inmates in this facility as he might have in others.

Bunnu couldn't help but admire Yoshio's ambition and knack for leadership, despite his reservations that, perhaps, these would be better utilized in other ways. It seemed that for one as ambitious and practical as he, it was easy to convince oneself that the conditions of the surrounding reality were immutable and thus had to be worked within in order to ensure success. This sort of myopic thinking often caused men like Yoshio to remain entrenched in less-than-satisfactory positions due wholly to their own stubbornness.

“Haaah haaa! Filthy! Filthy! Filthy! You might as well lube up with that excess ear wax, ne Ravi? Put it to good use! Now, we're really hitting bottom, ain't we? Haaah!” Then, there was Jagdish. He occupied the cell next to Bunnu on the side opposite from Vikram. Jagdish was a rather hyperactive individual, who insisted on interjecting his droll and scathing observations into the conversations around him, though most of the other inmates now seemed to ignore him, as his comments often proved to give way to uncomfortable silences. He had an exasperated, gurgling tone of voice that Bunnu couldn't help but think sounded a bit like a kitten drowning in herbal tea. These phlegm-filled sounds bubbled up a sense of panic throughout the surroundings, infusing all within earshot with a sense of hollowness about the way they'd chosen to live. His air passages seemingly compromised by a deluge of devilish *schadenfreude*, he would call out derisively in the wail of a feline submerged: his mocking words spiraling out, caught up in jetstreams of tiny bubbles that permeated through membranous walls to react with the psyche of those around him, displacing what may once have been acceptance of one's circumstances with a certain embittered zeal that raised the blood pressure, tightened one's chest, and made one's head pound until there was no recourse but to cringe in the corner and rock back-and-forth, resentful at the conditions with which one has been made to endure and further dismayed by the bleakness of one's fate. *“Your mothers would spit on you if they saw you! Haah! Your fathers would rip your heads off and shit down your throats, ne! But who am I to judge? We're all disgraceful, right? Haaah Haah!”* Most of the other inmates did their best to block him out of the conversations, so as to prevent him from getting a foothold, but Jagdish persisted anyway, sometimes even attempting to appeal sneeringly to Bunnu by wildly pounding on the wall adjoining their cells. *“Don't try to hide! I know you're in there! I can hear you tooting away after those beans we had for lunch. You're a shameful little craploaf, ain't ya! Haah haaaaah!”* Jagdish, on the exterior, seemed simply like a lonely, pathetic creature who only truly wanted the attention of those around him. But what he truly sought more than anything else was to bring others down to his level so that they might empathize with his desperation. And so, every comment out of his mouth was geared at making others feel negative about their situation. In fact, it would seem that he was attempting to inject a little of his own surplus misery into the common stock, so as to diffuse it amidst the other inmates equally, until each was abidingly driven into a corner and squeezed dry of all hope. This base, dried-out clump of empty flesh who feels it necessary to air out the sediment of his own despair; this fossilized sponge who seeks vigor by draining others of their resolve, until they are left to droop lifelessly in the depths of a similar cosmic madness: This soul-destroying raptor is called Jagdish.

“Craploaf! Craploaf! Craploaf! Born in an outhouse, were we? Mother must have been right disappointed to see you staring back up at her when she got up from the toilet seat, ne! Haaah haaa!”

Aside from these 3 inmates, Bunnu found himself surrounded by so many conversations at once that it was difficult to pay attention to one without getting distracted by another. Many would engage in gossip about other inmates, referring to some incident or the other that had taken place 'outside' in the Yard. Somewhere down the hall, there was a group of inmates who would talk about sex non-stop, sometimes masturbating in the process, while encouraging each other to do the same. Some of the older inmates, meanwhile, would go on and on for hours tirelessly about their diaper rash, some of them complaining that it had been months or years since they'd even been allowed to shower, while others would gripe endlessly about how in the old days, the guards and the administrators used to do things differently. The layered conversations and sex talk would go on interminably, sometimes making it impossible for Bunnu to sleep.

Bunnu, in fact, had no interest in social interaction with the other inmates and had, despite others attempts to draw him out of his reclusion, managed to keep himself at a great distance emotionally from those around him, which had in recent months become a source of selfish pride for him. Now, he put one elbow

behind his head and closed his eyes in an attempt to ignore the surrounding noise. His other arm—the one with the ant crawling upon it— lay flat upon the mattress at his side. He was afraid to move it, as he felt a kind of obligation to see to it that the ant remained untouched. He realized that this was a peculiar attitude to adopt as part of him still felt on edge about its presence, but then, at the same time, for some reason, he felt as though something terrible may befall him should he harm the ant. So, he kept his arm still, allowing his thoughts to drift in the reverberation of voices that surrounded him like static.

It was upsetting to think that all this time he had been under the false impression that this place was somehow unreachable by the outside world. The idea of it being impregnable to its surroundings had sustained him for these 2 years. It had led him into very important directions. Yet, this image was now shattered by this ant. He had half a mind to crush it, but for some inexplicable reason, the other half told him to cherish it and protect it and thus he didn't completely know how to feel about it anymore. Nor did he know how to feel about the realization that he had not, all this time, been impervious to outside influence.

He silently admonished himself for not having realized the reality of his situation sooner, for not having known better. Of course, for him to be completely unreachable by the outside world would be logistically impossible, no matter how one tried to reason it, but it had been necessary to maintain this illusion for his own sense of purpose. Now, allowing the disillusionment to settle into the depths of his consciousness, creating ripples throughout, Bunu envisioned a serene and harmonious pool deep within him becoming slightly agitated. Bubbles were now drifting to the surface.

Until now, the sang-froid with which he had conducted himself in these conditions was dependent on a kind of self-assurance that was not only therapeutic to him but also allowed him to maintain the psychological distance that he sought with respect to the other inmates and, therefore, it was now disheartening to have this equanimity that he'd afforded himself shattered by the appearance of an insignificant little creature who had taken it upon itself to reside somewhere upon his person. Yet, now, resting on the elbow of one arm and taking great care not to hurt the ant as it crawled upon the other, Bunu could see himself getting used to the idea of the ant living with him. Maybe it wouldn't be so bad. He started to sense that the initial pang of disappointment was starting to cool and in its place, he felt a mild sense of joy overtake him. Right now, even though he could no longer perceive it, some element of the outside still existed and had found him. Some element had, in fact, recognized his presence, despite his more recent assumptions that he may very well have become invisible...or even disappeared completely. He felt something slowly swell inside him: a glimmer of hopeful optimism that he didn't think he could possibly have been capable of feeling ever again.

Courtship Hour

Being on the inside: he had forgotten that there was even an outside to be kept away from. In the mornings, during his first year, sunlight would shimmer in from the frosted glass of the tiny window on his cell door. The rays would diffuse throughout the cell, casting spectral bands of colored light upon the opposite wall that would move in an arc along its concrete façade with the sun throughout the day, until finally it dimmed again in the evening and the light bulbs in the corridor were turned on. About 10 months ago, however, someone had made the decision to replace the light fixtures in the corridor outside the cells with fluorescent lighting, which subsequently remained alit day and night. They covered the windows in the corridor with boards and the lights were left on constantly, making it impossible to determine the time of day or, for that matter, how quickly or slowly time was truly passing. Of course, there were other ways for him to gauge the passage of time. For example, through the timing of his meals, which were not meals, *per se*, but, more accurately, bowls of insipid gray beans that were sent down to him three times a day by way of dumbwaiter. Another way that he managed to get a feel for the time was from the footsteps in the hallway, as the other inmates filed out to the Yard for Courtship Hour, which was a kind of after-lunch sex ritual for them. Though his cell door was unlocked during these times, so as to allow him to partake in such activities, Bunu felt no need to do so and, despite any nostalgic urges he might have had to feel the sun once again beat down upon his face as in his childhood, he couldn't bear up with the compromise inherent in viewing the outside world through the glass of the geodesic dome that encapsulated the Yard, and so he opted instead to stay in the comfortable quarters of his cell—for he knew the 'outside' would only be disappointing. After all, the facility was airtight and hence, even in open spaces, he would be restricted in his access to the 'outdoors' and made to endure the irksome artificiality of this environment, which was disingenuously punctuated by trees, rock formations, and flora that were all said to be native to the Asoka Plains area—which wouldn't have seemed so bad if such things were natural, instead of intentional components of a microcosmic design hyper-real in its attributes. This just made it all seem like some attempt to institutionalize his interaction with the natural world. He didn't like being in a position of conditional freedom, subject to terms predetermined by the administrators of this facility. If there was freedom to be had in the open air, there need not be terms attached, much less permission given by some authority that one is meant to answer to. Thus, it seemed a waste of time.

For him, it was much more satisfying to stay indoors as Courtship Hour was the quietest part of the day. The part he looked forward to most as it was his only chance at uninterrupted, silent introspection. And usually, he spent his time laying flat on his back on the concrete floor, staring at the ceiling and allowing his eyes to lose their focus. He spread his fingers out against the cool surface of the floor and tried to imagine every muscle in his body entering a state of deep relaxation. The relaxation spread up from the tips of his fingers and toes, and down from the top of his head until all five sections met up in his chest, where he imagined his center of gravity to be. He felt the fragments interlock like parts of a puzzle and before he knew it, his chest was in rhythmic concert with these pieces, rising and falling in deep breaths amidst this feeling that his body itself was beginning to get numb and his awareness had receded to an infinitesimal point somewhere in the core of his Being. Immersed in these depths, his vision faded and his thoughts began to wander. In fact, his surroundings, though clearly present, lost their solidity until he was merely a particle hovering in a vast empty space that had once been the domain of an elaborate legerdemain of perception. The outer edges of this dense, concentrated particle that constituted his Being, began to stretch in parallel with an irresolute plane that was adjacent in a direction from him unknowable—*unknowable*, perhaps, due to the neurotic nature that this planar entity seemed to possess, inclining it to

vacillate periodically from its original orientation and thus change its juxtaposition with respect to him, to the utter annoyance of the more steadfast amongst its brethren planes—which impelled him, though he understood that this entity was uniquely skewed in relation to the other planes, to feel with it a kind of bond, a recognition that he might have failed to realize fully in those moments that he was otherwise distracted by his own senses. Consequently, he was compelled to remain adjacent to it as there seemed to be a sort of mutual identification that underlie their affinity with one another. Yes, he felt he could identify with it: more so than he did with the other planes from which this one differed—not really through any sense of stability implicitly afforded by its presence, but quite on the contrary, as a result of the discomfort caused by its tremulous nature, which was something that he found oddly absorbing. After all, how could he carry on deceiving himself into believing that solace was to be found through this process of introspection, when in fact, for him it was a source of greater dubiety than assurance? Perhaps, in proximity with other planes, he may well have felt different about the whole experience, though it seemed imprudent to consider such things when he was fully aware of his inability to reconcile himself with the infallibility of something that masqueraded itself in a veil of pure reason. And thus, this humble, unresolved plane seemed like the more honest option, as it didn't proclaim to offer any answers. He had, after all, found not peace, but great despair in his various dives deep into the vast trenches of his Intellect, at first, indulging himself in the possibility of answers through self-realization, only to find, in their stead, a greater emptiness, replete not with answers, but with more and more doubt. And then to bear witness to a shivering plane which offered no comforts or explanations, but which was, in fact, meek at the prospect of his acquaintance: something about it seemed better than Truth, because perhaps this plane could not give him the answers he sought, and more importantly, because it seemed to imply that any answers that could be had would never outweigh the benefit of doubt. And yet, it seemed strange that such an entity should quiver uncontrollably by simple virtue of his existence in parallel. In fact, he was perplexed that it would see him as anything more than another entity that had come into proximity with its own domain. Nonetheless, he could not forbear to gaze mindfully upon the hanging question mark that circulated around this paradoxical mutualism that seemed to exist between them, as though it implored him to carry on, not in transcendental fulfillment, but in a state of defiance to the act of surrender, to that inscrutable and utter devotion that the more *enlightened* had proclaimed to be crucial to this process of self-realization. This act of surrender—or devotion, as the case may be—was, to him, a kind of lifeline for those who sought a quick answer and didn't want to stick around long enough to see their doubt through to its ultimate conclusion. A conclusion, which, of itself, was a bittersweet paradox—for how could doubt simply cease to exist by any stretch of the imagination? Doubt was, nonetheless—from his own perspective—the only *inclusive* insight into the nature of a Truth *exclusive* of conditions.

And so it was that Bunu would reemerge in the cell to the sounds of the other inmates returning from the Yard and he would find himself, not refreshed, but with his scalp stinging, blood boiling with impatience, as he struggled to breathe. He awoke on the cold hard surface of the floor, unable to move at first and shocked at the realization that he had been holding his breath, though this had not been his intention. The experience had drained him and made him feel a kind of anxiety, causing him to wonder momentarily why he'd even bothered, though he knew that he was simply musing over this in the heat of a frustration that would soon cool over.

Bunu would then hear the sound of the guards stopping at the door of each cell to make sure that the inmates were back in. There was a pounding on the iron door, a low mumble of voices and then a hush that seemed to fall over both the guard and the inmate before the heavy door was shut again with a dull thud and locked. He could hear this same pattern repeating itself over and over, from all the way down the corridor, progressively growing louder as the guards slowly approached his cell. They would reach Yoshio's cell and he could hear them engaged in a bit of bargaining, as Yoshio likely had some kind of side business going with the guards. The door would then slam shut and they would move on to Vikram's cell. Vikram usually remained quiet and well-behaved as he was under the impression that this sort of compliance would get him out of the facility much quicker. Vikram's cell door would slam and Bunu would find himself jumping at the loudness of the sound, as his hairs stood on end in anticipation of their arrival. Yet, they would skip over his door, whispering among themselves and giggling as they moved on

to Jagdish, who would greet them with an insidious cackle.

At first, he had seen the guards' actions as an oversight. They may have simply forgotten he was there. However, this didn't make sense, as he was still receiving regular deliveries of his meals by dumbwaiter, as well as fresh diapers from the diaper hatch that fed into a wicker basket next to his mattress. Surely, the guards knew he was there. There was no doubt about this. They simply left his door unlocked, because there was no longer any reason to lock it from the outside. And they were probably making no mistake in assuming so.

The fact of the matter was that he saw no reason to leave the cell, as it would only propel him into situations that required social contact with the other inmates, which made the very thought of even touching the doorknob seem ghastly. The *inmates*: he had never seen any of them, but had heard their voices and their movements. The scraping of their toes and heels against the floors, the padded plastic wrap sound of changing diapers, torsos bumping against walls, the reverberations of their flatulence, which could only have been due to the insipid gray beans. He heard their whispers as they passed his cell door on their way back in from the Yard and the subsequent screams from within the cells to companions from whom they were now separated by layers of concrete and iron. He knew the inmates purely by their sounds...but could he even trust that these noises were real and not imagined?

Figments, Fabrications

Bunnu had always assumed that the other inmates were real, tangible beings...but, now, it occurred to him, for the first time, that even this was something that he could not be completely sure of, for he had never seen their faces. Vikram, Yoshio, and Jagdish: as far as he knew, they were simply voices, though it was not completely out of the realm of possibility that they were mere figments of his own imagination. Worse yet, they may even have been fabrications, created by something external to him that sought to deceive him for one purpose or the other.

