

# Dead End of a Circle

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I was introduced to the time machine that we'd spent so much time developing and the only thing I could think about was that it shouldn't have been possible to exist. Of course, you could easily make a future-traveling time machine simply by traveling very fast, but to make a past-traveling time machine is a completely different challenge.

I'm sure, due to the stories of time travel that you've endured in your lifetime, that you have certain expectations of what's coming next. You are probably only concerning yourself with the many potential paradoxes that might arise from time travel.

You can break man's laws, and if God is real then you can surely break his laws, too, but you cannot ever break the laws of the universe. And so if a time machine were to be successfully constructed, then the consequences, even if they seem like a paradox, will be completely natural and within the rules of the universe. The main question that any seeker might ask should not pertain to paradoxes, but rather to the working parts of the machine.

I will give you an engineer's description of the machine later, but for now I'll start my story from a bit further back...



The year was 2011 and the place was New York City. As I had been doing for all my life, so I was doing on this night—I was hunting.

I found a destitute prostitute with a nondescript face who had one stocking riding higher than the other and some reddish-brown substance clinging to the cusp of her nostril like the Nike symbol—an ugly duckling of a woman whose unnecessary sexual parts were a mockery to the testament that no man would ever have her; I was somehow able to lead her to believe that I was sexually attracted to her. I motioned to her to get into my car, and she gladly did.

I had a fairly good idea of what she was expecting me to do, and it wasn't that I would rip out her throat and inhale the scent of the cherry springs that proliferated from the oxygenated life

beneath. But, as fate would have it, I was the one in for the surprise: she was a police officer—a dead one now—and I hadn't suspected it because she never tried to elicit a bid from me. The other officers who'd been in surveillance were now buzzing around me like flies; had I swatted them all down, this day would have perished in my memory after a few centuries.

With ease I disposed of the officers that charged at me since I, thanks to all the time that I've had to walk this earth, had long ago mastered the various arts of hand-to-hand combat; there was a coward, however, that had escaped while I was occupied with his companions, and this was the beginning of the end for me.

I thought nothing of this night and I continued to live my life. I was an anonymous, moderately famous magician—in addition to combat skills I'd also picked up some showman tricks and swiftness of hand over the years, but the main attraction to my shows was something that was not fake. I've been hanged, scorched, poisoned, drowned, crushed, and tortured in many other ways on stage. But that escaped police officer was the real magician, and none of these tricks could compare to what he was going to do to me.

As I would discover after my arrest, the police officer did not provide a reliable description of my face to his cohorts. What he did do was advance through the ranks and become a respectable homicide detective, and, seventeen years after that night, he recognized my face on the internet. The only thing he had to work with was a very quick encounter in the dark, nearly two decades ago—and he was in fear for his life at the moment, no less. It seemed impossible, but he saw my ageless face and his dormant memory awoke. His paygrade bestowed him credibility with the rest of his fellow officers, and that was the only reason that he was even able to scrap together a few men to spy on me. I'm sure he gained even more ranks after I was seen killing yet another prostitute on their very first day of surveillance.

The team's numbers were nowhere near what they needed to be in order to take me down, but they didn't know it. They only

knew that I was caught in a violent act, and so there was no hesitation on their part to attempt to apprehend me. They threatened me with bullets and such, and so I killed them, but that slippery detective escaped once again. This time, however, he had images of my face and of my deeds, and I had no chance of an escape from New York. Within a matter of a few hours there were enough recruited hands so that they were able to capture me with their mechanisms of metal; I surrendered unconditionally, lest I be seen reflecting bullets outside of the context of being a magician.

Bail was set at no bail—if that makes any sense—and so I was not afforded the opportunity to flee. Some suspicions were raised when I was so eager to sign a plea bargain under the sole condition that the number of years was fixed and definite. I was very wary of being given life without parole, or—worse—a death sentence. If I was handed down a death sentence, then the authorities would inevitably discover my invincibility when they try to do me in; if that was discovered, if they knew that the magic was real, then the day of my freedom would be further away than ever. (I did not know it at the time, but the death penalty had been recently abolished in the current state.) And I really didn't want life without parole, or even life at all, because if I got that then there may be some kind of lobbying against me when the time came for the term to be up... some proclamation by the people that I ought to be incarcerated until death by natural (or otherwise) causes. What I wanted was a set amount of years, even if it was longer than a life sentence.

Thus the prosecution, in the end, agreed to give me a ninety-nine-year, eight-month sentence (or some other weird amount like that). They didn't want to give me the full one hundred years because they thought I wanted all these years for bragging power with the other inmates. I would be eligible for parole in about eighty-six years.



As things unfolded, it became increasingly clear that killing

the undercover prostitute was one of the worst mistakes I'd ever made. I was simply unable to fulfill my plans of peaceful observation while being locked up with these savage scavengers. They provoked me. Daily they provoked. They provoked me like it was all they wanted out of this life. I should have been a hero because I was a cop killer, but instead I was targeted by everyone because I refused to join a race-based gang.

The intensity of the battles became very fierce. I was attacked with weight-lifting equipment and razors and dung-covered shanks and locks in socks and any other sharp or blunt instrument that these subhumans could grasp. I would usually manage to severely injure all of my attackers; occasionally, however, I would be overpowered and held down, and they would repeatedly stab me in vain. When these limb bearers escaped me, knowing full well that the magic was real, I had to hunt them down individually and murder them in secret.

I became morbidly indifferent to the violence, and my numbed mind failed to realize that the large amount of serious inmate injuries attracted the media... which attracted the government. And so there was an investigation, and many mouths spoke of me. I was taken away and examined by the world's greatest scientists to determine how or why I was what I was.

Like a wild animal I was as uncooperative as I possibly could have been. I could not be chemically subdued, so whenever I was partially unrestrained I attacked with the intent to kill. Looking back, I think that was the wrong choice. I sometimes wonder, were I cooperative, if I would have been eventually given a chance to escape or even openly go free—at the very least, a friendlier version of myself could've perhaps gleaned insight into the properties of my invincibility from a member of the staff. All I did was infuriate them and hinder their once-in-a-lifetime chance to study a creature as intriguing as myself. And so, when they determined that they had learned as much as was feasible, they locked me up and threw away the key.

They took me to the vault. Yes, not any vault... this was *the* vault. It would become my world, my entirety of reality, and the end of my reality. I knew that there was nothing for me after this, and I had always known my whole life that I would end up in permanent darkness one day.

The vault was deep underground and a system of mazes had to be mastered before it could be found. It was originally owned by a mega tycoon who'd had the whole thing set up because of his lack of trust of banks or even of the dollar itself. He eventually fell on tougher times and forfeited, among other things, his prized vault to the government that he could never trust. This, at least, was the story I was told by the driver while I was being transported there.

The vault was very much what you would have expected, considering that the owner designed it with the frame of mind that money was no object and that total security was the only thing that mattered. It was a cube in shape, and all five of the non-door sides were protected by several feet of steel. There was no way for any kind of wiring to come into the vault from the outside world—the vault was nothing but plain, stupid, brute force with no electronic trickery, and there was no way in hell that I could ever MacGyver my way out of this one.

The door was clearly the only way into this vault unless you had an oil drill with a diamond auger the size of a Nixon-era nuclear warhead. The door was a sliding one, rather than a swinging door, since it was just so insanely thick, and a machine was required to open and close the door because it was simply so heavy. Banks do not use doors like this for their vaults—in fact, nobody does—because it is impractical to be used on daily basis; the door had to be specially commissioned. The locking mechanism on the door was a set of several steel, cylindrical rods that receded into the door when unlocked and protruded out when locked. The receptacles for these locking rods above and below the door were nothing but holes in which the rods could hibernate.

The vault was waterproof, tornado proof, fireproof,

bombproof, soundproof, and vampire proof, and that door was as shut as the speak-no-evil monkey's mouth—with me inside. The manual lock was destroyed so that no one could ever open it from the outside.

It must have been the military that ordered this—no one else could have been so stubborn. I went through scenarios in my mind over and over and over, and I, unfortunately, managed to convince myself that I wouldn't get out until after the United States of America was defunct. I should have considered myself fortunate that they did not fill the vault with quick-drying cement, or perhaps, with enough of a budget, they could've put me in a rocket and sent me into the sun. I was still, of course, not feeling very grateful about the situation that I was in.