Opening his eyes now on the mattress, he sat up, momentarily allowing himself to entertain this reasoning. Something from the outside sought to violate him and was using these sounds and voices to appeal to him. The other inmates may not have been real entities, but elaborate illusions meant to deceive Bunnu's perceptions. Meant to draw him out of his cell for some unseemly purpose.

Hence, the unlocked door...this was all beginning to make sense!

It was thus necessary to be vigilant and critical of even the minutest detail of the surrounding reality as it, too, may well have been some kind of deception. The scraping of their toes and heels against the floors, the padded plastic wrap sound of changing diapers, torsos bumping against walls, the reverberations of their flatulence: All of it could have been a ruse. The smooth, dreamy tones of Vikram's voice, the gravelly sound of Yoshio's, the incessant cackling of Jagdish: all of it a ruse! The color spectrum upon the wall: a ruse! The taste of the beans: a ruse! The rock hard surface of the pillow, the smell of the dirty diapers before he deposited them in the chute, the feel of the sores festering upon his soiled, unwashed skin: Ruse! Ruse! Ruse!

It all made sense, now. It seemed conceivable that even the outside corridor, the Yard, and the facility itself didn't truly exist. Asoka Plains never existed and neither did the country of Morell. And there most certainly was no such thing as a Republic. In fact, political systems didn't exist either. Neither did the words *political* or *system*.

Bunnu's past, too: this was a deception. He had only now come to be sentient. His first moment of existence was *now* and he had spent the entirety of it, thus far, in this tiny dark room, reminiscing about fictional events that could only serve to give the present Moment its texture—if for no other reason than for the sake of making it seem comprehensible. This idea that the past only existed to give the present cohesion was not, in fact, a new one...or at least it didn't seem new. To say the least, the past was good at overstating its own significance and thus the concept of *past*, in and of itself, could only be best regarded as a convenience sake's supposition, which abidingly made it subject to one's immediate doubt. Accordingly, to Bunnu, the only thing conceivably beyond the reproach of doubt was that he existed right now and in this moment, but that too seemed uncertain.

Perhaps, his first moment of sentience had been when the ant appeared. He could very well have still been frozen in that moment and—stationary within this temporal locus—postulating a potential future arc by which time may progress, thus relegating his perceptions to a subset of imaginary time, as they could more likely be described as anticipatory reflexes than perceptions, *per se*. This is to say that he may actually have been existing in the past and approximating a conceivable future, which brought even the assumption

of his immediate perceptions as being in the present into doubt. And thus, he couldn't—beyond a hint of skepticism—say that he truly existed right now and in this moment, but instead it seemed more rational to assume that he simply existed and nothing more.

The Many Natures of Dust

There was a loud clanging sound coming from just beyond his door. Bunu jumped. The sound was that of the afternoon bell. It was time for Courtship Hour. He sighed at the realization that no matter how vehemently he doubted his perceptions, their seeming persistence continually managed to peel away at his resolve to defy them. His shoulders slumped as he put his hand to his forehead. He was here in the present. Right now: here in the moment. Here: in the Asoka Plains Detention Facility in the country of Morell, a region of the world that was now understood to be a part of the Republic. A *republic* is a kind of political system. *Political* and *system* are words. Words exist.

And as the other cell doors swung open and inmates filed out to make their way to the Yard, Bunu now envisioned them: these surly gray fibrous masses beyond his door, in the spaces between walls, trolling the depths of the building itself—hunched, faceless amalgamations of loosely-configured men, leaking abrasive Matter upon the hard surface of the floors when even the slightest breeze whistled through their cavernous bristled epidermis. He imagined them: these husky, ashen Beings, scurrying in droves through damp, uninviting corridors, nestled back against the wall, lingering behind corners, lying in wait for even the smallest squeak of his door hinge, so that they may swarm inward upon him and the bristles that comprised them could unravel and twirl in his direction, skimming from ceiling to floor, scraping against the walls and curving in through the crevice to creep along the shivering mass of cells upon his exterior and cover the body whole. His hand would freeze upon the door knob and be shattered to splinters of flesh as he, in defiance of this coarse invasion, struggled to break free of their grip: to no avail. Gray fibers covered with loose granules of cosmic dust—similar in consistency to incense ash—would plunge through every orifice in search of alveoli to stop the breathing at its source. He would then be flooded with this strange, granular matter and made to respire by proxy as the invading agent would not allow him the benefit of self-respiration, as it was too selfish and far less efficient than the sort of respiration that could be achieved through mutual means.

Bunu shivered as he broke into a cold sweat.

The very anticipation of this process was, for him, horrifying, for he could imagine the Dust spiraling in corners, plotting en masse an elaborate offensive upon those who sought seclusion from the outside Universe. The Dust: it was older than Time, bound by its allegiance to the Tangible—to the very Physical Substance of creation—to make pointed attacks fueled by conspiracy upon its bitter rival, the amorphously-composed Intangible Will. This conflict, too, was older than time: one that had always existed and one that continues perpetually between the abstractions of Tangible Form and those of Intangible Will, the two locked in eternal combat for they could know no other state than to oppose the infringement of each upon the confines of the other. The tangible, however, was more resolved—more given to complicity—for without this, there was no hope of overcoming the tenacity of something so refined. Accordingly, there were many natures to such Dust, many inclinations that Bunu was impelled to delineate—for the sake of convenience—by arbitrary color. For example, *red dust*, though it wasn't truly red, came as a result of an incredible shift in gravitational force, perhaps from an explosion of a vast star in a distant galaxy. The particles of dust traveled and accumulated through void, attracting each to the other by sheer weight of their micro-gravities as they fused with hot gas to form masses, which would loom in stasis for many billions of years and later crumble to their constituents in vast explosions, sending each particle off again upon its own distinct immaculate trajectory. These particles carry with them their

memories in aggregation of them with their associates and of their associates with their collection of foregone associates, allowing them by means of interconnecting social networks to seek old members of former *almae matres* (i.e. one particle of red dust recognizes another that *he* had once been fused together with to form a rock on the surface of a distant planet and seeks to relive old glories together. The particle, in question, however, is wedged between the teeth of a beached whale, and thus the alliance-seeking granule, must seek to merge with the whale itself in order for this reunion to become a reality).

It was these elements of the outside that Bunu had now come to fear. This cosmic dust which plotted against him and sought to sap his Will with impurities: he had no choice but to resist it, for his insulation from the outside world had given him purpose. He could not, now, allow the outside to infiltrate the defenses and make inroads to that part of him untouchable even by Light and Dark. But-

THE ANT!!! Where's the ant?

Bunu now jumped up from the mattress and brushed his hand over his forearm. Nothing. *It escaped!* Or perhaps, it was holding on for dear life. Holding on to one of the hairs of his arm. *That shrewd little beast!* He scratched at his arms intensely with his long yellow nails, drawing blood, but the ant wasn't there. He picked up the mattress and threw it against the door, kicking up a cloud of dust.

Dust? How did it get-? H-how could it-?

He backed slowly away from his mattress screaming wildly as he felt his shoulder blades touch the door of the cell. His hands now clawed frantically at his hair and beard as he, for the first time, realized how long they had grown. *What's happening?* The image of the shivering plane loomed before his eyes until he, too, felt tremors throughout his body, ripples through his essence. *It's getting inside! It's getting into me!* He cried out again in panic as he could feel particles of the dust growing to vines in his bloodstream that crept slowly along the walls of his vessels and branched inward until they reached his air passages. He reached for his own throat. *My God! It's inside!* He felt an explosion in the back of his head as the door behind him opened allowing the air of the outside Universe to circulate in. Amidst the swirls of enveloping dust, he could hear voices roaring behind him like ravenous beasts as he fell forward to the concrete floor.

His vision started to fade as he, sprawled upon the floor of his cell, felt an itching sensation beckon to him from his forearm. He looked up slowly and through a blurry mist of his own tears, beheld, to his surprise, the image of what appeared to be an ant upon his wrist. It stood there, looking victorious amongst the rivers of blood that now flowed from his forearm. There it was: the leader of the invading forces. Having spearheaded this offensive, it was now looking upon its conquest with what—from this indistinct perspective—appeared to be a glimmer of pride. Bunu had no recourse but to admit defeat. But there was another option that still appeared to be available. The ant was feeling merciful and was willing to accept symbiotic coexistence as a feasible diplomatic alternative.

Presumably, the ant was lonely and sought companionship beyond that which could be afforded by mere foot soldiers of dust. Perhaps, that was what Bunu required too. This may very well have been what he had needed all along. Surely, it would be moderate companionship, at best—albeit *companionship*, nonetheless, which would certainly be worthy of, at the very least, his perennial affections, however lacking in depth these may have been.

But precious time was slipping away and a decision had to be made in the moment. *Does one acquiesce to such terms?*

The blurry ant—as though in response to this query—appeared to stand up on two legs and bow before Bunu graciously in a gesture of appeal. The ant was both magnanimous and compassionate in victory, which was something that made its proposition all the more compelling.

Bunnu's breathing faltered. There was still one other option he hadn't considered, an option he wouldn't otherwise want to consider, if for no other reason than its inherent cruelty—it's calculating lack of compassion. Certainly, it would be a temporary solution that attacked the symptom, but neglected the root cause and, thus, it could actually end up being counterproductive to pursue it, as it may prove to exacerbate the situation further, rather than alleviate it as it was intended to do.

Nonetheless, with his hand dangling in mid-air, circling like a predatory bird, he, with all his strength, pulled the looming appendage out of its failsafe position and into a steady dive in the direction of its target; and with the fortifications of his doubt overcome by the force of his own fatigue, he committed himself fully and unquestionably to the objective of this pointed assault until he felt, under the force of his own thumb, the body of this six-legged diplomat being crushed mercilessly. Its insides leaked out through ruptures in the exoskeleton, which crumbled easily to tiny fragments of external solute in a pool of internal fluid. He did this and he allowed his body to slump back down again and his eyes to close. He had given in to this option out of exhaustion and could not be bothered to consider its repercussions at this very moment.

And as he drifted out of consciousness, he could sense a shadow fall upon him from the doorway of his cell and hear these voices from all around him, whispering again and again in concert: *Asoka Plains... Asoka Plains...Asoka-*

Three Years Later

(or “A Brief History of Asoka Plains”)

-Plains...Asoka Plains...Asoka Plains...

(“Asoka Plains!” he slammed an invisible fist upon the podium.)

Bunnu’s head snapped up in alarm.

The man on stage wore a shoddy-looking purple tuxedo with dust piled upon the shoulders. A stone menhir held him aloft like some unfinished puppet—which is to say, that he had no legs and no head and no hands, at least none that were visible, though his sleeve could be seen reaching down uncomfortably to the podium to slam upon it emphatically. It seemed conceivable that whatever it was that was occupying the space within the suit—or conversely, whatever frame the suit had chosen to wear—it was, in fact, an entity (or the inverse thereof) that visually appealed to one’s recognition of its absence (or in some cases, to one’s disregard of its presence) by means of abstract overtures which crescendoed to the undeniable inference that in some anti-matter, contrapositive space-time, there was most certainly a similar, visibly naked organism in a conversely inverse circumstance, who consisted only of legs, hands and a head, but no torso and who had want for nothing more than a purple tuxedo (or, at the very least, one that was magenta).

(“Asoka Plains...” the voice insisted again.)

The floor was a gray cloud of concrete. Near the windows, where the sun shone down in slanted rays, the sound of the talking suit’s words impinged heavily downward upon the field of light throwing off the balance of a surface that had once—at least, if the perpendicularity of walls was any indication—seemed level. Bunnu’s seat lurched to the side and he had to lean left to avoid falling off his chair outright. The man at the far end of the row had already succumbed to this fate and was now rolling helplessly, as though in a dry, gaseous whirlpool, down the curve of the surface’s depression and into the bright field of light, unable to halt his own inertia. His arms were at his sides and his body remained limp, as he seemed to find the prospect of putting up even the slightest resistance a futile gesture at best. The old sod had surrendered himself to the pull of this diminutive, yet infinite curvature in space-time, for surely he had managed to convince himself that he was relegated to an irreversible fate and that there was little left to do, in contending with such forces beyond one’s control, than to relax and enjoy the downward spiral. And so, the man, devoid of any will to fight, spiraled slowly and blissfully and in utter spiritual devotion through gray oblivion and to what he hoped would be the light beyond.

All eyes were back up to the talking suit. Seated behind him on stage was the medical staff, all of whom already seemed terribly bored with his presentation. Or, maybe they weren't bored. It may very well have been that the heaviness of his words was draining for them. This would not be an unreasonable assumption as the hint of panic that pervaded his tone as he spoke the words *Asoka Plains* seemed to bear with it a sense of import that was burdensome to all who encountered it, as though by simply listening, one had acquired affiliation with something that he would otherwise have avoided under normal circumstances. It could have been the tone with which he spoke that caused them to react with apathy, for conscious participation would only have been exhausting for them. On the other hand, it was also conceivable that they had heard this speech many times before and that their reaction was not at all an attempt at premeditated indifference, but rather a genuine sense of annoyance at the tedium of these proceedings. Truly, it was difficult to determine which the case was. Either way, they slumped down in their folding chairs and tossed crackers shaped like animals to the guards who stood at the sides of the stage. The guards, seemingly bored as well, cocked their heads, sometimes hunching over and sometimes jumping, in an attempt to catch the crackers in their mouths.

(He continued: "Asoka Plains is an area in perpetual flux: a place in bitter conflict with its own Past. A place where the young consume their elders. Not just consume, but, in fact, *devour*. It is a place where the young *devour* their elders, as this has become the tribal custom of this ill-fated paradise.")

An invisible fist slammed the podium again and a cracking sound could be heard. Ants suddenly began scrambling up the sides of the menhir. Or perhaps they were termites. They may have occupied the hollows of the podium. Or, they could have been part of the act. Another possibility was that they weren't ants...or even termites, but simply the words on the piece of paper from which this man was reading. They had fallen through a crack in the podium and were scrambling about in incoherent jumbles in search of the nearest medium that could contextualize their existence. Without this, the words would collide randomly with one another in a purposeless panic. They knew that there was safety in numbers as one word standing defiantly alone from the rest could only do so for so long before withering to obsolescence. These fossilized words could be reanimated, but only through the thoughtful and concentrated intervention of their other compatriots. To avoid the necessity of such measures, alliances were forged in the form of phrases and expressions, both of which were hollowly reinforced by clichés. And so, these phrases, expressions, and clichés clambered en bloc up the sides of the menhir (for there was no space to be afforded between the hidden inscriptions that languished in the darkness of its stony, hollow interior) and back in the direction of Paper, for they sought solace for their physical forms between the fibers of wood cellulose and confirmation for their spirits in the sounds that met with air when spoken. Nonetheless, it still remained to be seen whether these entities were, in fact, words at all...or if they were actually insects.

Or even a hybrid thereof.

(He continued: "Asoka Plains lies deep in a grassy valley, separated from the outside world by the Panta Rhei-21 mountain range, which extends hundreds of kilometers outward in all directions. Due to its remote location, the area, which stretches to a diameter of roughly 250 kilometers, had remained undiscovered by the Morellans for centuries until a flamboyant aristocrat by the name of P.K. Asoka happened upon it by chance, while attempting to traverse the Panta Rhei-21 mountain range by way of helium balloon.")

Whether these facts about Asoka Plains were inherently true or not, this man's words seemed to be

imposing themselves upon the surrounding reality—scrambling about excessively like a congregation of obsessive compulsive ant-zealots—to make whatever alterations necessary to its framework so as to ensure not even the slightest variation from the description he gave. The *word-insects* (not to be confused with the word: *insects*) performed their appointed duties unconsciously—the hormones that they secreted, actually, did most of the work by reacting with the surrounding atmosphere to create the intended reality-altering effect—in their mad instinctual rush for the Paper.

And yet, upon arriving at their destination, they—now numbering far beyond the seating capacity of a mere sheet of bleached pulp—were left with no feasible recourse but to seek asylum elsewhere. So they covered the man’s phantom appendages whole until the shape of his head and hands became visible, his features being molded by the scurrying of little black dots of code rushing adamantly in every which direction, some even crawling over the backs of others to get wherever it was they sought to go. It, thus, became evident to all in the audience that the suit had, for better or worse, somehow come to wear a rippling body of black *semioplasm* (otherwise known as “semiotic protoplasm”).

(Syllabic insects and Word imago crawled into his invisible mouth, over his invisible tongue, and down his invisible throat and he continued: “Seeing upon its vast elliptical plains a variety of flora and fauna, heretofore unknown, Asoka, a self-proclaimed man of science, believed this area to be a refuge and breeding ground for the more enlightened species of creature. He wrote thus in his journal...” he cleared his throat and took on a mockingly effeminate tone, which was presumably his attempt at a humorous voice characterization of P.K. Asoka, “*It seems to me that the birds of these Heavenly plains, being of the bluest feather, are remarkably naïve and trusting in their nature. Their song swells melodically from their breast with a kind of purity of essence, a delightful innocence, absent in birds from other regions. These tiny birds, though seemingly unaccustomed to the presence of Man, cater to his delight with great ease, as though equipped with an instinctual recall that allows them to treat one to a beauty of such magnificence that God could only have intended it for Man to appreciate.*”

“*Last evening, as my man-servant and I were setting up camp, one of these enchanting creatures, alighted upon our tent to greet us in such a friendly manner, that we were immediately moved to tears—which, I, given my typically masculine disposition, would otherwise be hard-pressed to shed at the mere song of even those Goose-necked Warblers that had roosted just outside my windowsill, last spring. I knew, then, that this land was unarguably removed from the suffering and torment of existence in the outside world.*”

“*Similarly, as we gathered water from a nearby creek, a species of creature with horns [the likes of which I’d never seen], approached us meekly and stood next to us, gently sipping the clear water, as though offering itself up to us as sustenance. My servant, too, understood this strange animal’s cues and we found ourselves, consequently, feasting upon its flesh by the light of campfire, that very evening. The meat, itself, had an unusual consistency, as it was unlike any other that I had ever tasted. It occurred to me, then, that we had been destined to discover this wondrous plain.*”)

Having said this, the man began to snicker uncontrollably, as though enjoying some sort of private joke.

(And, in his normal voice, he continued: “On his journey back home, P.K. Asoka came to the conclusion that he had been chosen by God to lead a pilgrimage of enlightened men to the untouched, untainted splendor of these plains. He returned to the excesses of social life in his hometown of Medvar with tales of this mystical place that served to arouse the imaginations of his dinner companions and the bitter envy of his rivals. And it was soon thereafter that he returned to the valley: this time, with more men who found

themselves equally awe-struck by its beauty.

“These individuals—all enlightened souls in the eyes of Asoka—explored the land together, murmuring amongst themselves wondrously as they beheld its many exquisite splendors: whether in the mist of the waterfall that plunged from between two rocky cliffs of the mountains down to form the river below, or in the delicate spindly petals of the Vociferous Findepuhl—which treated the ears to the most joyous chime-like melody as the wind bristled through and its hollow cylindrical petals clanked together gently to give way to a sweet ethereal tune that dispersed in air like seeds of a dandelion. Nothing could seem to frustrate their sense of delight, not even their trek into the mystical depths of the Esophageal Caverns, whose humid, fleshy interior glowed in bright pink phosphorescence day and night.”)

The black semioplasmic dots began crawling into the invisible mouth of the suit, slowly disappearing from the surface of his form, only to render his appendages invisible once again.

(The suit continued in a garbled voice: “All of it seemed perfect. And so, *Asoka Plains* [as P.K.’s companions had taken to calling it] was, to them, a kind of paradise. A land of dreams one didn’t even know existed. And Asoka, who had served as their guide throughout their excursion, couldn’t help but feel delighted himself at his friends’ reaction to his discovery. This would, certainly, be the beginning of a new era.”)

His voice became clear again, as the semioplasm, having gained access to his insides, had now disappeared completely from the surface of his invisible skin.

Meanwhile, a group of excessively clean and sprightly angelic twerps hovered down from amidst the snowing dust particles in the beam of the stage lights and proceeded to negotiate with the medical staff about something or the other. One of them, a particularly aggressive little prick bore a briefcase and seemed to be demanding top Julep for the benefit of their cleansing and purification services. His associates, meanwhile, began to form a blockade in an attempt to intercept any animal crackers that might be thrown in the direction of the guards, in the hopes of cutting off their supply until both sides were able to arrive at mutually agreeable terms.

It seemed that the little buggers had gotten to the climate controls, too, as the temperature of the room was starting to rise. Bunu could feel beads of sweat forming between the hairs of his chest.

(The suit continued: “Over the course of the next few years, ballooning became the sport of wealthy thrill-seekers, as those with the resources to do so, had their own elaborate flying apparatuses made from the finest materials and embroidered with such intricately-crafted designs that the balloons themselves were a sight to behold in the skies. To the effect that *Asoka Plains* soon became the endpoint for numerous balloon races and fanciful excursions.

“In fact, *Asoka Plains* gained such incredible prominence throughout Morell that even the Crown Prince Mitsuo, of the Morellan Royal Family, eagerly decided to make the perilous journey through the *Panta Rhei-21* to witness the exquisite grandeur of this area. Naturally, as news of his upcoming visit reached Asoka and his peers, it was decided that they must, at all costs, afford the Crown Prince the greatest luxury and extravagance possible, so as to make his stay a memorable one. And so, a complex that eventually came to be known as the *Asoka Plains Royal Resort and Banquet Hall* was built at the approximate

midpoint of these elliptical plains. Of course, given the time constraints with which P.K. Asoka and his associates were left, the complex could not be completed to their full satisfaction. Nonetheless, upon his arrival, the Crown Prince found himself not only delighted at the hospitality with which he had been attended to, but charmed greatly by the grand dinner reception that had been thrown in his honor in the Banquet Hall, the very first evening. He, thereupon, declared these plains a ‘protected area,’ entrusting their care to P.K. Asoka, himself.”)

The cherubs now flew over the audience. In their left hands, they held out skimmers to pull the dust out of the air. The screens from which these skimmers were made had perforations that were too small to view with the naked eye but were, nonetheless, effective in filtering the air of its stationary dust. In their right hands, they held spray bottles filled with a potent solution of antimicrobial disinfectant mixed with deionized holy water from the sacred river Placenta-C. The administrators had become rather concerned of late about the effects of airborne particles, spores, bacteria and negative orgones upon the free exchange of pheromones in the environment—which was something that they deemed essential to the therapeutic processes that occurred on the biochemical level between inmates.

Sitting in a folding chair on stage behind the invisible man in his purple tuxedo, Archimedes-5, the chief practitioner of the Asoka Plains Detention Facility, glanced nervously at his associate and Facilitator of Coital Discourse, the beautiful and voluptuous Dr. Aganashini, who, contrastingly unconcerned by the state of affairs, tossed animal crackers to a guard at the side of the stage. After staring at her for a few moments, she finally looked over and could understand immediately what he wanted to say without his having to utter a word. She looked back compassionately and her lovely mouth whispered, *Yes, but what more can we do?* She then resumed the tossing of crackers, eliciting an overzealous grunt of appreciation from the guard as he caught it in his mouth.

Archimedes sighed and looked over at Dr. Narciss, the Chief of Gene Expression and Communication, who was tirelessly performing calculations on particle dynamics, in the hopes of accurately calibrating his Molecular Reactive Discourse Amplifier (MRDA). Surely, his calculations hinged on the success of the cherubic mercenaries in ridding the air of its impurities and the inmates of the negative energy particles and dust-begotten plaque that had caked themselves like soot on their insides.

(The suit continued: “Over subsequent decades, Asoka, with the aid of his business partners, invested a great deal of money into building a railroad that curved between the treacherous mountains and back to the comforts of civilization. This marvel of modern engineering stretched to a distance of 1,379 kilometers between its endpoints and soared to elevations in excess of 3,500 meters above sea level to make it the highest elevated railroad in the known world. Along the length of these tracks, a series of telegraph posts were installed, so as to improve the ease of communication with other major cities in Morell. Despite having taken 23 years to complete, this railroad and the telegraph cables gave way to easier access to outside resources and brought in a whole new range of visitors, who had previously been apprehensive about making the excursion by balloon.

“The area was, thus, forced to develop quickly, as a result of increasing demand, and accordingly resorts and villas were built to cater to affluent families looking to get away from the bustle of everyday life. In its heyday, Asoka Plains became a luxurious hotspot for weekend trips and an ideal locale for country homes. Enormous mansions were built along the mountainside on the inside perimeter. These homes became ideal venues for evening soirees and lavish dinner parties, complete with big bands and ballroom dancing. Protozoan architecture began to dot the landscape as the style was becoming a symbol of status amongst Morell’s elite, largely due to the influence of groundbreaking *avant garde* designers such as Vivek-13 and the Zuzumebachi Design Group, who were renowned for the creation of aesthetic installations using only

living organisms as building materials. These materials—which would one day be allocated a taxonomic classification of B²C-34—were known for giving way to incredibly good acoustics and so the sounds of the dinner parties would echo throughout the valley, sometimes even reaching houses over 200 kilometers away on the other side. The sounds carried the cavalier tones of the men, who clad in their best tuxedos, pulled their shoulders back in a dignified manner, held their drinks properly in their hand as they admonished their lesser associates for one thing or another. Interlaced with this was the bitter, gossipy chatter of their elegant wives. The women, too, had once gazed upon this breathtaking plain and seen an unspeakable beauty, but now that previous enthusiasm had come to be replaced by this endless boredom with the mundane existence that had been wrought upon them by its lack of newness. Worse than that, all of their friends from home were now here, so it no longer felt as special as it once had and the lack of convenience of being away from civilization was simply annoying. The women complained endlessly to one another about this and, in their boredom, had taken once again to spreading vicious rumors, as they could find no better way to pass the time. And amidst the resonations of their fervent voices, the band played loud and wailing. Drumbeats thundering across the valley, in the darkness of the night, so loud the local animals, as yet unaccustomed to this kind of racket, scrambled about to take cover.”)

D-8....Q-987...B-13...J-377...R-4181

Bunnu had taken to silently cataloguing the behaviors of the inmates around him and filing them into the cabinets and drawers of his brain to be further examined, sub-categorized, correlated and cross-referenced. He designated each cabinet according to faction; each drawer by sub-faction; areas within the drawer itself were thereupon labeled by personal traits and tendencies—for example, those with the histrionic propensity to overreact to everyday situations for the benefit of either getting the attention of others or bolstering their own self-importance had their files affixed with a ‘D’ and were often filed in the back of the drawer where they could be easily ignored.

Determining the number that was attached to each letter—as in the case of, say, a *D-8*—was, in and of itself, a painstaking process of observation and speculation, as there was no way to concretely designate each prisoner an appropriate number without, first, knowing about his past and more importantly, about the circumstances that led up to his very existence, which was—to be sure—a daunting task to take on for any man who had been relegated to silence for as long as Bunnu. After all, he was aware of the futility of asking questions in the hopes of obtaining reliable data. He was more confident in his attempts at active observation than what could be achieved through the elicitation of a response and so he was left with no recourse but to gather whatever information he could by the means at his silent disposal and make an educated guess as to the number that would best categorize those factors that were out of the immediate control of the inmate himself. These factors included ethnicity, caste, birth order, eye color, blood type, birth weight, history of illness in the family, mother’s dietary preferences during pregnancy, and environmental factors from his childhood (which, in and of itself, included a variety of sub-criteria to be considered at great length).

The number, once arrived upon, allowed for the inmate in question to be filed into his respective place in his appropriate cabinet. Regardless, it often happened that new evidence about a prisoner came to light that made it necessary to revisit earlier approximations in the hopes of correcting any discrepancies in the data. In some cases, the new information may have made it necessary to reevaluate the number that had been previously decided upon and even to change the position of the person in the drawer of the cabinet. Nonetheless, such instances were rare and any adjustments made were abidingly minor as most new information had a greater likelihood of confirming previously held assumptions than discrediting them.

Bunnu had, thus, in the 39 months since he was forced out of his cell by the administrators, become so obsessed with his own methods of classifying and organizing data sets in his mind that, despite his silence, he had started to become more and more inclined to attending social gatherings for no other purpose than

to gather information about his fellow inmates to aid in the process of effectively categorizing them. He made his motives known to no one, for he had no way of doing so, but he had, as a result of this compulsive pastime, become an incredibly skilled eavesdropper, which is not to say, that he sought social contact itself, but more precisely, that he wished to be a more effective judge of character.

(The suit continued: “The youth culture of Asoka Plains was beginning to become increasingly prominent, as the economic upturn that Morell was experiencing, prior to their war with the Republic, had given way to a generation of bored youth with an enormous amount of disposable wealth to be spent on luxuries in great excess of those available to preceding generations.

“Thus, Asoka Plains became the backdrop for some of the newest and most groundbreaking fashions, status symbols, and even dance crazes brought on by this young community of well-heeled showboats. Soon, the dance halls were packed with the trust-fund society kids: these Dowry Daddy-O’s and Bob-haired Baby Dolls, strutting their limbs to spastic extremes to the rhythms of the Drippy Juice Pipe, the Ball-jangle, and the ever-popular Mammary Mambo. The band leader, a humble and retiring gentleman who went by the name of Scabby McGraw, was the master of ceremonies as he and his acclaimed ensemble, *the Magna-poops*, were destined to become legends in their own time with such dance hall classics as ‘Ethereal Scapegoat for Sale,’ ‘Magistrate’s on a Bender,’ and ‘Who put dat Dookie in my Test Tube?’ Dance halls were packed to the hilt until morning as the music echoed loudly through the valley at night: so loud, in fact, that it even drowned out the commotion caused by their parents’ dinner parties.

“Divine Nectar was the substance of choice and—though in limited supply—became a kind of staple at the dance halls as its availability seemed to make the distinction between an evening of moderate excitement and a night of unmitigated ecstasy. During his frequent visits to Asoka Plains, Crown Prince Mitsuo, himself, couldn’t resist a night out with the young socialites and insisted that every function he attended be fully stocked with casks of the Nectar. Though tradition forbade it, Mitsuo took a kind of defiant pleasure in mixing with the common people to the delight of all concerned. In fact, he spent hours each day with a dance instructor, learning some of the latest moves, so that he might showcase them the next evening at the dance hall.”)