In the pitch black I reached out my hands and felt for the wall, and then I guided myself around the cube. I paced several laps and then nested myself into a corner, sliding down the wall into a sitting position. The only thing I could do was wait it out, to wait until there was another nation above me, hoping that there would be somebody up there that hadn't forgotten about me...



In the beginning I was unable to persuade my memory to lend its stories to me for my amusement. I couldn't do anything but scream endlessly. I screamed until the air in the room tasted different. I punched the door as hard as I could, in the same spot over and over, hoping that, after millions of years, my indestructible fist would make a dent.

But those were the early days. Before I'd given up hope. I soon realized that I would never escape from this place and that I would never be rescued. I had been unable to dream because my mind was still holding out for hope, and it was this final acceptance of despair that brought it all back to me like a wave. My memories and my ability to dream returned, and I was free to pluck anything I wanted from this large basket of thought.

Not too long ago I had an addiction that was very much unique to me. I would travel on airlines endlessly, for years at a

time, never leaving the airports, all in the hopes of experiencing the jolting, screaming, panic, terror, and peace that come together in the moments before a plane crash. Due to the unfavorable probability of a crash actually occurring, I eventually resorted to sabotage in order to ensure the desired outcome; by myself I very much skewed safety statistics of airline travel. It was well worth it—I don't think I've ever tasted a fear so thick as I would during those moments. I've sat through my share of crashes and I've seen all the different faces of terror, I've seen luggage and carts springing through the isles as if they had their own violent intent, I've seen planes being ripped open in midair and people flying out, and so many things... but mostly it was the new sounds that impacted me the most.

When you truly terrify an animal it will make a sound that you don't normally hear. The human animal is no different. In these flying mechanical wonders I've heard the sounds that man makes when he is in true mortal danger, and in all my centuries and in all my conquests I'd never been able to stumble upon it because there is nothing like the moment that leads up to a plane crash. The instinct to either fight or run cannot be obeyed because there is no person present that is a violent threat to you—there is no way to compete with others for your own survival, and there is nowhere to run; the only thing you can do is wait for death.

When the crash comes I can hear other sounds. The crash itself is very loud, but eventually I learned to discern the other noises. Glass shattering, seats crumbling, bones breaking... the most fascinating sound was right before the crash when the air would negotiate with the metallic body of the plane. It sounded different every time. Sometimes the metal resisted but groaned like an ancient, dying god; other times there was a brief, loud shriek as some part of the structure was ripped off suddenly and without warning.

Many times the survivors were trapped because they were pinned by debris or their legs were broken, and their fate was to be burned alive. Here there was nothing really new to be observed;



I'd already seen the best and worst of humanity in the aftermath of similar catastrophes. Random heroes, mothers sacrificing their lives to save their children, mothers saving themselves and forsaking their children. Sometimes I'm rescued, sometimes I don't need to be rescued, and other times I'm the one who's left to burn.



If you leave the darkness of the vault, then you might find a world with natural laws that apply only in tales of fantasy, a world so deep in the past that the events that are told of this time are not possible unless you can imagine them.

I was a great one, and even the lowest of my soldiers was legendary. I simply did anything I wanted, and there was no one to stop me. I was, among other things, a practitioner of disciplines and arts reserved only for the highest of kings.

There exists an art that is as old as any other and yet one can never feasibly practice and train it daily. This is the art of the quick kill—to snap an enemy's neck. I had a horde of traitors and weaklings who'd been privileged to serve me to this end; in my conquest of thousands, I may have produced one enemy who was prepared to exact revenge... one enemy who had lost someone to my insatiable mountain of corpses and was willing to forsake his lot in this life in order to afflict me with equal heartache.

I was sitted upon my throne, contemplating things that would affect the lives of many serfs, and it happened that my immortal men saw a very old man counting the many steps that led to the top of my fortress. The last time an outsider came up those steps, he approached me with a psychotic smile and then stared into my eyes as he slit his own throat. It was a pathetic attempt from his master to strike fear into me; it failed, as did the ensuing invasion. This new visitor, however, was certainly no messenger. He looked more like a beggar. His physical state was so decrepit that my men began to take bets on whether or not he'd make it to the top. He did make it, I assure you, and what he had to say to me cut me deeper than anything I can remember.

"My lord, have mercy upon me," he begged, "and hear me before you render me dead where I stand."

Not yet knowing the message that he had for me, I did not fully appreciate his sincerity. "Your silver hair and beard are wild, like an animal, old man," I sneered. "You are more delusional than you are dangerous. I should have no reason to strike you down."

He got down on his knees and prostrated himself before me. "My lord, I need your explicit promise that you will not thrust me through until the matter that I must present to you is fully articulated."

"I make no promises, and neither do I break them."

He twitched his head and hesitated for a moment. "My little one has been taken under by the devil."

"I knew you were delusional, old man," I mocked. "You're two decades too old to have a child."

"I am but two and twenty years, my lord," he replied. "My little one's capture has aged me beyond my years."

"And why does this matter concern me?"

"There is no other that can retrieve her. No mortal can go where she has gone."

"But why does it concern *me*?"

"My lord, do unto me as you will, but, before I speak plainly, promise me that you will not bring harm to my little one if you find her."

"I will not take your life, for your life is not worth taking. Yet even if it was, you can rest in assurance that I would not ever, in the name of vengeance, impose penalty upon an innocent party. That duty is reserved solely for God."

"Thank you, my lord."

"Now tell me what it is that you are hiding from me."

"When the devil came and took my little one away... when the devil came and took my little one, I gave him your little one, too, so that you would take the task."

"I have no *little one*," I hissed.

"I know that she has a special place in your heart," he said. "You spare all the little ones from the blood tithe, but you spare her parents as well. You are a great one, but I also know that you can feel mercy and compassion. You do not want Starla to suffer. You have a fatherly love for her."

My eyes burned like charcoals and I could feel myself moving very unnaturally. "Truth be told, old man: I have never felt love for any child. All I can ever feel is hate for someone like you."

"My lord," he begged, "I hold my life in as little regard as you do. All I ask is that you do what is right, and that you do not harm the innocents. I will help you in any way that you need, and I will willingly subject myself to your wrath when this matter is through."

"This is not reciprocity," I scorned.

"But, my lord, I know that you will follow your heart. I know that your heart will take you to your Starla, and to my little one as well, for you are mighty and in you beats the heart of a hero."

"I have no heart."

"Yes, my lord, but you are not heartless."

I sighed with great emphasis. "Where did this devil take her?"

"I... I don't know. I—"

"What? You don't know? You said that no mortal can fetch her."

"Yes, because of the nature of the one that has taken her. But I swear I do not know where she is."

"What game are you playing, old man? Are you the mourner of one of the nameless souls that I have slain? Has it happened already that I, in my careless slaughter of thousands, have refined one enemy from the blood and slimy parts that have accumulated in the gutter?"

"My lord, inasmuch as I know that you, in your infinite wisdom, would not visit revenge upon a man by harming a third

party, I, too, would not involve an innocent for such a petty endeavor," he said.

"But you have involved an innocent."

"But, my lord," he beseeched, "this is not vengeance. I am not acting on behalf of a weakling that you rightfully executed. I assure you that I have done this only because my love for my little one outweighs my love for my own self and even my value for what is right and just."

"I hope for your sake, old man, that you tell lies. I hope for your sake that Starla is safe." I beckoned to my men. "Take him out of my sight."



I'd lived for thousands of years before man had the ability to harness the secrets of electricity, and countless times I had experienced total darkness of night with no pollution from light. But there was something different about this vault. When I held my hand in front of my face there was no wraith outline of a hand that I could picture in my mind. It was like this place was so brutally dark that I lost all sense of orientation and coordination. It was like I lost all sense of the self, and I did not even have the instinctual knowledge of where my hand should've been in relation to my face.

I could still feel and taste and touch and such, but it seemed like I couldn't. I had some kind of panic in me that made me feel like I could not feel. It was like I could reach out and feel the door, but my brain wouldn't know that it was there. If there was light in here, then I doubt that I would have even been able to see. I was completely out of touch, out of existence. This vault... I didn't even know where it was anymore. I was no longer sure of the existence of Earth, or of reason and logic, or of my senses.

The only thing I knew for sure to be real was the darkness.



We put the crazy old man who claimed to be young in tow behind our horses as we journeyed to see the oracle. By the time we were halfway there, he was being dragged because he was too

tired to walk.

The oracle didn't live in a house. Instead, she lived under a canopy of sorts—greenery that had been condensed into a thick rain cover—and she slept on a large, polished rock.

She had brown eyes and brown hair and perfect pink lips. She had breasts that were dipped in sin, curves that could make your loins boil, and legs that could wrap around you and grind like a tight pair of clockwork gears. Her earthly bed gave her a natural posture and a certain way about her when she walked that would have made her words true to any man, even if she did not have the sight.

As we stood on her porch, she looked at me, then at my men, then at the crazy old man, and then back at me again. "You are the one with no heartbeat," she said. "You rule the city that has no wall. You have more wealth than a thousand kings. Everyone from here to the end of the earth fears you more than death itself. Even still, you come to me because there is something that you lack."

"I offer you the weight of ten men in sculpted silver. In exchange I ask for mere words."

"Keep it," she said. "There is only one thing that I want from you."

"Ask."

"Immort'tality," she droned, with an emphasis on the T, in a way that was both deliberate and mindless at the same time.

"You have my word that it will be granted to you if you can help me."

"I want it right now or else I will not help."

"If I give it to you now," I responded, very diplomatically, "then I will never see my Starla again. Therefore, this is my offer: if she lives, then you will never die."

She eyed me and smiled. "So you want me to be just as desperate for her survival as you are. I will accept this transaction because your word is worth very much in these times."

"Good. You will have to do nothing but tell me where to

find her. My men and I will retrieve her, and then you will receive your reward."

"No," she said with lamentation. "That is not possible. Your men will not go with you."

"They will go wherever I tell them to go."

"But they would not go to their own deaths. I know the arrangement you have with them. You have given them immort'ality in exchange for permanent service, but they, unlike you, are not invincible. They would not die for you, would they?"

"I did indeed promise them eternal life in exchange for the perpetual service that you describe, so, as you correctly deduce, I cannot order them to their deaths. But what is this place of which you speak, such that these immortals would be in danger? And how, if these immortals are forbidden upon their lives to enter, is it possible that my Starla should survive?"

"It is a great risk for anyone to enter, mortal or otherwise," she said, staring at some arbitrary tree leaf behind me. "There is but a small chance that Starla lives."

"Tell me where she has been taken, oracle."

"You must find your way to the Garden of Truth; there, the answer will be revealed to you."



The only way to get to the Garden of Truth is to travel through the Land of Lies. Many mortals have gone into the Land of Lies in search of this garden, and none have ever come back.

They say you can never believe your eyes in the Land of Lies. It is a wasteland wherein the weaklings die and the strong go mad like the other inhabitants. Water is as black and thick as crude oil and fire is as cold as a nun's touch and nothing is ever as it seems, but it is not a dream.

My men had the crazy old man's eyes put out and we readied a blindfold that would eventually be wrapped around my eyes, and we traveled by horse carriage to the road that would take us to the Land of Lies. We rode for days, and the crazy old man became

increasingly fragile for the lack of food; my men kept him alive with the creeping and slithering things that we could find underfoot.

After some time we reached the road. Anyone who traveled upon the road to the Land of Lies was well advised to not use his eyes, lest he go mad and become one of the scuttling wretches that haunted the land. And this was as far as my men could go, for their loyalty was not to the death; they blindfolded me and left.

The road to the Land of Lies was strait and narrow. It was strait and narrow, but it was not straight. It was as crooked as a man's heart and as treacherous as his deeds. At the end of the road was the entry point. It was a great pit of tar, and it fed every day upon rot and decay. You could say there was no rotting in this place, as the process of rot is actually a result of the proliferation of life—this place had a death rot, and the air was like the air in the lungs of a dead man.

The trees here were leafless and black, and the sky was always dull and gray—so I've been told. Don't bother looking for the sun, it's been maimed. This land was so dry and desolate, so empty, that a mere drop of water, if given to the earth, would, with the invocation of osmosis and equilibrium, disperse itself in all directions, every which way, spanning several paces before surrendering its will.

The tar pit was the point of no return. The crazy old man and I arrived at this nexus point and we could hear it bubbling and frothing, slowly consuming the environment around it. Underneath these black depths was the Land of Lies, and there was no known way of coming back. So we took one last moment in this world and then gave up our bodies to the pit, descending through the darkness.

I had been counting in my head and I knew about how long a man could survive before drowning. As the time continued to proceed we kept descending, but we could not sip through the bottom. There was nothing beneath us but more tar. Something was wrong. When I felt that the crazy old man's time was about

to be up, I waded back up through the muck until I felt air on my face.

"My lord, is that you? Are you there?" he cried, the tar in his mouth forcing slight gag sounds as he spoke.

"Aye, it is I," I said.

I had anticipated that the tar pit would swallow us up and then defecate us into some deep underground cave, many paces below the surface; instead, the Land of Lies rolled itself out on top of reality and claimed the horizon in all directions while we were in the black deep. I could see now why there was no known way to leave this place.

And everything felt so different here, like we didn't belong, like the place was waiting for us to leave. It was cold and barren, and nature was different.



More years passed as I was reduced to mere existence in the vault. I began to lose my mind, and at some point I was totally unable to distinguish between my thoughts and the actual sound of my voice. Even my bloodlust was just simply gone. It was an emptiness that I had truly never felt before in my entire life. There was nothing in this world except for time, and my heartbeat was the world's clock.

There was something happening to me in this vault, something that I cannot explain. It was something like the phantom-limb phenomenon. When I touched the walls I could feel the metal on my hand, but I could also feel what the wall felt. I felt my cold, steel body being touched by a fleshy hand. I shared some kind of a biological entanglement with the vault, and I somehow was aware that it was alive and that it could feel my heartbeat. My heartbeat wasn't real, and I knew it, but I could still hear it pounding, and the more I focused on it the louder it got. And I knew the vault could hear it, too. I knew it could feel it. I knew the vault was just as indestructible as I was, and I knew that I would never leave this place alive.





We were as unarmed as soldiers of peace and the chances of success were not promising. The tar that covered our bodies had dried into ash, but the ground beneath us was moist from the mingled tears of all the forgotten children.

Each step I took in the mud took me deeper into agony. It was like my heart was cut up and unfurled and stretched out like a banner, and I could feel it being pulled every which way. Everything felt so significant, like my body's nerves were the roots of all the trees of the earth so that I could feel the pain and suffering of the whole world.

The blind worms slithered in the mud below me, surviving off of this misery, waiting in salivating anticipation for each new teardrop. I marched on but I was sinking, and everything was like an atmosphere in my eyes and I wanted to cry. The worms knew, and they began to undulate up my legs and up my belly to taste the tears that so desperately wanted to leak down my cheeks.

I slowly began to fall like a crumbling mountain and I braced myself with my arms, and the worms came up my arms and they were all over my body now. I had the feeling like a chill and a shiver all over, and it felt like there were a thousand wriggling fingers beneath my skin. The darkness got inside me and I began to tremble in my sadness. It was like the heat rushed out of me because the world around me was a cold of infinity. I could feel my breath becoming shorter, and the muscles in my face were sorely fatigued from the sorrow that they were forced to portray. The trenches of my eyes were holding water like an overwhelmed dam and the slightest blink would have flooded the world.

The very short moment that I'd spent in this land was like the time between when you tell a lie and when it's found out; now the time of reckoning had come. There was no way to hide that we were here. This place—it had an aura... it seemed to wrap its fingers around my eyes and remove my blindfold like a seductive lover, not lacking in sleight of hand, and it was then that I saw a great gulf before us. It was an enormous canyon that stretched out to the horizon on the left and the right, and there were three

bridges offered up as compensation for this.

To the left, a long, long bridge made out of hellfire;

To the right, an ornate road that filled you with paralyzing dread whenever you looked at it;

And straight ahead, a path that was an impossible structure, a one-sided helix, winding forever into the distance.

"I... I don't understand what I'm seeing," I confessed. "I cannot put this into words."

"What is it, my lord?"

The distress in his voice was not subtle, and when I looked upon him I could see that he, too, was afflicted by the worms. I took him by the hand and led him to the ornate road.

"Follow this path," I said.

The crazy old man obeyed without question; I followed the path of hellfire, for after having seen the ornate road I would have been overwhelmed by it even if my eyes were closed.