Against the wall, between the windows, one of the inmates was grimacing painfully in his reclining chair as a tattoo artist dipped a needle into a steel bucket of hot melted black rubber and fashioned with it, upon his shoulder, a stylized, albeit crude rendering of “The Choir of Diminished Shadows,” that famous work by the born-again Algorithmist painter, Carlotta Wakefield. His comrades, who were adorned with similar designs upon the shoulder and chest, sat around the man to provide moral support. Some held, upon their laps, pink potted tulips that they had signed out from the Yard for the purposes of indirectly expressing empathy for their compatriot.

Their eyes, however, were not on the man getting the tattoo, but in fact, hovering about the room, looking at members of rival factions. The factions were one thing that hadn’t disappeared with the institution of Free Love in this facility, despite the best hopes of the administrators. In fact, the factions were as strong as ever, albeit in a different way than one might imagine. They no longer battled in the Yard, as they once had, but instead evolved into more complex organizations that aggressively competed for members, money, diaper lotion, and, most importantly, pheromone-enhancing substances.

One faction member’s eyes fell upon Bunu, as a knowing smile broke across his face. Bunu did his best to ignore him and continued focusing on the conversations of the inmates sitting around him.

(The suit continued: “With the invention of the horseless carriage, Asoka saw to it that the roads were paved over and soon, the streets were packed with automobiles. Car culture swept through Asoka Plains and it was only a matter of time before local interests decided to sponsor their very first Auto Race and Motor Show. On the main boulevard, crowds lined the street to watch the motorcade of competing race cars, with souped-up engines and premium parts, some handcrafted to perfection to allow for acceleration to incredible speeds. The candy-colored cars passed in procession to the cheers of onlookers, honking their horns, with revs of the engine that were deep and gravelly like thunder. Silver tailpipes gleamed in the sunlight of springtime as black clouds of exhaust streamed out and the smell of pure unadulterated speed drifted throughout the streets. It was the smell of excitement. It was more than that: it was mankind poised to tear across the landscape at incredible speeds, to cross great expanses of land in very little time and outpace even the fastest of all God’s creatures.

“However, this enthusiasm wasn’t shared by all. The older generation, who watched these contraptions litter the boulevards of the town, scoffed at the foolishness of this idea of making sport out of the horseless carriage. The candy-colored paints, the racing stripes, the loud engine noises: it was all lost on them. The flare of it, the baseness of degrading oneself to cheering for the performance of a machine was just too gauche for their refined sensibilities to process. To them, sport was best left in its purest form: that of human trials, victories, and defeats. This was the arena that suited them best. A horse race, for example, still required skill, breeding, and intense training: all of which were overseen by people. And so, while the children flocked to the stadium for motor sport, their parents engaged in more civilized sport by watching horse races, or perhaps even an equestrian football match.

“But what started, at first, as civil disagreement between the younger and older generations soon started to degrade to out-and-out rivalry. A motorway was built along the perimeter of the valley, past the mountain villas and winding around the equestrian football stadium. The Asoka Plains Motor Sport Association [APMSA] had, with the support of local sponsors, put down a lot of money for the purposes of building a track upon which weekly races could be held. And no sooner was it built than the APMSA was already making the preparations for the track’s inaugural race. Not to be outdone, the Equine Football League [EFL] organized an all-star match that started exactly one hour before the race. The attendance at both events was unprecedented and the fans of each could even be seen rallying together outside the football stadium to taunt the other, as though to claim supremacy in their choice of amusement. Minor skirmishes occurred, but no one was seriously injured. That is, until the race began and the cars sped noisily around the horse equestrian stadium. The noise from these engines spooked the horses, which from the influence of steroids, thereupon went on a merciless rampage through the stands, trampling dozens of spectators and laying waste to the concession stand. 22 horses were killed, 12 injured and later euthanized and 38 spectators were seriously wounded. But the conflict didn’t end there...

“In the weeks to come, the noise from the races would again-and-again prove to be sufficient to drive the older generation away from their time-honored sporting events. Sometimes, the events themselves would be cancelled on days in which a race was to be held, leaving the older generation with little more to do with their time than take up refuge from the noise in the quieter corners of their homes; or, in some cases, even leave their estates entirely to make their way to the Asoka Plains Royal Resort and Banquet Hall to attend community gatherings addressing the growing threat to their way of life. At these gatherings, community leaders remained cavalier in their tone, yet persistent in their appeals that the town’s founder and governor, P.K. Asoka, do something about this state of affairs. Asoka, however, remained staunchly dismissive of any kind of threat, as he seemed to be doing his utmost to distance himself from the situation, afraid that he might otherwise lose favor with the Crown Prince Mitsuo—who, himself, was a great fan of motor sport. And so, the community leaders, left with no alternatives, planned demonstrations and staged sit-downs along the tracks in the following weeks to prevent races from being held.

“And despite their best efforts, the auto races became more and more frequent to the point that drivers, engineers, and mechanics alike started flocking to Asoka Plains from all over the known world to seek their fortunes in Auto Racing. Many of the drivers had once been gun runners from the Outlands, who

were renowned for their ability to elude the authorities in high-speed car chases along mountain passes with hairpin turns and loose gravel as they made their way full throttle for areas controlled by their client guerilla factions in the jungles below. Now, here they were, in the lap of luxury, in the paradise known all over the world as Asoka Plains. Being of such a humble background, these drivers didn't know how to react to the adulation they were suddenly receiving from the young and wealthy. They were invited to parties, filled to capacity with Divine Nectar, and shoved—willingly or unwillingly—into their cars for midnight spectator street races. Parents flocked to the streets from their villas to grab their respective children by the ear and drag them home. The young spectators, hopped up on the Nectar, however, resisted the suppression by their elders and violence ensued. This was the beginning of a series of violent clashes and terrorist attempts between the rival tribes of young and old.

“Despite the surge in violent conflicts between the tribes, over the years to come, the motor shows would come to be increasingly popular. Empty lots were developed and turned into moderately-priced accommodations as the events had become a source of tourism for the common people. Hotels, restaurants, bars, casinos, salons, fashion boutiques and souvenir shops soon lined the main boulevard, causing the population of the area to triple and sometimes even quadruple whenever an important event was to be held. Needless to say, the demand for labor brought on by this increase in tourism brought in trainloads of migrant laborers from other lands, looking to make enough money to send to their families back home. Prince Mitsuo, who himself had become a rather avid enthusiast of motor sport, often attended and—on rare occasions—even participated as a driver in some of these races. He also brought with him, by freight train, his own collection of custom cars to be displayed alongside all the other entries in the annual competition, earning him 7 first place trophies and 3 honorable mentions.”)

The cherubs began making their way through the rows to scrub down the inmates with their sponges and rags. The larger ones wiped bare chests and shoulders, heads and legs, while some of the tinier ones crawled into orifices—ears, nostrils, and skin pores—to scrub the insides clean and scrape away any encrusted debris with wire mesh. Two rows ahead, Bunu could hear one of the inmates in the midst of being cleaned, let out a relaxed, “Ahhhhhh...” It had maybe been ten months since the last time the cherubs had come to clean and rain their sanctifying blessings upon them and presumably, in that time, a lot of filth had built up.

A bioarchitectural engineer, who was in for shooting himself out a cannon without a license, tapped Bunu on the shoulder repeatedly, all the while, leaning forward and whispering in his mountain accent about the mechanics by which the talking suit was able to sustain itself, “What we be talking 'bout here, Cuz is...da living suit. You wit me? Da living suit dat respire by means of dem perforations. Breev tru dem air holes in dem sleeves, see? But den, inside da ting you got dis extensive vascular system made from dem starched arteries.”

He craned his long neck over Bunu's shoulder and his coconut-shaped head dangled and bobbed as though hanging from a thin branch. He continued in a whisper, “Dem arteries and capillaries, dey got 2 purposes...dey. Support and transport, you wit me?”

Bunu nodded, if for no other reason than to placate the bumpkin and end the conversation then and there. He didn't like to be distracted from his eavesdropping.

(The suit continued: “One year, however, the Motor Show was cancelled suddenly due to safety concerns, as news had reached the town of rising tensions between Morell and the Republic. Prince Mitsuo, insensible to the threats of the Republic, insisted that the event be held, nonetheless, as he wanted to showcase some of the newest models that he had acquired over the past year. The stadium was, thus, re-opened and a special event was held by invitation only for those spectators who had been longtime

residents of Asoka Plains. The motor show went off without a hitch, earning the Prince an unprecedented 3 first place trophies and special recognition for his unwavering commitment to the future of this sport. The awards ceremony was well-received by the crowd, who admired the Crown Prince for his unmatched bravado and his ability to easily assuage the people's fears regarding the escalating situation with their adversaries. That evening, however, during Mitsuo's victory party, news came over the wire that troops from the Republic had taken the Royal Palace in the Morellan capital of Mehta. The King was under house arrest and plans were under way to banish him to the Isle of Deposed Kings.

"Mitsuo, upon hearing the news from one of his advisors, remained confident that the Royal Guard would regroup and recapture the palace in due time. The best recourse, he felt, would be to stay put and pretend, for the sake of his guests, that everything was under control. And so, he returned to his companions at the party, carrying on with them into the early morning.

"And he had only managed to get about 2 hours of rest in his private quarters before being awakened with news of a second transmission over the wire. Several bridges that connected the railway station in Asoka Plains to other key areas had been blown up, presumably by the Republic's troops. The telegraph wires were, for the moment, still intact, allowing him to give the necessary orders to make provisions for his safe return. Mitsuo, however, still reeling from the effects of a Nectar-induced haze, ignored the pleadings of his closest advisors and insisted on staying in his villa, for fear that his sudden departure may alarm his friends in Asoka Plains unnecessarily. Instead, he commanded that more supplies be flown in by balloon. He was not ready to go back and assume the throne yet... and his supply of Divine Nectar was running dangerously low.")

Bunnu felt a tapping on his shoulder again and he sighed. "Listen, Cuz! Whachu gotta understand 'bout da suit is..."

Bunnu had now spent 5 years awaiting trial in the Asoka Plains Detention Facility and he had maintained his silence, simply because he didn't have the inclination to speak anymore. And despite his thirst for information, he simply detested the idea of speaking to others. He implicitly accepted the assumption that any data that could be gathered by such methods would inherently be skewed by personal motives.

Of course, this did not stop others from attempting to engage him, somehow in conversation. In fact, they all seemed intent on getting his attention, as they seemed to think that their factions would benefit greatly overall by winning him over and achieving his "blessing." And to use the word *blessing* was no exaggeration: For some bizarre reason, the other inmates had come to idolize him...or at the very least, they had come to idolize some romanticized construct that had conveniently been projected upon him, perhaps due to his mysterious, silent nature. And the attention he was now receiving from them, as a result of it, was proving to be a terrible nuisance.

The staff, too, insensible to his annoyance at the intrusions of others, had encouraged him these past 3 years to make a greater effort to make friends, as this could help pull him out of—what they assumed to be—his depression. Yet, for him, depressed or not, it seemed a far better thing to remain miserable and foul in temperament in the depths of one's solitude than to seek to be any other way for the purposes of making others, or even oneself, comfortable. The consequences of performing a role to satisfy the expectations of others, the repercussions of going through the motions of social interaction, after all, could be devastating and monstrous. Attempts at being diplomatic by feigning bliss could actually give way to repercussions that were the exact opposite of the intended effect. Consider the example of the Genki Phantom (seated just left of middle in the front row).

This gleeful wraith, though well-intentioned, sought to defy its metaphysical role as a force for malevolence by attempting to be good-natured and friendly, making his trespasses upon the Will, his deceptions, all the more frightening than they might have otherwise been if he had undertaken such

endeavors sincerely and with pure, albeit malicious, intentions. What brought this phenomenon on was presumably a nagging sense of denial, an irresolute cognitive dissonance stemming from his inability to reconcile himself with his very nature. Instead of embracing his vileness, he made a concerted effort to mask his abominable features—his three-pronged nose, his sharp cheeks, his harsh, pointed jaw—with a forced attempt at a soft smile that more closely resembled a sneer than anything else, in the hopes of affecting a calm and pleasant demeanor that would otherwise be reserved for those who were not, in fact, Evil Incarnate. Voices of desperation howled throughout him in sorrowful agony as he nodded an affirming, yet intimidating nod, crooned a scrap-iron clank of a trill, and stretched his lips to their limits to manufacture what was meant to be a grin, but more closely resembled a grimace.

Looking now at the back of his oblong head, Bunu could see that the Genki Phantom had slicked back his wild rubbery hair in an attempt to make himself more presentable. Concealed, too, were his glistening neck fangs, which would otherwise protrude from the posterior of his neck-face. He had chosen to cover this with a brightly-colored, lacey ascot, which the prison guards had afforded him the privilege to wear, in part, due to his supernatural status.

Bunu did not seek to be the menacing social butterfly that the Genki Phantom was, nor did he seek to forge alliances or to be liked by others.

To him, it served no purpose.

(The suit continued: “Mitsuo waited for days and weeks for the supplies, but they never came and soon, even his own reserves of the Divine Nectar had been depleted. And it was only a matter of hours after the effects of the last dose had worn off, that a great hunger had overtaken him—one so severe and painful that it seemed worse than starvation.

“Clutching at his abdomen, he got up from his bed and went immediately to the dining room. On the dining table, he found to his great relief, his morning feast, which usually consisted of much more food than he was capable of digesting. Today, however, he was particularly famished. So, he quickly devoured the first course, the Man-telope breast, finding upon finishing that his appetite hadn’t diminished. He turned to his servant, motioning to his empty plate, demanding his next course. The servant expediently served him a generous helping of Jellied Eggs which the Crown Prince slurped up in a matter of minutes. Next, was the Mumta marrow consommé. Followed by some green rice pudding. Then, Aloo Magenta with Mole Fly larva flakes. After that, steamed crickets with fondue.

“Mitsuo ate throughout the day and into the late night. His advisors, concerned that perhaps he had sunk into a depression because of the tragedy that had befallen his kingdom, stood by his side silently, giving each other knowing glances from time to time.

“They pitied the Prince.

“The eating continued into the dawn and the Prince took a break to empty his bowels and take a power nap. He commanded the cooks to have the table ready with his next meal within the hour. And with this, he left the dining room.

“About 20 minutes passed and the Prince burst back through the door with his pants around his ankles and a ravenous look in his eye. One of his advisors proceeded to replace his chair with one with a hole cut into the center of the seat, while another placed a bucket underneath to catch his feces.

“And so, never feeling the need to leave his chair, the Prince resumed his eating: Pineal Gland Sarada, Piddle-dowsed Scuppernongs, Minced Flatworm with Powdered Shouyu, Dark Matter Giblet Pie, Lesser Bison Makhani, etc. After days of this intense feasting, however, his servants and advisors were beginning

to get rather nervous as the food supplies were starting to run low. So, servants were sent out to all the houses and shops within the vicinity to obtain as much food as possible, explaining to all that inquired that the Prince had recently been taken ill and, thus, had a *slight* increase in appetite. The surrounding residents were not at all surprised at news of his 'illness' as a similar situation had inexplicably taken shape amongst the youth of the region, leading to food shortages throughout the area. Relieved to hear that this malady did not only seem to be plaguing the Prince, the servants gathered whatever food they could and returned to the villa's dining room to find Crown Prince Mitsuo feasting on what appeared to be a human leg. His advisors were still standing nervously by his side, sweating profusely, though apparently relieved to see that the servants had supplies with them.