The hellfire purified me of the terrible worms, but the crazy old man was not as fortunate. As I looked through the flames I could see that he began to drip apart like a punctured heart, and then he finally buckled under the weight of his own anguish. The worms left him in the same physical state that he was in when they had first found him, but yet there was definitely something tangibly different about him now; it was as if something inside him had been extinguished.

In my perverse observation of the crazy old man's torment I invested a dangerous amount of time looking upon the ornate road. And I felt the dread in me now, that suffocating feeling in me like there was a balloon lodged in my throat, and I closed my eyes but I still couldn't move. I couldn't breathe. The dread was so overpowering that it felt like it was coming from the entire external world, and in response I allowed myself to completely let go. I collapsed as though I'd been shot in the head, utterly limp and totally indifferent as to whether I might land upon the bridge or fall off of it.



"What do you see, my lord?"

"What happened? Where are we?"

"I think we are in the garden."

"How did we get here? I lost time, and I... how did you rescue me from the hellfire? I see no singe or sizzle on your skin."

"The hellfire only burns living things."

"The worms siphoned your soul?"

"Indeed, my lord. I am done for. I can never leave this place."

"Why is that?"

"If you tell too many lies, then you will only be able to save yourself with even more lies. And so it is with this place... it has gotten inside me... it's become a part of me now... I can no longer survive outside of this place."

"If you have become twisted with lies, then how is it that you can be standing in the Garden of Truth?"

"If that is truly where we are now, then I do not belong here."

"It looks like any other garden that I've been in."

"What's that sound? Have you been hearing it? It's water. There's a fountain. Do you see a fountain?"

"I see nothing of the kind and I hear nothing, you old fool."

"Maybe it's a large waterfall that's very far away," he suggested.

"Then let us find it."

So I took him by the hand and I began to guide him through the garden, but then he tripped and lost his feet after a few paces.

"My lord?" he cried in confusion. "You let me trip over something."

"You fool, there is nothing there."

The crazy old man reached out with his hands and pantomimed them in the air, as though he were feeling the contours of a solid object. "Can't you see this? This thing here, is it not a statuette?"

"Old man, there's nothing there. It's just air."

He then rubbed his hands over the ground. "What is the substance of the ground?" he asked. "Is it soil?"

"We're standing on a grassy walkway."

"Oh no... oh no."

"You've lost your mind, old man," I snapped.

"No. I know exactly what's happening. We're not in the same garden."

"What?"

"Can't you see?" he cried. "We aren't in the same garden. It's trying to tell us something. The truth is that there is no truth."

And just then the oracle came out from behind a hedge. She had cut out her own eyes, just the same as we'd done to the crazy old man. And she spoke:

"Your friend is almost right. The truth is that truth is meaningless."

And I already knew the complete and exhaustive formulation of this argument and I knew the inescapable conclusion: statements are made of language, language is circular because all words are defined in terms of other words, and so statements are circular and thus their truth value is completely arbitrary. Furthermore, without any logical axioms in place, everything can be both true and false at the same time, and the truth will be indistinguishable from anything else. We are only able to baselessly assert the validity of a set of completely unverifiable logical axioms so that we can use our language, which uses itself to define itself, to conclude that a favored statement is true.

And I suddenly had the feeling that I'd had enough of this garden.

"Where are you going?" the oracle asked.

"I have to find my way out of this place so that I can save Starla."

"What do you mean, my lord?" the crazy old man asked. "This is where we need to be to find her."

"I'm talking to the oracle, but only I can see her," I said. "Only I can hear her."

"Then I was right," he said. "There is no truth. There is none! We are in different gardens. I cannot hear her."

"Quiet, old man. Oracle, are you me? Are you my inner thoughts?"

"This is the Garden of Truth," she said. "There are no lies here, and everything that you can see or hear is truth."

"Supposing, of course, that truth exists."

"Of course."

"But then why can't my prisoner hear you? Is it as he says—are we in different gardens?"

"No one can know everything. We are all in the same garden, but different parts of this garden are seen by different people; there is no one who can see the whole garden."

"Then why are we here? What is the point?"

"I was able to feel that your girl is in the Land of Lies, but nothing can be certain of that place. I had to come to this garden and breathe this air. This was my only way of knowing what happened to your Starla."

"You must be an apparition. There is not a chance that the real oracle would venture through the Land of Lies with no escort, especially considering that I, an immortal, could have offered it."

"I told you," she insisted. "There is only one thing that I need from you. Nothing else."

"And you shall have it if you can bring me to her. Tell me where."

"It's so tragic... she's not far from here. You may have even passed her on your way."

"You say with a certainty that she is in the Land of Lies?"

"I did tell you—did I not?—that she is in a horrible place. But I could not have known it for sure until now. I am so sorry."

I finally found the courage to ask the obvious question. "She no longer lives?"

"It is as you say."

"But what if I never left the Land of Lies? Maybe I'm still in it. Maybe you are a lie."

"If this is not the Garden of Truth, then where is it?" the crazy old man asked. "How far must we go until you'll believe we've made it?"

"This is all a lie," I insisted.

"Then say a lie," suggested the oracle.

"What?"

"There are no lies in the Garden of Truth."

And so I tried to say a lie. I tried to say that my vest was purple, but I could not say it.

"But, oracle, I said that this was all a lie."

"And you were not lying."

"What is happening? What is she saying?" the crazy old man asked.

"Quiet, old man" I said. I looked back at the oracle and asked, "Oracle, tell me: is God real?"

"This is the Garden of Truth, not the Garden of Knowledge. Some truths are unknown."

"Then tell me: what is the purpose of my life?"

She had no eyes, but she looked straight at me. "Kill yourself now."

"I cannot kill myself, oracle," I ridiculed.

"And that is why it is the purpose of your life."

"And Starla—did she leave this world in peace?" I asked.

The oracle's reluctance to answer was enough for me. I turned to the crazy old man.

"You will now tell me the truth, old man. Are you here for revenge? Are you here because I have harmed someone that you love?"

The crazy old man wept. "Yes, I... I've taken this too far. It is true that the devil took my little one, but I gave him your Starla, as well, because of what you did to my love. I lured you here, to the garden, so you would know the truth... so you would know my pain."

"Kneel down and prepare yourself for the end. It will be swift and painless for you, just as it was for the one I took from

you."

"I beg you, my lord, to remember the promise you made to me. When you leave this place, do not bring harm to my little one if you find her." He lowered his head in anticipation of his demise. "I'm so sorry, Gertrude."



The indestructible door before me I named Padempire. He was always watching and always listening. Any misdeed done in that pitch black could be clearly seen, and any silent thought could be easily heard.

I spent days (or perhaps months or years—I had no concept of time) sliding my fingers over the grooves that separated Padempire from the rest of the vault. It was an orgasmic high to feel it because it was the only thing that there was to feel. Even the bloodlust was still long gone... I'd have given anything to feel the torturous longing of blood once again. Padempire, my new friend, my old friend, was all I had now. There was truly nothing else for me.

I would kneel down at his feet and spread my arms like eagle wings, feeling my way up from the threshold, standing when my arms got high enough, and meeting my two hands at the top. I tried to get as close to the middle of the top of the door as I could. And when I'd get there it was time to go back down again, retracing my path so I could do it all over.

I didn't really care about anything else anymore. I just kept running my fingers along the grooves. It was the kind of thing that you might catch yourself doing and then, upon realization of it, you would stop because—even though you were finding it somehow pleasurable—you knew that you were wasting your time. But I didn't ever stop. I don't remember ever stopping. I had no reason to think that it was a waste of time. I just kept mating my fingers with the crack, and all was right with the world.



The blind oracle just vacantly gazed at me, waiting for me to ask my next question. She already knew what I was going to ask.

"Where is Starla?"

"She is dead."

"*Where* is she?"

"You cannot turn her; she is too far gone."

"Do not try my patience, oracle."

"She is still in the Land of Lies. I can take you to her."

"Why would you do that? If she is dead, as you say, then I will not give you your reward."

"I am doing all that I can, and I am trusting that your judgment will be clear after some time."

"And so," I concluded, "you're saying that I'm still trying to save her because my judgment is not clear?"

"Yes."

"I will go alone. How do I get out of here?"

"The truth is at the center of any lie."

I nodded my head in acceptance and began to peel a strip of cloth off from my vest so I could make another blindfold out of it.

"That is not necessary," she said. "You will not lose your way in the Land of Lies because you can leave at any time you wish."

"How is that possible?"

"You must accept Starla's fate."

"Why?"

"You must go through the Land of Lies to get back to your world, but you cannot ever leave the Land of Lies if you believe in a lie."

"How do I know I'm not still in the Land of Lies right now? How do I know you're really the oracle?"

"You have already proven it to yourself. You cannot tell a lie here."

"And what if that is the lie? How do I know this place isn't the biggest lie of all? There's truth in any lie—you told me that."

She couldn't tell me a reason why I could trust her. She knew it and I knew it. Truth cannot ever be expressed with words.





Since the truth is at the center of any lie, it would follow that I needed only to walk a straight line until I was back in the Land of Lies. But the garden seemed to stretch on forever and without repetition of landscape. After having wandered for hours I retraced my steps and found the remains of the crazy old man. The oracle was long gone. I started off in a straight line in another direction and again there was nothing but infinite greenery and scenery before me. The echoes grew louder in my head as I began to focus more and more on the fact that I was alone, and the fear started to set in. Would I be stuck here forever?

And then it happened that I saw Starla in the distant fog. I ran and shouted for her, but, as I got closer and as she began to turn and face me, I saw that it wasn't Starla.

The little girl just looked at me for a while, and then she spoke: "Help me. I'm lost. I don't know where my father is."

It was the crazy old man's little girl. I suddenly felt so horrible. I'd killed her father and I wasn't even concerned with her safety at all. I only wanted to find Starla, and this little one here could have perished and it would've meant nothing to me.

She was so young and innocent... there was no possible way that this little girl could have crossed over any of the bridges leading to the garden. I suddenly realized that I must have, at some point, wandered out of the garden and back into the Land of Lies. It looked like the Garden of Truth, but I must have left at some point and was now seeing nothing but lies. And then that meant that it was possible that this little girl before me was no girl at all, but rather some horrific monster indigenous to this place.

"What is your name, little girl?" I asked.

"Gertrude."

"Gertrude, I've come to take you home, okay? Your father sent me. He loves you very much, but he had to leave. He told me to come and take you home."

"Okay."

A lie. I was able to tell a lie.

I took her by her little hand and my thumb filled the entire valley of her palm. We wandered through the garden and at last we came to a well, but there was no water that did fill this well. In this well was black tar, the same black tar that had taken me into this terrible place.

I did not know what game this place was playing. I knew only that this endlessly swirling slop of black and darkness would definitely not take us home. But what else could I do? I had to play the game. I had to go inside.



This place was doing its best to convince me that I had returned to the other side. We were on the road that the crazy old man and I had taken to get to the Land of Lies—or, rather, I should say that we were in the Land of Lies and on a road that felt just like it. I turned to Gertrude, expecting her to molt her false skin and reveal her true self. But she just looked at me, dried tears halfway down her cheeks and ash all over her little body, wondering what I was thinking. So I kept on with her and we reached the end of the road.

But I could only think of Starla. And I was doing something wrong. This did not seem like the right way to go.

"Go home, Gertrude. Back to your village. I know that you can find the rest of the way."

After dismissing Gertrude with yet another lie, I went back to the tar pit. I ran as quickly as I could, but the tar had already disintegrated into ash. I clawed through the ashes in vain; I was being mocked. I lifted myself up with my ash-stained hands and turned around to go catch back up with Gertrude, but right when I turned around I saw her lying on the ground before me.

I rushed to her side and tried to check for her human vitality, but she was already pale and cold to the touch. Even in death I could tell from her face that it was the blind worms that had gotten to her. They fed on innocence and fear, and little children have those things in far more abundance than terrible old men.

This was the game. This was how this place would try to

break me. Gertrude was only preserved this long so that this could happen. I told a lie to a little girl in the Land of Lies, and because of my lie she died. I was a monster, no different from any other abomination in this place.

I looked at her little fingers that barely had any wrinkles of daily wear on them and I saw in a flash all of her life that she would never be able to live. And I wanted to die. I wanted to trade places with her, I wanted to be buried in the deepest tomb, I wanted to disappear. The crazy old man had taken my Starla, and now I had taken his little one, and everything was so fucked up now, and I held Gertrude close to my heart and spilled my tears on her scalp, telling her how sorry I was, and this place had finally broken me.

I was broken to pieces, but I was not driven to madness. I was just driven to sadness. I could never love again. And I knew that this was what was necessary for me to finally accept and believe Starla's fate. And so I closed my eyes, but there was no darkness because the sun had returned and its light was coming through my eyes and I was out of the Land of Lies.

But the story ends in darkness, just as it began.



Padempire started to inflate like the foil top on a popcorn pan, a big, huge bubble of bobbling metal that was finding some kind of buoyancy like an inflating balloon, bouncing and boinging until finally bursting. And I could see outside, and it was full of stars, and I was the only life left in the universe.

Perhaps, in a few billion years from now, the sun will not expand so far out into space that it will swallow the earth. Perhaps the earth will instead just keep going around the dead sun, forever and ever. Or maybe the stray rocks and pebbles intersecting the earth's orbit will, after an eternity, bog down the planet enough so that it will apathetically fall into the sun and melt in the charred remnants of what was once a star.

But before that happens the end will come. I will be trapped in this vault until the half-life of the proton has been doubled, and

then the deconstruction of matter will dominate the universe. My invincible hands will wither before my blind eyes as all form and shape in the universe is bled dry. Madam Entropy will at last finish her masterpiece, and all evidence that life, beauty, and happiness ever existed will be irrevocably erased.

The last man on Earth will watch his last bleak sunrise, and he won't even care as his cold, lifeless body is claimed by the dirt. The worms will rot, the oceans will be dry as chalk, the volcanoes will belch out ice, and the sky will crumble into dust as the final curtain closes on the universe. And I will be backstage, staring, forever and ever, into the void.



The phisher of men dangled on the T, arms stretched wide, eyes turned out, blood leaking down his ribs.

"To be honest, I don't know if he's telling the truth or making it up," Father Brahm said. "I don't know why he would make it up, but I just don't feel certain about this." He paused. "Reserve your judgment."

I looked down at the crude paper that held Mr. John Tilger's information. "As always," I said, "I will lie in wait and catch him in the act."

Father Brahm and I had an arrangement: he was to listen to confessions and give up to me the name of anyone confessing to the rape of a child, and it was my duty to substantiate the claims and then take the monster from his home. Father Brahm also ran the orphanage that adopted the children in the event that there was no one left to care for them after I had done my part.

My abominable nature was acceptable to Father Brahm, as was my refusal to acknowledge his rank in the vile hierarchy of perverse old men, because we both believed in what we were doing. He must have thought that I was an angel or else some other kind of supernatural being, being totally above him and anyone else in the priesthood.

And so, having received my target, I took my coat and departed. As I rode on horseback, the rain began to descend and

the ink on my document ran. My pocket became an abyss of black slime, and anything written down was useless; it didn't matter, though, because I'd long since memorized it all.

Mr. Tilger was not very wealthy, although he did have his own residence. Any further remarks regarding this man's description will be withheld. Also, his name was not Mr. Tilger but rather something else that will not be revealed. I refuse to honor his legacy by immortalizing his name in print, in the hope that time has forgotten him.

I dismounted my horse around a corner and hitched the reins, opting to finish my journey on foot. From a distance I noticed some small clothing, soaking wet from the rain, that had been left on the clothesline in Mr. Tilger's small yard.

I silently marched up to the rickety property. I could see by the gate a small footprint in the mud, and my mind was flooded with images of Starla and how I had failed her. I pushed the memories aside as I pushed open the gate, and, remaining ever so silent, I tiptoed to the front door and pressed my ear against it.

I could hear shouting and crying, but audible words were a luxury that I was not afforded. I crouch-walked to a window and spied inside, and I could see Mr. Tilger violently yelling at his two daughters. The older of the two could not have been more than seven or eight years aged, and, judging from her bruised face, I surmised that she tried to shield the younger one by taking the brunt of the punishment.

As my eyes oscillated between the father and the daughters, I noticed a faint bloodstain on the crotch of the older daughter's dress; despite being the older sister, I can assure you that she was definitely not old enough for that to have occurred naturally. I was already invisible due to the darkness, and, upon receiving this sight, my eyes only grew darker with hatred.