"But the food could only last so long and, as such, it was only a matter of days before Crown Prince Mitsuo—having finished every last morsel of food and still craving more— had somehow managed to devour all but 2 of his remaining servants, both of whom were cooks. Mitsuo looked at the two of them angrily and screamed as he slammed his fist against the table, 'I'm the King, dammit! Where's my food?'

"'I'm sorry, your Majesty. We have nothing left,' one of the cooks pleaded.

"'Terribly sorry, sir. Perhaps it's time to leave the area,' said another.

"'You know who you're talking to, Boy?' Mitsuo demanded. Folds of fat were now hanging from his cheeks and jowls and upper lip, weighing down his mouth and consequently making it difficult for him to speak without obstruction. The words came out muddled by flesh and it seemed that his tongue may have swelled making it difficult to pronounce certain words. For example, *You know who you're talking to, Boy?* sounded more like *Yo doh hoh yoh thawkik thoo, bwa?* Simply uttering these words, in fact, made him sweat and gave way to a great sense of frustration, as though it were the fault of the other person that he was made to expend energy like this unnecessarily.

"'Yes...your Majesty' the cook said nervously, 'You are the King!'

"'Tham rah ahl em!' Mitsuo responded. *Translation: Damn right I am!*

"One of the cooks patted his sweaty brow with a handkerchief and pleaded, 'But you see, sir. We are out of servants. Giorgio and I: we are the only two cooks remaining.'"

"To this, Mitsuo exclaimed, 'Dzazha! Hukh hith ath thup!' *Translation: Giorgio! Cook his ass up!*

"'Yes, your Majesty,' Giorgio responded with a sigh.

"After eating all of his servants and advisors, the newly proclaimed King Mitsuo, decided that he would like to go for a drive. It had now been weeks since he'd eaten out and that terrible hunger of his was getting worse. However, upon pulling out of his driveway and into the streets of Asoka Plains, he found the area in a state of turmoil. Houses had been burned to the ground. Carcasses, stripped of flesh, lay on the side of streets splattered with blood. A tribe of young socialites stood by the side of the road watching his car drive by with cold, soulless eyes. Their faces were smeared with blood, their cheeks and jowls, too, weighed down by excess flab, until it became clear to Mitsuo that they, too, had a great hunger.

"Mitsuo drove down the main boulevard, but didn't see a soul. Windows were broken. Doorways boarded up. The place seemed abandoned, but surely it couldn't have been. And then he saw at a crosswalk, straight ahead, three giggling fat men holding chains pulling prisoners behind them. He recognized one of these prisoners as P.K. Asoka, the founder of this town. He floored the accelerator, in the hopes of mowing them over, only to miss and hit a nearby lamppost. The car door opened and he was dragged out into the street.

"Mitsuo's subsequent demise is no great tale and I'll certainly spare you the graphic details, except to say

that when the Morellan Resistance landed on the plains in a strategic retreat from the Battle of Mehta, they were shocked at the conditions to which Asoka Plains had been reduced. They were attacked and, at first, overwhelmed by tribes of hungry young men, looking for fresh meat to satisfy their appetites. However, being in better physical shape, and equipped with weapons with a great deal of stopping power, the soldiers soon overpowered the locals. However, in the heat of these socialites' beastly cravings, it was difficult to coexist side-by-side, as these people had devolved to the level of savages and couldn't bear up with the restraints of civilization any longer.

“It was, thus, decided that the tribes of Hungrymen would be allocated certain areas of land that were isolated from the military camp. However, certain members of the youth faction of the Morellan resistance believed this strategy to be unwise and took it upon themselves to spearhead an all-out offensive aimed at annihilating these barbarous Hungryman tribes. However, the Hungrymen, being better educated, despite their crude ways, found themselves better capable of organizing and strategizing than the young, inexperienced officers of the resistance. And soon enough, not only did they overcome the attacks on their tribe, but they also managed to steal all the food rations from the military camp, reducing the troops to starvation. An all-out battle ensued within the chain of command and among the troops, until they, too were reduced to cannibalism.

“And when the occupying forces from the Republic finally arrived at the Plains via L'Oiseau Mecanique, the troops found no adversaries, but various tribes, all of whom had the amalgamated appearance of being indigenous to the area, though this simply could not have been the case: Tribes of Young Socialites, Tribes of their Elders, Tribes of Migrant Laborers, Tribes of Auto Mechanics, Tribes of General Infantry from the Morellan Resistance, Tribes of their Officers, even a Tribe Consisting of the Horn Section of *Scabby McGraw and the Magna-poops*. Asoka Plains, once the beautiful paradise of unspeakable beauty was stripped bare, gray, and forlorn. Buildings were run-down. Skeletons were scattered about the street. Ruins littered the landscape. And left with the formidable task of cleaning the place up and starting over again, the leader of the occupying forces, a man by the name of General Aziz-3, observed, ‘Human action—drained of its superfluities and absolved of the necessity for pretense—is, in its very essence, cannibalistic in motive.’ Inspired by his own words, he had this phrase carved in stone at the entrance to the Asoka Plains Royal Resort and Banquet Hall—a building that would, years later, become a detention facility for enemy combatants and political dissidents. This very facility: the Asoka Plains Detention Center.”)

The suit bowed before the audience, “I hope you found this educational.” The inmates' applause was lacking in enthusiasm, causing the suit, humiliated by the lukewarm reception to collapse into a pile of clothing on the floor beside the menhir upon which it had sat. The menhir, too, though seemingly deficient in the sentience required to comprehend wholly what had happened to the suit, felt a soulful tremor of separation anxiety press upon the insides of its hollow chambers; and with a solitary fissure creeping up its mid-section, the monolithic structure began to crumble to its lonesome rudimentary fragments. A cloud of stone dust soon enveloped the stage and when it cleared, countless black semioplasmic dots scurried out from the collar and sleeves of the suit and in every which direction to disappear somewhere between the stage and the walls.

Every Good Boy

“Cuz...” the bioarchitectural engineer said again in his mountain accent, tapping Bunu on the shoulder. He craned his neck over again and Bunu could now see that despite his little coconut head, the man was rather tall and slim like a stick figure. His tiny eyes darted about the room, as he spoke through a large ovoid mouth with protruding lips, “Gib’ me fi’ minutes wit dat suit and I can restore it no problem. Dat ting’d make a good d’version fo’ an ‘scape attempt! What say you? Ya sho’ looks like you wanna make ‘scape mighty quick! Me and da boys gots us a tunnel goin’ and wit yo’ blessin’ and a wee bitta dough, metinks we could make dis ting work!”

Bunu sighed at the man’s desperate plea for his attention, as he watched Archimedes-5 stand up and approach the podium, kicking the purple tuxedo to the side to release a cloud of dust. The sprightly angelic twerps swarmed to the stage to intercept the dust before it spread to other parts of the room. “That’ll be all for today, gentlemen!” Archimedes announced, twirling his long mustache, “We’ll meet here again, next week. The beautiful and voluptuous Dr. Aganashini will be our keynote speaker and the topic will be ‘The Dissolution of Sin through Open Intercourse.’ When she speaks, please do your best to focus on her words and not on her gorgeous and squeezably plump breasts, which are the shape of melons and perfectly-sized to envelop your manhood whole as you thrust it into the soft warmth of her cleavage. And when I say *‘focus on her words’* that doesn’t mean that one is to stare blankly at those full and luscious lips which could wrap soulfully around the shaft of your cock as her tongue licks the head, propelling you amidst gentle head-bobs of moist warmth to shoot your wad down her waiting throat. None of that! Instead, I would advise you all to take her words to heart. And as a pre-assignment, before next week, I would like each of you to engage in no less than 10 sexual acts—masturbatory or otherwise, but preferably with a partner or series of partners—and be ready to speak of them at the next session. Incidentally, I’m told that there are some among you who are refusing to interact with others during Courtship Hour. I must insist that you make a greater attempt to be sexual. After all, ‘you can’t be sexual, without first being social,’ as I always say. But then again, I can’t blame some of our newer inmates for being bashful around those who’ve been on the inside longer. It is, of course, natural, being new to this sort of environment, that one should feel a certain degree of apprehension about becoming someone else’s *bitch*. However, I urge all of you to not look upon the situation in such a way. I think that we simply need to break through that shyness and get some rapport going. It’s those first steps that can be a little shaky, but once you get the process going, you are well on your way to a happy and productive sexual dialogue. However, taking those first steps, in and of itself, can be, I must confess, somewhat harrowing and so, to make the experience a little easier for all involved, we have decided to facilitate the group discourse at the molecular level.

“Dr. Narciss is—oh...you all know Dr. Narciss, don’t you? The man seated to my right with the enormous cranium? Yes, yes...quite a specimen, is he not? Uh...well anyway, Dr. Narciss has, in fact, developed a new apparatus through which linguistic discourse is undertaken between the molecules in our bodies. Messages encoded into our DNA bubble up to the surface through skin secretions that evaporate into airborne communiqués that collide and react in mid-air with the messages sent by other people, before returning to the source in the hopes of eliciting a response that would allow the dialogue to continue. And so, grievances can easily be aired by each individual as their communiqués take up free radicals in the air to be utilized in the composition of complex molecular institutions with directives to be operated upon and modified according to the flow of other existing cycles in the ecosystem. These institutions, in fact,

become manifestations of our Collective Will, somewhat like a superstructure constructed from building blocks from a variety of sources and so it could be said that this process could only serve to connect each of us to the other to create a community that exists in Harmony. Harmony will be our guiding force: the chief directive by which what could be considered appropriate behavior within the group can be easily determined and clarified, so that we all need not think about it at great depth. And so, this system of discourse, though admittedly untested until now, can only serve to strengthen the bonds—social, physical, spiritual and otherwise—that may already exist among you. So, I urge you all to sit back in your cells, soak up the warm spring air, and allow the organic discourse unfold as it should. Presumably, the discourse has already been coded into our genes and has been waiting to be expressed, much like the written notes of a chamber orchestra composition. Through this mechanism, we can conceivably achieve a consonance of Being, a harmonic fusion of expression as our spirits react together, through our secretions and excretions, with the surrounding atmosphere. But, I see that Dr. Narciss is shaking his gigantic head at me...and perhaps I haven't explained it well at all. Regardless, I think this process of proactive genetic expression and communication will bring us all to a new level of collective understanding. We are well on our way to becoming Embodiments of Empathy..."

"We're doing so well already," the sexpot Dr. Aganashini suddenly piped in, her eyes bright and smooth skin glistening in the glow of the stage lights. "And it's only going to get better. I'm so proud of all of you. We're making such great progress together!" Her voice sighed heartfully like soft velvet. "After all, Every Good Boy Does Fine...and?"

"Good Boys Do Fine Always!" the men responded in chorus.

"My sweet little Bonobos!" she marveled.

Cessation at the Follicle

There was a sound like plastic crumpling and rubbing against surfaces. It filled the room as the men, clad only in their leak-proof diapers, arose from their chairs and made their way to the exit of the assembly hall. Bunu could now feel the sweat pouring down in rivers and canals through the dense forest of hairs on his chest. Those cherubic bastards had not returned the temperature to its normal level. In fact, the assembly hall was now particularly hot and moist, like a steam sauna, causing Bunu to wonder if, in fact, this wasn't an intentional provision of this new initiative on the part of the administrators.

He sighed as he found himself silently wondering what his body could have been communicating during the assembly and, more importantly, with *whom*. A rash had now formed on the palm of each hand, though he couldn't be sure why, except for his nagging suspicion that his Will had somehow been betrayed and overridden by the mechanisms of his Form. His Form and his Will were, in fact, bitter enemies, who each constantly sought to overcome the influence of the other. Now, it was the Form that was winning. But it wasn't winning truly so much as it was being *aided* by external forces that rendered unto it a distinctly lopsided advantage. To see these rashes upon his hands now meant that some interaction was occurring on the biochemical level between him and someone else without the necessity of their consent. Just thinking about this now, as he walked back down the corridor to his cell, he couldn't help but feel violated at the intrusion upon his distinct physiological mechanisms.

He wondered how the other person felt about this and then thought that this, too, was of no consequence, as he saw it fit not to acknowledge any connection between the two of them, to begin with. He certainly wasn't about to start a conversation to find out either. 5 years of silence...and enough time had now passed that there could be no reason good enough to start speaking again. In any case, as far as he understood, most spoken language seemed to bear with it the purpose of building and maintaining social networks, creating alliances, or even confirming—by means of either mutual identification or confrontation—one's identity within the larger social framework. However, he saw no use in endeavoring to do any of these things. His stay at the Asoka Plains Detention Facility would be temporary and, as such, he saw no virtue in making the situation a comfortable one, as it would only seem to complicate matters further.

This is not to say, however, that the other inmates simply understood just by looking at him that he wished to be left alone. And thus, he had, on numerous occasions, been forced into a position in which he had had to rebuff—though not verbally—the multitude of attempts on the part of his fellow inmates to reach out to him for one reason or another. Their adulation, after all, was embarrassing and tiresome. To be put on a pedestal by those one couldn't be less concerned about was an esteem not worthy of one's own acknowledgment. He didn't seek or deserve their respect...and he didn't need to speak to them to know that doing so would simply be a waste of his time.

However, it wasn't solely this collective need for idolism that prompted the other inmates to break from their daily routines and wander in Bunu's direction. There were other forces at work, not just within the facility itself, but all around him in the air: other motives advancing inward, other agents of influence. And thus, the inmates' appeals to him had presumably been steeped in some agenda, unclear to him, prompting him, as though sensing an immediate threat to the purity of his inclinations, to retreat further from others and seek reclusion, as he had done in the schoolyard as a child. The last thing he needed was to be a pawn

to some unknown scheme. Who knew what the others had in mind for him?

There had, after all, already been enough acquaintanceship plaguing his existence, thus far, to last him 10 lifetimes—or life sentences as the case may be—and, as such, Bunu had become inclined to assume that those who sought him out, whether in his present or in his past, could only have been doing so as a consequence of some underlying sphere (or spheres) of influence that were conceivably out of his immediate grasp or capability to perceive. These spheres could only serve to catalyze a response (or series of responses) from him which followed trajectories that—when extrapolated—would pull him further and further away from his purest and most individual of dispositions. And if he were to follow such trajectories, these influences would only manage to mask themselves further until he ceased to be aware of the sweep of tides that guided him from one action to the next.