I thought about the best form of entry for this particular situation. I definitely needed to intervene now, and my two choices were to either knock on the door or kick it in. I did not want to traumatize the children beyond the unfair measures to

which they'd already been subjected, so I took the diplomatic approach.

There was no answer, so I knocked again. Then the tattered man in his tattered clothes finally opened the door. And I knew the best lure for a man in Mr. Tilger's financial situation.

"I am a marshal and I have an emergency," I said. "A prisoner in transport has escaped and I am trying to hire hands to retrieve him. It is a good pay for a short amount of work."

I ironically flashed the weathered dossier that Father Brahm had given me with the obvious suggestion that it was an official document. I could see, in Mr. Tilger's pitiful eyes, that he was greatly considering the job and that he didn't want to refuse. Those eyes looked beyond me, to the left and to the right, and then back at me.

"You have no carriage," he said. "How will you transport the fugitive once he is captured?"

"I am parked down the street, and I've been going down to each house in search of good men. I have very little time. I need to know if you will join the posse or if I must ask another."

"I'll join," he grunted. "But what about my daughters?"

It sickened me to hear him speak as though he was concerned for their well-being. "He's wounded and I have a good idea of where he is. We won't be gone but for a few hours," I said sharply. "Get your coat, for we must be on our way."

During the moment that he was gone, the children, in their curiosity, filled the doorway and looked up at me. They were confused, but the older one seemed to partially understand what was happening (at least, on the surface) and she appeared to be glad that she would be relieved of her father's company—if only for a short while.

Mr. Tilger came back to the door and angrily shooed them out of the way. Immediately afterward he tried to act like a polite gentleman to me. I led him away from the house and out of view of his daughters, and then I knocked his wind out with a carefully placed fist to the stomach.

"The fugitive is you."

I administered a vicious beating and then dragged Mr. Tilger's effectively unanimated body into a dark alley that no vagrant would even defecate in. There I secured him in ropes and fixed a gag around his mouth. Before going back to the house, I felt for air under his nose to ensure that he was able to breathe. I threatened to kill him if he attempted to escape or draw attention to himself.

I went back to the house and I could see that the girls were still standing in the threshold of the doorway. I stood under the eave and greeted them with kindness, but not so much kindness that they'd lose trust of me.

"Your father is getting the bad man," I said. "Is your mother home? Can I talk to her?"

"She sleeps with the angels now," the older one said, speaking for the both of them.

"Did your father get a new mother for you?"

"No; he says that it's our fault that she died and we have to take her place."

There was something about them... they were so stoic and accepting of their own fate. It was infecting me, and I could feel my pity for them starting to slip away. It was like there was nothing inside of me, and it just felt like I didn't care at all. But this would've happened anyway because my love for them was not genuine. My love for little ones was nothing but hatred for the monsters that did harm to them. I could never love again because, long ago, I'd been broken.

"What does that mean, 'take her place'? What do you have to do?" I asked.

"We have to cook for him. He labors for his fee and then buys the food, and we just have to cook it."

"Is there anything else that you have to do... anything else that your mother did?"

"Sometimes we have to close our eyes while he hugs us. It hurts, but he says that's normal."

"Well, your father will be gone for a very long time. He wanted to come back again, to you girls, but he is just so good at catching the bad men that the king needs him for a long time. Do you have grandparents that can watch over you for a while?"

They both shook their head no.

"Maybe an uncle or an aunt?"

They again indicated in the negative.

"How about this, then. After I go get rid of the bad man, I'll take you to a nice place where the food is always hot and the beds are always warm. How does that sound?"

"That sounds good."

"Thank you," said the younger one, in a much brighter voice.

I just smiled, turned my back, and started to run. I ran slowly at first, while I was still on their property, and then I tuned it up to full speed. I was relieved to see that Mr. Tilger was still where I'd left him.

"You are guilty of the highest of all crimes. Higher than murder. Higher than treason. Your punishment shall be death without a trial."

I beat him again until his face was soup and his eyes were half-eaten strawberries. My love could be broken—I knew that much. But my hate? Never.



"Father! Father! Save me from this madman!"

Father Brahm and I shared a glance with one another and then looked back at Mr. Tilger coldly. And that's when he realized, as he was hanging there naked, upside down, and totally helpless, that he was going to die.

"Father!" he begged. "What would God say?"

"What would God say?" Father Brahm repeated in disgust. "What would *God* say? God has taken a vow of silence. The question is, 'What would your wife say?'"

"Please, my daughters need me. Turning them into orphans is doing more harm than good. For their sake, let me go! I beg you!"



"Your children are not a shield," I said. "You will not hide behind them." I stepped in behind the hanging man and held him in place so that he could not writhe. "You will be held responsible for what you have done."

"Oh, I know what it is," Mr. Tilger proclaimed. "This is what happened to the two of you, isn't it? That's why you're doing this?" He quickly exchanged his fright and dignity-trampling desperation for a sadistic smile. "How did it feel to have another man inside you? How did it feel?"

Father Brahm produced an ordinary dinner fork and gazed upon it with awe. "I've always felt that elaborate tools were unnecessary. You'd never believe what I could do to you with nothing more than this fork."

There was blood and screaming. And Father Brahm was quite right—it was indeed very possible to do many horrible things to a person with nothing more than a dinner fork. The hanging man eventually lost consciousness, either from the intense pain or from all of the blood rushing to his head, but that wasn't enough to stop Father Brahm.

And then I could feel the cold darkness of the vault rising up inside me and swallowing my guts.



In almost every war, I was there. I enjoyed to fight for both sides in any particular war, unless, of course, my physical appearance forbade me from joining one side or the other; in most such circumstances, however, I found myself able to break through the ethnic barrier simply by supplementing my enrollment application with the presentation of several severed heads of enemy leaders.

The America-Vietnam War was the last war that I fought in, and it would have been the last one even if I hadn't been stowed away in this vault: I had to stop participating in wars due to technological advances since my capture would result in a transfer to a maximum-security research facility or perhaps another vault like the one I was in now. Thus, in the America-Vietnam War, I

fought only for the Americans.

In addition to being my last war, the America-Vietnam War was also probably my favorite. The Americans were insane, and it spread to me. I began to act like my true self, hiding nothing, and there was a sick joy to it all. This was not how I had evaded detection all these centuries; I consequently had to murder many men in my companies if I suspected that they were gossipers.

Aside from my own side, I, of course, did my fair share of damage to the enemy. I ate the enemy and I drank his blood, but I didn't just do that. I'd strap a belt of grenades onto myself and run into a bunker, and then afterward I would collect their body parts as if there was some application for them. I'd take some of the prisoners that we had locked up and then run through minefields, dragging them behind. I would even sneak into a commanding officer's office at night to the spy the time and location of the next aerial strike so I could experience such an attack firsthand.

My friends started to call me Phan because I'd killed a Vietnamese officer of that name and worn his uniform for a while. And they began to emulate my behavior as well, wearing enemy armor and clothing for fashion and other crazy things like that. Many of my psychotic friends were captured and tortured, and I let it happen because they deserved it.

The atrocities that I'd perpetrated while in that frenzied jungle draped a haunting shadow over the next few years of my life, and I was in a decade-long melancholy spiral after my discharge. I cut myself off from the world, rarely surfacing, never feeding.

I was in a den of vagrants—some of the other homeless men there might have been in the war, too—and I recalled to mind a particular Vietnamese man that I had killed. He was running away, he was trying to survive, trying to protect the flow of air that was going in and out of him, but I ran him down and overpowered him. The feeling I had when my hands were around his neck was indescribable. There was the world around me, and then there were my hands, and then in the space between my grasping hands there was this life that I was destroying. I could feel his throat

vibrate against my hands as the air went in and out of his lungs, and then I squeezed harder and I couldn't feel the vibration anymore. I was killing him, and I looked into his eyes and he knew that he was going to die. And I didn't even remember why I was doing this anymore. His face became blurry, and then I blinked and tears fell onto his face, and his neck was warm to my fingers now because his body and mine had established a connection, and my rhythm was set with his, and it was like I could see in his eyes his whole life and everything that I was taking from him.

I deserved to be in this vault for all of the lives that I had destroyed and for all of the pain that I had caused, and Padempire would never forget the things that I'd done.



As I brought yet another bloodied pedophile down the dark steps of the dungeon I could hear Father Brahm interrogating someone. It could not have been Mr. Tilger, as it was not physically possible for him to have been conscious at this point. The interrogated would not answer, and, when I laid eyes on him, I discovered why: the detainee was one of my men.

"This one is a different kind of monster than the ones we usually seek," Father Brahm said to me. "This one is a bloodsucker."

"As am I."

"But this one is a killer."

"As am I." I looked up and down Father Brahm's face as it glowed in the flicking fire, and I was able to see his fear from any angle. "You must let this one go."

"But he is a devil!" Father Brahm protested.

*"As am I."*

Father Brahm looked at me very strangely and then formalized the accusation. "Blessed Mary, you really are the devil! You're no angel! You're the devil! Cursed be you, by the blood of Christ! The blood of—"

I grabbed him by the neck and lifted him off his feet.

"Reserve yourself, mortal," I hissed. "I am older than the ink in your Bible. I was there when Cain killed Abel. You will not edify me."

"I—"

"If you speak, I will cast you to the floor and crush you."

"Begone, devil!" he piously shouted.

So I violently threw him to the floor and put my foot on his throat. "I should twist my foot," I said. "But I won't kill you because I think you know, deep down, that you can't see heaven in the tip of a sword. You know that there is no pot of gold underneath your deathbed. You listen now. Your founders were outcasts, your saints are hypocrites, and all your prophets foam at the mouth. Even your messiah was executed for blasphemy. You will not act as though I am privileged to be in your company, and you will not concern yourself with what I am or where I come from."

"As you say," Father Brahm acquiesced.

"Now release the prisoner." I turned to address my soldier. "Lemniscate, you will not retaliate. I will compensate you for this."

"As you say," he echoed. He looked at Father Brahm through the bars of the cell, laughing.

Father Brahm raised himself up, retrieved the cell keys from the wall, and began to unlock the cell door as instructed. The door creaked open and Lemniscate approached in a natural strut, very cavalier and arrogant. As he neared, Father Brahm took a courtesy step backward to make room. When Lemniscate's back faced Father Brahm, the priest revealed a dagger from within his robes and jabbed it into the vampire's neck. He held the other side of Lemniscate's head with his other hand so he could jostle the dagger back and forth, and blood did flow out in mighty gulps. And as Lemniscate was growing weak, Father Brahm accepted the waves of blood into his mouth until there was nothing left in the dry vampire.



The fledgling Brahm was a perfect display of why I was so careful in choosing my men. He could not control the new hunger, and—to make a long story short—he was responsible for us both becoming fugitives of the church. And, of course, in these times, being a fugitive of the church was just the same as being a fugitive of the world.

Brahm was thrust through and beheaded in battle because he'd gone mad with the new blood that was in his veins; however, I, as always, surrendered when the overwhelming forces were upon me.

I was largely glad that Brahm's time on this earth had come to an end, as he had become uncontrollable and unpredictable. Due to his loyalty to me that he'd had while he was still human, I was unable to kill him; it was, however, far from my duties to grieve his death.

And so, having yielded to the church's knights, I was taken to the deepest, darkest depths to which man could have possibly burrowed, given the technological infancy of the time, and there I would dwell for a short time.



Padempire opened and I saw the surface of the sun, and it was like it was alive. It moved like a morbid fluid, like a slosh of substance that was wounded and bleeding, and I reached out to touch it. And just as I did, Padempire's metal melted and washed over me with the burn of ice water.

In the next moment, the scorched earth and her billions of graves were consumed. I knew in my mind that it was actually a process that took a long time, but it was still only an instant. And then the outer parts of the sun swept through the rest of the planets in a massive wave, and I was left floating like a space rock. I was gravitationally ejected away from the sun, destined to drift through the blackness until the extremely improbable, yet extremely inevitable, fate of falling into a star.

And then something very unlikely happened. It was like a flipped coin landed on its edge and anything was possible now.

After the infinity of time it wasn't a star that I fell into, but rather a planet. A rock-solid planet with 0.004 Jupiter masses.

I was the mother. I was the mothership that brought a world's population of microbes to the salivating planet. The organisms shed off of me like dust and accumulated on the ground, and they began to multiply, and they were multiplying inside me, too, and the life flourished. They consumed the nutrients of my body and my consciousness was swallowed up by the soil, and I watched the centuries pass as the life increased in complexity until it was walking upright and fighting wars.

My children left for the stars, perhaps in search of me, and, soon after that, my world was again consumed by the heat of a star. And I was in the vault and I was screaming, and I might as well have been in the vacuum of outer space because there was no one around and I did not make a sound.



This was why I'd stopped ruling over humanity.

Back in the land before time I could simply pummel them under my fist because they could not build cages of iron to confine me; as man slowly began to wade through the secrets of metal, I began to realize that I could not continue to brutalize them—I could not even rule over them at all because they would eventually learn that the legends of my immortality were very much legitimate. I could never allow metal-working man to learn this secret because if the terror of my name once again swept through the land—except this time through a land of metal—then, eventually, the insignificants would band together and come to take me away. My only choice was to live under the shadows.

"Under the shadows" would be my exact address for the next few years, as I was taken to a firelit dungeon wherein all of the other heretics were held captive. It was a bleak place that was damp and dark, and you could always hear muffled screams of agony. The particular area to which I was taken was a circle of cells surrounding a middle open area that was used for persuading the prisoners to convert.

What was going on here was something that probably wasn't legal, not even in this age when interrogation was synonymous with torture. I say this because most torture devices will have some kind of complexity to them, such complexity that the device could be used for only one specific purpose, thereby legitimizing its usage. Instead, in this dungeon there were torture tables—nothing but metal beds to hold you down while a very, very sick person satisfies his sadism.

There was only one table in our cell block. It was a long metal bed upon which you will lay your body, and there was room enough for your arms to be outstretched into L shapes—elbows out at the side, hands at head level. Your legs would rest in their natural position. There were attached dungeon cuffs that would be fastened around your wrists and ankles, and there were similar things to hold down your waist and neck.

The living conditions in this prison were truly as horrific as the torture. For one thing, you were never let out of your cell unless you were free to go—that is, either through clemency or torturous execution; I never once saw or heard of an inmate being removed for a court appearance. Inmates were able to take care of some parts of their bodies, but atrophy of certain muscles was inevitable. There was also atrophy of the mind: over the years while I was there, I saw many prisoners who were unable to walk when they were being taken out of their cells because they'd gone so many years without walking more than four paces in any one direction. They could walk quite fine inside their cells, but when presented with a vast openness before them they could not remember how to take more than the amount of consecutive steps that they were able to take while inside their cells.

It was quite bad for the prisoners here, but for me it was hardly anything at all. I had no sorrow for the fact that a few years of my life were being taken away since I, unlike my unfortunate friends, had so many to spare. I was also unaffected by the poor quality and quantity of food, and the physical problems resulting from this form of incarceration were impotent against me.

There was, however, my bloodlust: I needed to inhale the fumes of fresh blood.

I know that I probably alluded that I drink blood, or perhaps I even said it outright, but that's not the case; I needed only to sip the aroma of the blood, as this was where I could find the residence of the soul. If ever I endured a prolonged period of time without this satisfaction, my mind would begin to unravel; however, I will not be driven to madness in this tale, for I had always been capable of sustaining myself for quite a few years without any crimson gratification.



If there's one thing about human nature to which I can wholeheartedly attest, it is this: humans are clever. When locked up, men have very ingenious ways of doing things that need to get done.

There was a market for all kinds of things here in the prison, and this market thrived without anyone ever leaving his own cell. I donated much of my daily food to this market, and in exchange I received all of the feces that I'd ever need. Yes... feces. There was indeed a demand for this waste substance since the prisoners were so creative and so talented at using such a small amount of tools or goods to do so many things; the demand for dung never met the demand for food, of course, and so I was entitled to more than just fecal matter for my edible contributions.

Although there were no spoons or ladles or solid tools of any form issued to us that I could use to take the feces from the donator's bucket into my own, I certainly was able to fashion a decent shoveling tool with the small amounts of materials and the large amounts of time that I was afforded; however, there was another task that made hands-on contact sometimes unavoidable. For you see, toilet paper is a very new invention—as new as the twentieth century. Back in this time, there were other methods of handling the unspeakable; in this particular prison we had our weekly rags. To protect my secret it was my duty to not only sufficiently fill a waste bucket but also to manually soil a rag so as



to fabricate evidence that I had regular bowel movements.