Yet, despite his determination to insulate himself from the influences surrounding him, he remained dimly aware of the oscillating cycles, chemical and otherwise, that appeared to surround him and beckon for his compliance whenever he happened to be in possession of something that met the demands of the surrounding environment. These factors he could not control. Yet, the influence of other people upon this environment served to engage Bunu's form into an indirect mutualism, inevitably symbiotic in its biochemical processes, from which there could be no means of escape. Naturally, this breed of mutualism would only be a source of perverse pleasure for those droves of maniacal zealots among the prison populace who sought biochemical union with their godly and beloved Bunu by means of this broad-scaled process. Nevertheless, Bunu managed to actively resist the tendencies of the very cells that comprised him, in an attempt to exert the power of the Will over the Form and invoke a conscious state of stasis.

He had once heard a story from Rakesh-7 in which the protagonist, an inmate of a prison facility, had been told by his guards that he was expected to grow a beard as a form of retribution for his crimes. Yet, the protagonist was strongly averse to the idea of punitive facial hair. So, in a form of protest, he invoked what he called *cessation at the follicle as a means of civil disobedience* and managed to keep the skin of his face smooth and hairless for the duration of his 20-year term. And upon leaving the prison, he relinquished conscious control of his hair growth only to end up with a beard down to his chest within the matter of an hour. This accelerated facial hair growth continued for the remainder of his years and it became necessary for him to employ a team of barbers to follow him around constantly and assist in the trimming and disposal of newly grown hair. Despite this inconvenience, the man lived to a ripe old age, never once regretting the defiance he had exercised toward his captors: a fact that, in and of itself, never ceased to impress Bunu, regardless of how many times the Outlander told that story.

Naturally, to prevent one's facial hair from growing required a great deal of concentration, to be sure, but with enough strength of resolve, certainly anything could be possible. And so, Bunu tried to do the same by attempting to limit the intake and outtake of molecules at the cellular level, in the hopes that this should allow him to isolate himself from interaction with his surroundings, and hence from the influence of other inmates. But then, such attempts could only serve to be detrimental, as it was imperative that his cells somehow interacted with their surroundings, if for no other reason, than to allow for their own respiration. However, he had now reached a point in which he couldn't have cared less what happened to them. They could shrivel up and die for all he cared. It was difficult to imagine that there should be anything worth looking forward to that would cause him to have even a modicum of concern for his own physical health.

And as a natural consequence of this thinking, it certainly came as no surprise that his health had started to deteriorate rapidly. He had first begun to notice this the previous month as he was putting on his shoes to go out to the Yard for Courtship Hour. On the inside of each shoe was a kind of yellowish-gray residue—a powder from the looks of it—that, when poured out upon the floor of his cell, left a mound that looked like wet sand, though it was much softer in texture. Upon putting his shoes on, he found that they were slightly bigger in comparison with the size of his feet than they had been the previous day. This meant one of two things: (a) he was truly starting to shrink in size, as he had surmised earlier on in his imprisonment,

or (b) the yellowish-gray residue had nothing to do with his body shrinking and he was simply letting his imagination run away with him again. Either way, he could do nothing more than shrug the matter off and assume that some dust from the outside was getting into his shoe.

And so, everyday, he swept away the residue, tied his shoelaces tight and ventured outside to the corner of the Yard, where he spent his afternoons staring through the glass of the Geodesic Dome and over the concrete wall that fortified the complex at a distant peak of the Panta Rhei-21 mountains. He stood as he always did, with his back slumped against a wall and his hands in his diaper pockets, eavesdropping on the yips and howls of the other men, as they chased one another back and forth, engaged in intricate mating calls and dances.

The Gentleman Caller

The Courtship Hour initiative had first started about 10 years earlier when Archimedes-5 first arrived at the facility. A behavioral scientist and researcher in a former life, Archimedes had proposed this initiative to the administration as a means of limiting aggression between inmates and weakening the factions, after years of performing research on Land Eels. Land Eel communities, which were generally prone to aggression between males who sought dominance over one another, were shown to have fewer violent confrontations when the leadership roles of the Alpha Males were decentralized further and dispersed throughout the community. The dissemination of these roles required a level of intimacy between members of the community that had previously been unheard of amongst the Land Eels. Thus, sexual favors became encouraged as a means of expressing obligation and appreciation between individual members to the logical extreme that, within a matter of months, Free Love would become rampant in communities in which this technique of establishing communion had been employed. As a result, the Land Eels became an incestuous bunch, sworn to protect one another and co-exist cooperatively, minimizing any need for competition or confrontation. Obligation, thereupon, became the context by which social debts could be manifested and transferred between individuals.

It was this necessity for transferring obligation between one another that troubled Bunu greatly. He saw it as a burden, not just to be obligated, but even to have someone obligated to him and, as such, saw no great need to partake. Nonetheless, before coming to know of the legendary status he had come to take on in the minds of the other inmates, a less cautious Bunu had been approached on numerous occasions by an inmate by the name of Makhan Singh, who sought to establish a rapport, seemingly, by bearing gifts that Bunu was left with no choice but to accept.

“Some lotion for yon diaper rash, fair inmate,” Makhan Singh had said chivalrously on one such occasion, as he presented a tube of blue cream to Bunu on one knee. The man was short, stubby-legged and stout in physique. In spite of this, he had disproportionately lanky arms that projected down from his awkward bony shoulders, jutted diagonally to pointed elbows, angled acutely back inward to the forearms, which thereupon narrowed dramatically like two ends of a carrot to wrists and hands, similar in diameter and size to those of a baby.

Bunu frowned and said nothing at Makhan’s advance. He had already determined this man’s classification. He was a classic *B-21*. There could be no doubt. And so, this man’s appeals to him could only serve to waste precious time, better spent on other time-killing activities. However, the gentleman caller was a hard one to shake as he implored, “Really, I must insist!”

He wasn’t looking Bunu in his eye, but instead at his crotch and he appeared to be licking his lips. “I am greatly indebted, as you are the only one amongst the inmates who has been willing to hear me out. For this, you have my deepest and sincerest gratitude, for what is a man without true friends? A man, who is not to be trusted, that’s who! But you, fair inmate, have gained my favor.”

Bunu sighed and took the bottle of lotion, nodding in feigned appreciation.

“You do me a great service, kind sir. You do the world a great service!” Makhan marveled with excitement, prompting a shrug from Bunu. “You see, I believe that the world would benefit greatly from

the severity of my humble opinions. And yet, I am a Nobody. Surely, no one whose opinion is worth listening to. The problem, I imagine, is one of credibility. I am not skilled at logical reasoning, nor am I any good at emotional appeals, and so I am left to rely upon whatever little rhetorical and ethical authority I possess on the topic at hand. And yet, I lack a firm base of knowledge and experience to declare my points valid and my wisdom intact, thus many are reluctant to deem my assertions plausible, for my claims are often subject to misinformation and contradiction. I wish to be an authority on all areas of interest to mankind. Yet, how does one become an authority on any one topic, much less on any range of topics? One might say that it would first be necessary to seek education on these topics, but in doing so, does one not cede his own knowledge to the views of an external authority, who himself may have achieved his academic prestige through illusory and unfounded means? All I seek is to be that authority: I do not wish to be deemed anyone's intellectual inferior in the process of achieving it. I understand that acquiring a sense of ethical authority is a long and arduous process of learning, unlearning and relearning, but at what point does one realize that he has achieved that elusive sense of credibility that he has so fervently sought? And how does one know that it's real and not imagined—not illusory and not unfounded? Is there a loud bell that rings, some kind of certificate, or a special ceremony by which one can get his rhetorical and ethical authority conferred upon him? And, if so, who confers it? Better yet, who decides whether he gets it in the first place? Someone else who could be said to be an authority? But how did that person get his? From someone preceding even him with a recognized air of authority, I imagine...but does that mean that there is an infinite regression of authority, or is there some point at which authority originated organically and external to humanity, rather than as an instinctual sense of esteem conferred upon others by those already in possession of it. And if it is, in fact, external and organic, I suppose one might even call it a sense of *enlightenment*. Anyway, as you have, no doubt, gathered, I know so very few things that any opinion that I might have that seems worth expressing ends up getting quashed by my lack of assurance before it even reaches my mouth. You see, I used to be brainwashed and—oh, but you knew that already. I told you yesterday, didn't I? My apologies...I don't mean to harp on the same old thing over and over again. It must be terribly boring for you. That just goes back to what I was saying before. I'm a nobody! I have nothing substantial to say capable of substantiating my ideas. In fact, in the grand scheme of things, I'm simply a microbe. I'm like this microbe who doesn't know how to be...uh... *micro*! You see? I'm not even good at speaking metaphorically! Or was that a *simile*? To be honest, I don't know the difference between a simile and a metaphor, yet I have opinions nonetheless. *Is that wrong?*"

Bunnu, unsure of how to respond, simply shrugged again. He wondered why this man had chosen him out of everyone and then thought there could be no other choice as none were as willing as he to remain silent through this mindless jabbering. And so, in a way, without intending to, he had truly done the man a favor by not voicing any outright objections to his advances. It was from this breed of inactivity that Makhan's perceived sense of obligation to him had been forged. And the only way to cancel it out now was to give him a chance to reciprocate. Thus, Bunnu silently hoped that by accepting the diaper lotion, these distractions would end neatly then and there.

Makhan Singh, however, seemed to view the situation differently.

"I have to say," Makhan continued with his eyes watering and lips trembling, "I would hesitate to proclaim myself worthy of your affections, such that they are..." He smiled winsomely and his eyes looked down at Bunnu's emaciated frame, "Though, I must confess that I find that nappy chest hair of yours irresistible. Is it alright if I touch-?" He started to reach out with his tiny hands when Bunnu, suddenly, struck him with a right hook.

The man stumbled back in a daze, stunned by the punch, as Bunnu—who was equally surprised—froze and stared in astonishment at his own fist. The act of punching him hadn't been conscious, nor had it been any attempt on his part to assert some kind of masculinity or homophobia, but had been a kind of knee-jerk response to the encroachment of another upon his chest hair. After wavering for another moment, Makhan Singh fell to the ground and proceeded to rub his cheek, which was now beginning to swell. "You have a rather dainty punch," he remarked whimsically, "I find it difficult to describe, but there's something about

your follow-through that infuses your technique with this delicate air.” He rose to his feet and swiped the diaper rash lotion from Bunnu’s hands. “My dear sir, you have managed to charm me greatly. I bid you adieu, Fair Bunnu!” And he walked away.

Bunnu sighed in relief, for he had averted successfully an attempt from Makhan Singh to extract obligation from him. This, of course, would not be the last, as this self-deprecating suitor seemed tireless in his persistence. In fact, the very next day, he responded to Bunnu’s apparent disapprobation by attempting an elaborate mating dance—which coordinated hand claps and imitation bird calls with one foot hops and rhythmic head-bobs—for an inmate adjacent to Bunnu, presumably in an attempt to arouse envy. However, when Bunnu merely yawned in response, Makhan Singh lost his composure, burst into tears, and—overcome by the more primal of his tendencies—proceeded to beat the man half to death with his tiny fists of precision. The victim, a self-proclaimed rival of Bunnu’s—though Bunnu could scarcely understand why—barely survived the incident and was transferred to the intensive care unit of the facility. And the administration, left with no recourse, but to take whatever action they could on this, called Bunnu and Makhan Singh in to see the Warden so that he might investigate the matter in greater depth.

The Warden

The Warden's office looked like any other cell, only it was cluttered with numerous astrological charts, maps, and volumes of dusty old books with pages hanging out, dog-eared and marked in pen. The room was different from the other cells, however, insofar as it possessed that musty feel reserved for places where old things were kept. The aroma of decaying wood cellulose fibers permeated the room, as though each printed word within had indelibly insinuated itself upon the surrounding atmosphere.

This was a room in which codes were not only exceedingly prevalent, but even hell-bent on the prospect of making their presence felt to all who dared impose upon what one could only assume to be *their* domain. There was a manner with which one was to enter, a decorum to be observed in the way one conducted oneself, a procedure by which one was to inhale, a discipline to be followed in the pause between inhalation and exhalation, and subsequently a protocol underlying the social mechanics of expelling one's breath, even a set of guidelines with which biochemical processes were expected to fall in line—as evidenced by a sign on the wall, stating authoritatively in large black letters: ALL TRANSPORT OF INTERCELLULAR MATERIALS IN THIS AREA MUST CONFORM WITH CLAUSE 8, OF ARTICLE 33-C OF THE CYTOPLASMIC IMPORT-EXPORT ACT (REVISED 133.5.21.1), with a stamp underneath that said in tiny red letters: from THE INTERSTITIAL PORT AUTHORITY OF ASOKA PLAINS.

The regimented atmosphere of this office, however, was greatly contrasted by its physical appearance. The office had a rundown, makeshift look about it: a fact that was strikingly apparent upon even a momentary appraisal of the room's furniture. The bookcase, for example, was composed of a series of milk cartons stacked one upon the other. In place of a mattress, there was a tiny desk and a small wooden stool, both of which had books and papers strewn upon them, leaving no space to sit or write. The warden, himself, was crouched in the corner of this office, presumably having been left no other place to sit, as he stared at the charts and maps on the wall. He, too, was rather diminutive in size, his wiry arms cradling his knees, and his ribs protruding from an emaciated chest devoid of hair. He wore the same prison issue diaper as the other inmates and nothing else, save for the silver plastic toy badge that was loosely taped just above his left nipple. His pointy nose hung down from his decaying gray skin, punctuated by this look of imperious despair, festooned by a patchwork combination of facial features that led one to the immediate conclusion that he had forced a shit sandwich down his own gullet at some point in the distant past and still wasn't sure, as it languished in stasis in his system, whether to digest the wretched thing or give in to his latent urge to spew it out into the nearest vacant receptacle. This breed of indecision seemed somehow to be the fulcrum upon which all that rotated about his immediate axis seemed to be anchored.

“I can see now from the size of you that I have shrunk a great deal since my last encounter with any inmates. I assure you that I used to be much larger...” he said in a raspy voice. He cleared his throat and continued on in an even harsher voice, “Dr. Archimedes has asked me to meet with you both. Frankly speaking, I can't understand why they can't handle this matter themselves, but now and again, they leave these things that they can't be bothered to deal with to the old Warden, because maybe they think I can identify with the inmates. If I had an open line of communication with them, I might tell them that *that* ship sailed long ago...but I suppose I'd best make myself useful, or they're bound to forget about me until I've shrunk away to nothingness. Well...not *nothingness, per se*, but a half of a half of a half of something so infinitesimal that it might as well be Void—which could only be a fate far worse, as one's presence

could easily be misunderstood for absence. And that certainly would be the greatest injustice of all!

“Injustice...” he said, suddenly pondering something, “justice...injustice...” His nose started to whistle for a brief moment, before he silenced it with a proactive grunt and he exclaimed with renewed vigor, “I have no frame of reference, however, when I speak of such things. If such concepts as *justice* or *injustice* ever even existed, they’ve been overwhelmed by the weight of clauses, subclauses, precedents, and revisions.” He jumped to his feet and dusted off the cover of a book sitting upon his desk. He paged through it casually for a few minutes, seeming to forget that Makhan Singh and Bunu were standing before him. “My friends, I’ve been here a very long time. In this room, operating upon principles that are said to be rooted in the fundamental truths necessary for the successful functioning of a society. And yet, in that time, I have been a servant to many regimes, all of whose values differed from the others in enough ways to cause one to wonder if there was a universal truth by which civics could be set forth. But that’s a tired old academic matter. It’s simply not for us to decide right here and right now. To be honest, I’m too tired to worry about universal truths and *blah blah blah*...I feel foolish for even bringing it up!” He let out a puff of exhaustion as though suddenly deflated and his back hunched as he put a hand to his head.

Suddenly his voice became very clear and quiet, losing its previous rasp, and he said slowly and carefully, “As I’m sure you lads are aware, the current administration has been in power for the past 10 years. And a lot has changed under the rule of Archimedes-5. Before he came along, the Yard was a veritable battlefield between the factions. Aggression was the factor that determined where each inmate fit into the society of this detention facility and everyone was satisfied with that. We certainly didn’t have a team of behavioral scientists calling the shots here. But times change: even in here. And my role in this place is to uphold the law, regardless of what I feel. I don’t ask questions. I simply perform my duty. Somehow, *duty* always manages to be one of those realms of human action that, from the perspective of those bound by it, can be rationalized well enough to elude one’s own scrutiny, regardless of the seriousness of its repercussions and the self-interest underlying its cause. And so, since I am beyond the reach of any earnest attempt at self-scrutiny—immune, as it were, to the slightest hint of fallibility—let’s take a look at the matter at hand, shall we?”

“The two of you stand before me because you have seen it fit to resort to aggression to solve your problems. Now, off the record, I see no problem with resolving conflicts by violent means. Boys will be Boys, after all. But you do know the motto here, right?” He sighed and recited painfully the dictum: “‘Every Good Boy Does Fine’...and?”

“Good Boys Do Fine Always,” Makhan Singh recited by himself with his arms folded. Pointed, bony elbows protruded at his sides, digging into Bunu’s arm, as he stood silently wedged between Makhan and the doorway.

The warden didn’t object to Bunu’s silence, but instead scratched his head and continued, “To be honest, I don’t really know what they want me to tell you boys. But I guess we’ll figure something out.” He moved the stool out of his way and made his way to the toilet by the side wall, swiping from atop the seat, a couple of file folders. “I apologize for placing your files there, but you see, since we started wearing diapers in this facility, the toilet has been useless to me, except as extended desk space, so I try to make the best use of it that I can. Speaking of which, do either of you baby boys need a change of diapers before we begin?” His raspy tone seemed to have returned upon uttering this last part, as though he were eager to get down to business.

Bunu remained silent as Makhan Singh shook his head. Bunu made it a point to change his diaper twice a day, discarding the used diapers in the chute that connected his cell with a vast underground waste disposal area. Bunu now found himself wondering who tended to the refuse, but soon dismissed the thought, as more important things were at hand.

“Right then...” the Warden said, perusing Makhan Singh’s file, “so, we’re in for treason against the

Republic. Freedom fighter, are we?"

"*Was* a freedom fighter...sir," Makhan Singh said respectfully. "Was...past tense. I was with the Morellan Liberation Front. I'm not sure if you've heard of us."

"Yes, I'm familiar with that outfit. We have our fair share of enemy combatants here. So, you still get along well with the other lads in the Morellan Lambasting Flabajaba, then?"

"Uh..." uttered Makhan Singh, seemingly unsure, at first, how to respond, "Well...yes. As a matter of fact, we still have dealings together. We're running a business."

"A business in the confines of our detention facility? Running a business like a big boy, are you? And may I ask what you deal in?"

"Well...in diaper lotion."

"Diaper Lotion? It says something else here on your file," the Warden squinted slightly as he brought it up to his face. "Before you entered, you were a merchant of *Akihito's Oil*."

"Yes, sir."

"What is that?"

"Surely you've heard of Akihito," Makhan Singh said. The Warden shrugged. "You know...Akihito...? The Prophet of the Outlands?" The Warden shook his head and sighed out of boredom. Makhan Singh continued, "Well...I suppose it's all rather ancient history now that he's been proven a fraud."

"AH! That Akihito!" The Warden exclaimed, hitting his forehead with the palm of his hand. "The Snake Oil Demagogue! Yes...yes..." he said with relief, "I know all about him. So, you got yourself mixed up with that lot, eh? Rather embarrassing, I imagine."

"Well, we all 'got mixed up in it,' so to speak. All the other men from my garrison, that is. Actually if it's all the same to you, I'd rather not talk about it."

The Warden tilted his head, "Well, that's for me to decide, given the circumstances. Humor me..."

"Well..."

Akihito the Prophet of the Outlands

Akihito the Prophet of the Outlands had been the leader of a pack of dissident Melic half-breeds who had seen it fit to assert their religious freedom upon arriving in the lands outlying the borders of the Republic. Invoking a sense of rage that had been passed down to him through generation upon bitter generation of his bloodline, this vengeful demagogue took it upon himself to defy the Melic interpretation of Morellan scripture, in favor of his own self-serving perspective. He, thus, proclaimed himself the living incarnation of God and proceeded upon a journey through the desert by caravan of followers and faithful Holy Swordsmen to put all lands to fire and sword, until all cowered as they knelt before the glory of His Eminence Akihito and begged for His infinite mercy and compassion. The tribe battled fiercely through the Outlands, picking up new followers and spreading the word of the religion along the way, until their cultural influence began to encroach inward from all directions upon the borders of the Republic.

Akihito, however, was not just a brilliant military strategist, but also a charismatic diplomat and, most important of all, a born salesman. Life amidst the Melic half-breed carnies had taught him how to spot a Mark and lean on him well enough that he couldn't possibly realize that he was giving more than he was getting. It was, thus, that his religious cronies had come to sell *Akihito's Oil*, a snake oil scam concoction he claimed would bring all, who anointed themselves with it, closer to God. It wasn't long before Akihito had a sales force more formidable in its arsenal than even his legions of Holy Swordsmen.

In fact, many of the soldiers from his holy wars, left with no more battles to fight and no gainful employment, were recruited into the sales force, trading their armor and weaponry for suits and briefcases. They were made to look presentable with impeccably shined shoes, hair slicked back with scented pomade, and cravats of such remarkable elegance that one could scarcely believe, upon first glance, that any of these men had known the untold horrors of war. *Being presentable* was only the first step in their metamorphosis. Yet, without considering these sorts of details, Akihito's Oil would otherwise be a hard sell.

The next step was *technique*. The men, most of whom were illiterate, were given a sales manual with countless diagrams and visual aids that served to model for them effectively the proper way to make the approach, the friendly greeting, the importance of the smile, the art of schmoozing, the segue from establishing rapport to getting the Mark's attention, turning attention into interest, pushing the Mark to make a quick decision with an incentive or fear appeal, and thereupon moving firmly and confidently together with the Mark across that divide that separates decision and action. The sales philosophy was simple: get the Mark onboard and build his brand loyalty to the point of utter devotion, until nothing in this life could possibly make him happier than the prospect of selling the product to his family and friends. When this became possible, the Mark was effectively engulfed and further absorbed by the pseudopodia of the sales organism and the Buyer and Seller fused together to become a solitary and distinct entity, alternating evanescently between one state and the other, according to the demands of the environment.

Naturally, the good PR afforded by this self-perpetuating methodology only served to propel the religion to incredible success and increase the size of Akihito's sales force a hundredfold. As the scale of the organization grew, the sales infrastructure became multi-tiered in such a way that the supply chain was maintained between the seller and each of his buyers, allowing those higher up in the ranks to benefit greatly from the efforts of even the least proficient bottom-tier salespeople. The supply of Akihito's Oil, too, never seemed to be a problem, given that whenever its ingredients were in short supply, the formula of

the concoction was modified in such a way as to keep the costs of production low and profit margins at their maximum.

And yet, despite its overwhelming success, the precepts underlying Akihito's take on the Morellan faith were unclear to most and, very likely, inconsequential, as the distribution of the Oil to as many people as possible became the profit-motivated rallying call. It was, after all, as a consequence of the team-building and motivational sales tactics they employed that Akihito's Oil was finally able to have its inevitable Placebo Effect realized: as the binding force—the Glue, as it were—by which this particular social faction achieved its collective ends, however unclear these may have been. This lack of clarity, too, was more than adequately compensated for by an unmitigated Team Spirit that allowed all suffused with it to feel a glow of pride toward their individual contributions to the whole, a sense of animosity towards those who either rejected the Oil or failed to see it for the piety it brought to them, and an unwavering feeling of pity for those lost souls who were still, as yet, beyond reach.

This sense of social unity was further reinforced as Akihito saw the need to branch out from the core business and organize promotional festivals, camp retreats, and motivational speaking events. Bunnu had, in fact, on one occasion, inadvertently happened upon one such event while on a business trip, decades earlier, when he was still working for the RavanAlloy Mining Company, prospecting the Outlands for the purposes of identifying certain mineral-rich areas that could be transformed into mining colonies.

They had been travelling for days by riverboat, when one of his subordinates, a particularly sycophantic young go-getter by the name of Hanuman-13, spotted their tents amidst the dunes of iron scraps and began yammering uncontrollably about networking opportunities. Before Bunnu could so much as utter a word of protest, this waifish, small-boned toady had already jumped ship and started swimming for the banks, to the annoyance of all, leaving them with no choice, but to moor the boat and see what was going on.

The bank of the river had no soil, per se, but rather consisted of a collection of junk iron scrap that had been discarded over the years and had, thus, piled up in what had once been the sea to create the equivalent of an unintentional landfill, a piled mass that was still habitable, but not for any sustainable period of time. Bunnu instructed his men to set up camp, while he investigated the situation. However, upon making his way over a dune of scraps, he was irked to find that Hanuman-13 had run out ahead of him and was now being suspended by the collar by an enormous ogre of a man, clad in a business suit and horn-rimmed spectacles. In the clutches of this refined beast, the young corporate carnivore squirmed like an animal desperately trying to free itself from a snare. As he did this, another suit-clad beast stepped over to them, removed Hanuman-13's shoes and socks and proceeded to anoint his feet with oil.

“You'll notice...” the beast said as he rubbed oil on Hanuman's feet, “that the oil rubs into the skin of the feet rather easily. It doesn't take long at all...and do you feel that cooling sensation? Well, that's the menthol—now don't *that* make your feet feel fresh?” He turned to Bunnu, as if noticing him for the first time, “Hello, what's this? It seems we aren't alone. How goes it stranger? You lost?”

“Nothing of the sort,” Bunnu said. “We're on an expedition.” He pointed at Hanuman-13, “...and I believe you are holding one of my men. Would you kindly let him go, so we can proceed on our way with our business?”

The beast holding Hanuman-13 by the collar looked indecisively to the other sales beast, who appeared to be either a supervisor from a higher tier in the organization (and hence his supplier) or his client on a lower tier (whose success in this transaction would inextricably be intertwined with his own)—the delineation between the two, of course, being something difficult to determine in an organization in which power relationships extended in both directions. Bunnu, unconcerned by the chain of command, repeated his appeal and added, “We have a tight schedule to maintain. We cannot afford to lose time.”

The beast put Hanuman-13 down and dusted him off, while the other put his shoes and socks back on, saying calmly, “A slave to working world, eh? No problem. I understand. Used to be there myself...but

let me tell you, ain't nothing beats the feeling of being your own boss. Hell, when you have an opportunity staring you right there in the face, you find yourself wondering, 'What do my actions say about me?' I could jump at it and take the opportunity, but what'll happen down the road? There's bound to be a risk involved. And most assuredly, there is...in anything you do really. But you never really know, do you? It might be worthwhile..." He looked up and flashed a bright smile at Bunnu. "The other option is to stay the course. What does *that* say about me? Well, I'm aware of the risks involved and I choose not to partake. Nothing wrong with that. It's the more conservative route. You gain nothing, you lose nothing. But then, everything comes with a cost. An opportunity cost, mind you! You have to wonder if you are getting the most for your time and effort. A lost opportunity is a liability, in and of itself."

"What are you getting at?" Bunnu pulled Hanuman-13 to his feet and put him in a headlock. The sales beast looked down at Hanuman's head and back at Bunnu.

"I'm talking about freedom, good sir—the ability to determine your own destiny. Is that what you seek?"

"I dunno. I didn't think that sort of thing was possible."

"Well, try to imagine, then. You have your days to do with as you please."

"What difference would *that* make?"

"Well...you said so yourself. You are a slave to the working world and—"

"I didn't say that, you did."

"Yes, well, you have a boss, do you not? Someone you have to answer to?"

"Doesn't everyone?"

"In a manner of speaking, I suppo—" the sales beast fell silent for a moment. He pulled a tiny notebook out of his pocket and a pen from the breast pocket of his coat. His eyebrows furrowed as he flipped through the notebook, scanning each page carefully. Finally, upon reaching the page he was looking for, he marked something with his pen and nodded with a smile. "Sorry about that, sir. OK...perhaps I've approached this all wrong. Let's look at this from another perspective. Imagine I held in my hand the key to a safe containing enough money to allow you to live as luxuriously as you like until the end of your days. A limitless cash flow that only *you* would have access to. Imagine that...OK?"

Bunnu sighed impatiently. "Sure..."

"So, how far would you go to get that key from me? What would you be willing to do?"

"I dunno. Why do I want the key again?"

"You know...the money in the safe! You're set up for life if you—uh...w-well...if you have that key."

"So, I have to ask you for the key?"

"Well...hopefully we both want it bad enough that simply *asking* wouldn't do."

"But you have it..."

"Precisely..."

"OK." Bunnu shrugged. "Well, it was nice meeting you. I think Hanuman and I will be on our way." He smacked Hanuman on the top of his head and reprimanded him, "No more of these networking detours,

OK?"

And so they returned to the boat.

Duty

Reminiscing about this instance in the Warden's office, Bunu couldn't help but realize that there was something about Makhan Singh's atmosphere that was similar to that of the sales beast that day on the scrap iron dunes. Despite his deferential manner and self-deprecating, whiny tone—which appeared to be some method of lulling the Mark into a false sense of security and, thus, rendering him open to suggestion—Makhan Singh seemed to possess, beneath it all, an immutable sense of self-assurance, but in addition to that, the look of a man ensnared by what he perceived to be his own Duty. A Duty that effervesced inside of him impatiently, dry at the mouth, shaking feverishly, and holding its breath in anticipation for—not his action, but in fact—the fruits of his actions, however distant these may have been. The goal was to satiate its thirst in as few moves as possible, instilling each action with an almost implied necessity for having a motive by which it must exist, which is to say that no action was to be wasted for anything, but only for that which was rooted in some definable and clear-cut purpose—whether it be one's financial stability, freedom from one's burdens, or even the ability to allow the world to benefit greatly from the severity of one's humble opinions. Every action had to be a step in some direction and there could be no dillydallying, for Duty bubbling in the bloodstream for too long brought with it a kind of *sickness*-

“Mr. Bunu?”

- from which it was difficult to recover. Neither could there be any reconsideration, for the values to which one has sworn were unassailable and beyond the powers of one individual to reassess. And so, Duty, once instilled, must be allowed to carry on unabated, diverting sustenance away from other aspects of one's character—driving them to a weakened state, brow-beaten by circumstances beyond their immediate control and relegated to their own downtrodden acquiescence to the bravado of the Parasitic Superego, and, as such, cognizant of their growing superfluity. It was the essence of Duty that Bunu could understand in virtue, but the declaration of one's allegiance to it that he failed to comprehend. He had, after all, always found it difficult to guide his own actions with principles, as he could never find one that he was truly satisfied with, nor could he form his own, as anything that he might consider meaningful and concrete and relevant would inevitably change as it fell victim to his doubts. Thus, it was his lack of assurance that, paradoxically, often served to be a source of strength for him, as he could find no lasting truth that-

“MR. BUNNU!”

Bunu looked up to see the Warden staring at him with a smile. He was now holding Bunu's file. “Got away from us for a moment, did we? Yes...yes...your file says that you have a habit of doing so.” The Warden shook his head with a smile as he perused the file. “Well, Mr. Bunu, we are a curiosity, indeed! An embodiment of Curiosity, perhaps. It seems that you generated quite a bit of buzz for those first couple of years you were here. Never emerged from that cell of yours for a long, long time until, one night, when you awoke the whole floor with your incessant screaming. The other inmates couldn't help but feel a little gratified by your outburst, but all the same, disappointed by your humanity, for they had built you up in their stories and in their own minds to be something far different. At times, a silent, but noble avenger. At others, a sleeping monster. On the whole, a formless and faceless entity with an auspicious fate beyond the abilities of the mind to project. Talk of you took on the air of a local legend. But then, you emerged from your cell. Well...you were dragged from your cell, really. And everybody was again abuzz, as

though waiting for you to speak. But you didn't. In fact, I reckon you haven't spoken once since you've come here. And for that fact alone, you still somehow remain a mystery to us.

“And the stories and the theories about you continue to circulate. One wouldn't normally call these men romantic idealists, but I suppose when you have nothing left to look forward to, you need something to keep you going. You have become that silent, lingering hope. You, Bunnu, with that magnanimous destiny, have been forged by our collective desperation into the anointed guardian from the devils that taunt us. And so, it should be no surprise that the inmates have taken an interest in you. And not just the inmates, as individuals, but even as factions. Every one of the factions, including that of Makhan Singh over here, the Morellan Lady Fuggiebirds. They are very curious about what makes you tick. And they want in on the ground floor of whatever it is you have going for you.

“And through all this...it seems you...you, too, have a curious nature about you. You scrutinize them all, observe them, make your judgments, and walk away, saying nothing. But I assure you, good sir, they feel themselves being scrutinized...but they don't mind it. They see you as a prospective customer, merely inspecting their wares.

“This being said, we must still, for the sake of fairness and equality, treat you as a regular inmate, regardless of what our hearts tell us. I'm sure you can understand why this has to be done. And so, I must bring up one matter which has been of some concern to the administration—and a point, mind you, that is far from being insignificant—and that is your asexual nature. You have not, to anyone's knowledge, engaged in one sexual act, masturbatory or otherwise, since you arrived here. Granted you had two years on your own and, surely, you must have jiggled the knob now and again, but there's no way for any of us to know that and, thus, it hasn't been noted in your records. As a veteran of numerous administrations, I can tell you that this sort of behavior is abnormal, regardless of who is calling the shots.

“Embodiment of Hope, Damnation or otherwise: You are out of play! In the reality of the prison environment, power roles are distinct and must saturate every aspect of existence. To exist without having a bitch, being a bitch to someone else, much less being one's own bitch creates an obstruction in the dynamic ebb and flow of events to the extent that one degrades to the equivalent of a null Being—a kind of stationary rock or land formation, around which Flow must be diverted.

“Now, what I'm about to say may sound a little callous...and I want to make it clear to you that it comes only out of Duty and not as a result of Free Will, so I ask that you not use your mystical powers against me. What I have to say is this: the other men in this facility have a great admiration for you. Perhaps their admiration is rooted in something that is beyond your control...and yes, maybe it is not truly *you* that they admire, but an idealized representation of *you*. Either way, don't you think you owe it to them to humor them just a little bit? Would it really, honestly, kill you to take on the characteristics of that role circumscribed for you by their expectations? Is it so bad to be as an actor and take on a part, knowing full well that it will give so many people the joy they so richly deserve? Just acting, mind you! Not too much to ask, right? But no...you don't want to cater to their fantasies, because you have your pride. Why...why do you seek to deprive them of their happiness? Are you that selfish? That much of an ingrate that you don't care about morale? Don't you know what effect you have on other people? No doubt my saying so upsets you, but naturally that is because you are so stubborn. But I have something else to say on top of that, so I must insist that you be patient with me. And it is this: I am told that you are, in fact, quite capable of speaking...and not only that, but that you have actually engaged in real conversations on numerous occasions before coming to this facility.”

“Noooo...” cried Makhan Singh in disbelief.

The Warden nodded, as though he himself were grappling with a similar sense of doubt, “Please don't get angry! Now...you may not remember that time anymore. It may seem like a distant memory or even a dream to you. But your file alleges that that time did once, in fact, exist. It also alleges that you were

related—not by blood, but by circumstance—to a Legal Non-Entity by the name of *O*.”

“*O*, the reclusive tycoon?” Makhan Singh gasped, shocked by this bit of news. He had now taken a seat on the toilet seat next to the Warden’s desk. “I must say, Mr. Bunu, I always knew that there was something interesting about you. Well...we all did! But I never imagined that you would be related to a celebrity, too!”

The Warden ignored Makhan Singh and continued, “I don’t know if what the file says is true, Mr. Bunu. But if it is, could it be that you are seeking to mimic the behaviors of this *O*. and are, thus, shutting off your responses to the outside world?” The Warden shrugged, “Now, to be clear, this is just a theory and I don’t want you to get upset that I’ve said this. After all, I have never met this Legal Non-Entity and have no basis from which I can draw a comparison between its absence of response and your own. Regardless of whether I’m right or wrong, though, I would be remiss in the performance of my duties if I didn’t tell you that the administration seems to feel that it’s a terribly lonely way to be. But then, some people can’t help it...and perhaps you are the same.”

“He *is* a very good listener!” Makhan Singh remarked with a smile.

“Yes...” the Warden said with a frown. “*That* I’m sure he is. Well, Mr. Bunu, as you know, my options are limited. The facility has a very liberal take on rehabilitation and I can’t actually force you to do anything you don’t want to. This same principle extends both to talking and to fucking. But I can encourage you to socialize with the others more actively. You have a dour way about you that I think can easily be remedied, so long as you are willing to make the effort to interact and make the best of your situation. We haven’t seen that so far. What you seem to be doing is shutting down: which some might construe to be both weak and defeatist. Not to say that I see it that way, mind you! The administration seems to be under the impression that you are depressed. I don’t know you well enough to know whether or not this is truly the case and certainly your silence does nothing to prove or disprove any such claims. Anyway, if that’s the way you choose to be, then you must continue to suffer in silence. And that must truly be a fate worse than anything anyone external could ever wreak upon you.”

“So, what’ll you have us do, then?” Makhan Singh inquired. “What’s your judgment on the matter?”

“Like I said before, there’s not much I *can* do. You should be allowed to approach him and he should be allowed to withdraw. And you are similarly allowed to react irrationally and violently. We do not discourage any of these behaviors and we certainly can’t enforce repercussions for them. It would be hypocritical. So, I ask you both to consider the consequences of your actions and proceed with discretion from there...but not with too much discretion. I think that’s about all I can do for you. That being said, that’ll be all gentlemen.”

Ways Out

And so, they left the Warden's office with no resolution, no guidance, and very little recourse, but to continue behaving as they had. And not a few weeks passed before Makhan Singh started approaching Bunu again in the Yard and events unfolded in almost exactly the same way as they had before, landing them, once more, in the Warden's office for further discussion. The second meeting, however, made no greater headway than the first and it wasn't long before the incidents repeated themselves again and again, for a *third*, *fourth*, and *fifth* time.

And as events progressed from duplicity to triplicity to inordinate multiplicity, the process started to become cyclical like the changing of seasons: a routine that the two of them had come to expect, until Bunu found himself, unwittingly, feeling a kind of association with Makhan Singh. This bond had managed to form itself so gradually that he had failed to notice it until after a very long time had passed. And now, things had progressed to the point that if Bunu failed to go out to the Yard for Courtship Hour, it would seem like he were consciously avoiding Makhan Singh, specifically, which would actually prove to have the reverse effect of what he intended. And so, regardless of what he did, there was a link forming between the two of them that he couldn't seem to sever. But perhaps, this had been Makhan's plan. Perhaps, all along, he had been scheming for Bunu to get used to him by sheer virtue of persistence...and now his perseverance was starting to pay off.

Which brings us back to the *present*: Back in his cell, now, and still reeling from the chaos of the speech in the assembly hall, Bunu sat on his bed and let out a sigh. He scratched the rash on his palm as he looked at the untouched bowl of beans sitting in the dumbwaiter. It would soon be Courtship Hour and there could be no doubt that Makhan Singh was going to beat another inmate half to death today. That's simply where they were in their cycle. And now, with this new apparatus designed by Dr. Narciss, who knew what would be in store for them? It would undoubtedly have some kind of effect. Perhaps the cycle would intensify, or speed up, or even grow in scale to include other inmates besides Makhan Singh and him. The only thing he could hope for was that this apparatus would somehow interrupt the cycle and he could be left alone once again to do as he pleased. Otherwise there would truly be no escape from the others.

If what the Warden had said was true, the factions all seemed to have their hopes pinned on him and not because he was anything special, but simply because they saw him as the missing ingredient to some kind of secret formula that they suspected could save them all from the same breed of cannibalism that befell their predecessors in Asoka Plains. Something about their adulation made Bunu feel ill, as though he had always unsuspectingly been controlled by those surrounding spheres of influence and groomed for the role they expected him to perform. He knew that to cooperate—even slightly—with these factions would be a kind of suicide for him, a compromise too great to bear. And yet, regardless of how hard he tried to cut himself off from them—socially, biochemically, or otherwise—there always seemed to underlie a kind of association that superseded anything within conscious control. And now, this new apparatus, this MRDA, would only serve to reinforce it.

And so, Bunu could only conclude that as long as he stayed here at this facility, there was simply no escape from these people with whom he'd been cooped up for the past few years. He tried to take a deep breath and was met with the stale, humid air. Upon exhaling, a fatigue crept into his body. He slumped back against the wall next to his mattress.

There were ways out of this facility.

There was no doubt about this. The man behind him at the assembly—the tall stick figure with the small coconut head and the mountain accent—spoke of a tunnel. It sounded risky, but the plan had its merits. Another possibility would be to escape with the help of one of the factions that had connections with the guards and could arrange safe transport out through the trucks. There was no guarantee of success, but certainly no harm in trying. And then there was the administration itself: one could play along with their mind-bending rules in the hopes of being viewed by them as *rehabilitated* and thus, fit for life again in the outside world. Their testimony would certainly carry a great deal of weight in his trial. And the ends would undoubtedly justify the means.

But then, all of these methods required *cooperation*, which was simply out of the question. Surely, there had to be a way for him to escape without having obligation conferred upon him. Otherwise, one could scarcely consider oneself truly free, even upon leaving the facility.

The Courtship Hour bell rang and Bunu leaned forward, resting his head against his hands as warm tears streamed down his cheeks. His thoughts were suddenly with the outside world as he felt a great weight sink inside of his chest like an anchor and his windpipe narrow—as though tied to it by a length of chain—until an intense pain swelled in the back of his head.

To Separation

His breathing faltered as a vision appeared to him like a light over the broad horizon. It blinded him at once and he had to make a conscious attempt not to avert his gaze, for he knew that doing so would be an intolerable betrayal of that point which lay immediate and a denial of that luminous one upon which his fate had plotted its inevitable course.

The two points were of the same substance, dualities bound by space and time. The point immediate and the one beyond were, in fact, two opposing sides of a plane: rifts in the fabric that remained distinct by virtue of the transformation undergone in crossing between one side and the other. And to pass through would be as light through the perforations in a screen, separating to brilliant rudimental shapes malleable to obstruction, branching to distinct and solitary awareness in prismatic colors cast now upon a darkened wall.

Rays rouse sleeping matter unconcerned by the impartation upon it of an immeasurable, yet insignificant bounty of retrospect decayed to alternating forms over eons of traversal. Each form is inadequate, like a graft to be rejected by its intractable and unrelenting host and thus can only serve a brief and momentary purpose coherent to a context rooted in contiguous reason. This unbridled brash Spirit is, to itself, burdensome, yet dynamic, for it sees no flaw in working within the confines of a closed system to achieve ends that extend beyond it. This Spirit is, in fact, self-deceptive for to achieve such ends, it becomes necessary to bound manipulable fragments of the Self with a twine by which these parts can be joined indissolubly and maneuvered adroitly with the skill of a marionettist.

Maneuvered hollows of ossified substance tap in synchronicity amidst the bumps of adjoining pieces, as the form changes direction suddenly, or as a bitter wind of semblance whistles through, and the topology of its reality—the stage upon which it stands—transfigures itself to a different scene of a different act of a different version of the same time-worn narrative. Tapping in the choral chimes of substance blustered through by wind and circumstance, the soul migrates in sparks to expanded expression in the flare of ignited flames upon a crackling, dry parchment in the chilly neglected air of night. The nature of such air is buoyant and naïve: cold with the absence of trespass, increasingly leery of the imposition upon its trusting, diaphanous nature by this dreadful elemental parasite which now envelops the parchment in its reduction to exhausted granules. The parasite looms ephemeral to fade to dying embers and the air feels within itself a transmigration to new awareness as a sacred medium by which sparks ignite and embers weaken to darkened solemnity in the permeating gossamer.

The atmosphere exults in the glorious consistency of the interwoven fumes, for they bear in subtle swirling wisps, passages to events in space-time: air sweeps through a valley, whistles through canyons and gusts through a remote rice field to twirl inward upon itself, sensing the aromatic vapors of a young boy's curiosity, like sizzling bacon fat laid upon the white-hot foundations of imagination; tasting the apprehension anchored, amidst gusts, to his naïve curiosity: a lack of assurance for his consciousness of the world existed only as far as his perception extended and, beyond that, only in the realm of fancy; feeling the charge he radiated in anticipation for something that lay beyond, something that he just could not know at the moment, but knew was out there waiting for him on the broad horizon, for there could be no other more suitable than *he* to unveil the object of this imminent wonder, as though it were bound intangibly to his romantic Will. The air swirled wildly with his spirit in its flurry of questions, in his lack

of satisfaction with answers, in his need for greater and more satisfying inquiry into the nature of all that existed around him.

The landscape changes from fields to mountains to deserts to sea and the point beyond remains fixed upon that distant horizon. The boy stands upon the shoreline: timid and fearful of the depths that must be probed in search of his quarry. He looks about at the rocks sitting fixed in spite of the breaking of waves and impotently contemplating a similar fate: screaming inaudibly as a mad woman at the sea. Screams drowned by the surface water, for to venture further inward would be to resign oneself to the possibility of no return.

Waves scatter over rocks.

A bracing wind swirls about the boy and alights gently upon his shoulder to gape frightfully at droplets of fate joined infirmly to a sweep of atmospheric and lunar forces far beyond their capabilities to resist. He takes a long, deep breath of air—cleansed through its migration—and he closes his eyes.

Scattered waves roll back in to the sea.