As I mentioned before, it was important that those in power could not discover my immortality; I only wish that I had remained just as careful in the latter times.



I sometimes wondered why the United States locked me away in this vault. It was true that I could not be rendered unconscious by any drug, but I would certainly think that they could have used pulleys and ropes to make me completely helpless and harmless. It was clear that they didn't really put me down here because of my behavior—I would have wound up here regardless of my level of cooperation.

I was left to conclude that I was sent here as a cover-up. It seemed to be quite plausible because there were so many PhDs who saw me and performed tests on me—the number was unusually large because my abnormal nature made me an interest to so many different fields. There were anthropologists, linguists, physicists, physicians, biologists, and even astrobiologists—just to name a few.

And so I think that the whole issue had to be squelched before it could get really big because I was (at least in appearance) a human being. And human beings have rights—even violent prisoners—but yet I was certainly being treated like an animal. There were so many people studying me that the risk of one of them going public would have eventually become more of an inevitability than a risk: there is no non-disclosure agreement, whether it is backed by bribery or brutality, that can suppress a man's inner demons forever.

They tried to physically destroy me on many occasions. They certainly found out that I was indestructible, but it wasn't clear to me if they ever found out the reason that I was that way.

The amount of people aware of my existence was becoming dubious, the expenses of the entire project were building up, and the only thing that remained constant was me. There was, I suppose, no better way to dispose of me than to lock me away

behind the eternal gaze of Padempire.



Sometimes I would meditate and leave my body, just hovering in my cell, observing the other cells from behind the bars of my own. Due to the orientation of the cells, I was unable to see into the cells of my neighbors on either side; I could, however, see into every other cell.

On my left-hand side, in the first cell with a visible interior, lived Jesus, a person of unknown faith who had no tongue. Over the course of the next few months, Jesus would complete the transformation of his living quarters that he had begun upon his arrival. He'd been painting something on his prison wall, but he refused to let anyone see it whenever there was light.

There came a day when Jesus silently announced to us fellow prisoners that he had completed his mural, but it still couldn't be seen due to the bad lighting. The guards, it seemed, had never known what he was up to the whole time. So when they heard about his excitement and contentment for what he had accomplished, the guards felt that it might be pleasurable for themselves if they could take it away from him. They brought a scrub and a bucket of water to his cell door and demanded that he wash the painting off the wall.

Jesus' refusal was all the grounds that they would ever need. They extracted him from his cell and shackled him to the torture table. It was interesting to me that they didn't deface the artwork after they'd extracted Jesus from the cell and secured him on the torture table; I suppose the morbid promise of physical cruelty was more titillating than the allure of whatever they might have been able to do to his art.

One of the guards furnished something that looked like a sleeping bag, only much smaller, and he set it down on the table near Jesus' belly. The guard unfurled it to reveal that it was a torture kit, each little roll of it divulging more lackluster blades and metals too rusted with blood to ever shine again. He withdrew a hook-shaped knife that was used for gutting fish and was about to

use it for the same purpose on Jesus, but, just before he broke the skin, some of the other prisoners started to make a fuss.

The prisoners threw all of their piss and shit at the guards, shouting as loud as they could. Jesus was kind of popular, and no one was happy about seeing this happen right when he was done with his artwork.

Now, there were two guards in total present here. They both turned their backs to Jesus in order to attend to the rioters, albeit for only a brief moment. This moment would be all that Jesus needed.

He applied torque to the first metacarpal bone in his left hand by twisting it and grinding it against the edge of the metal bed until there was sufficient dislocation so that he could slide his whole hand through the wrist shackle, probably ripping up a bit of flesh in the process. Next, he began the difficult part: to use four fingers and no thumb to silently pick the lock on the other hand's wrist shackle. It was a basic lock, possessing no system of tumblers, and it required only one tool for the entire mechanism to be picked; Jesus knew this, since he had on several opportune occasions studied the dimensions of the bucktoothed key from afar, and he was certainly prepared—he produced the required tool from the place in his mouth where his tongue should have been. After freeing his good hand, he was free to use it to pick the locks on the shackles binding his neck, waist, and ankles.

The prisoners who had been making the distraction were now distracted from their own cause as they watched Jesus rise from what should have been his deathbed. The guards started to follow the eyes of the prisoners, but by then it was too late. Jesus was right behind them, and he imposed violence upon them before they could fully turn around and set their feet in preparation.

And so Jesus freed us all, and we set foot outside of the cells. I was interested in seeing, in close detail, the living conditions to which my fellow inmates had grown accustomed. I didn't know what I was expecting—maybe some kind of luxurious furniture ingeniously invented out of garbage—but all I saw was the same

thing in every cell: grey-brown bedsheets, the dilapidated brick walls, and the waste buckets from which I had regularly borrowed.

We all had to go look at Jesus' mural before we could leave, if for no other reason than out of respect for what he had done for us. And I'll tell you, it was the strangest thing I'd ever seen: it was Jesus Christ's face... painted in human waste.

As soon as he was content, Jesus released the audience. We all formed one group and took out the rest of the prison's guards, one cellblock at a time. Each acquired area would make the guards' numbers weaker and ours stronger, and the complete collapse of control was inevitable.

During the chaos I subducted a guard into the shadows and satisfied my thirst. It was a very good feeling—so much so that the riot-born escape was somewhat anticlimactic.

And then we left the prison, out into the light. Although we all bathed in the bright sunlight after having been down in the depths for so long, this story will end, once again, in darkness.



I had another dream in the vault, except this one was different from the others. It felt real... it felt like a memory.

In my mouth was the overwhelming taste of metal. I was at the bottom of a well, and I was in total darkness. I had been there for an eternity.

And then the darkness receded in a vague way, and I could see all around myself. It was like I was not in a well but rather drifting in the depths beneath an endless ocean... everywhere in all directions there was ocean with no end. And then an enormous whale revealed itself as being the source of the light, a glowing whale the size of a city, and it opened its massive mouth and swallowed me whole.

The belly of the whale was its own world, filled with mechanical marvels. I was on solid ground now, but for some reason it was incomprehensibly difficult to rise to my feet. I eventually stopped staggering around and conceded to a slumped kneel, whereupon I emptied my mouth and lungs of the metallic

water.

And then a living machine approached me in a reverent way. It cleaned me, clothed me, and helped me to my feet. I still could not walk, and so it carried me into a great theater where I was shown the history of my own life.

There were other living mechanical entities inside the belly of the whale, and I lived with them for thousands of years. Eventually it was time to leave, and they brought me to the final mechanical mystery...



And then there was light... light everywhere... light all encompassing. I could see nothing but this bright white light, and I closed my eyes and it flashed and bulbed in my mind like a resonance. And then, after some time, my atrophied eyes could perceive that it was just a small fleck of light that had so gracefully lit up my world like a thousand suns, and I could now distinguish the light from the darkness. It was a flower of light, budding, blooming, bending, white petals spreading out and unfurling over themselves like the first lily after a harsh winter, and each second was more miraculous than the last.

And then the speck of light started to move. Sideways, if that was still a direction. I could feel my feet beneath me, but I honestly could not have told you which way was up or down. But I was sure that the light was moving, and I could see a faint streak of glowing stardust in its history. A spark fell to the floor and illuminated a circle of metal beneath itself, and I stooped down and my eyes inhaled the newly exposed texture like it was nude flesh.

And it was raining sparks now, and oh God I held my hands in front of my face and I could see those hands, and my knees buckled and I was swept down to the ground and I was crying for joy, and I wiped away the tears with my visible hands and I could see the trail of light moving in a new direction now. I extended my hands for the falling pieces of light like they were snowflakes, and then I took my warm hands and held them on my face and I was warm.

At long last I could see the shape of a door. It was a door of darkness with an outline of light. After the edges of light were completed, forces of what sounded like suction removed Padempire from my sight; behind him was infinite brightness. From that brutal white light emerged the figure of a man, and then two men, and then three, and then more. I could see no distinguishing features—only that they were each carrying a pole with something like a noose on the end.

I could tell just from the way they were walking that I was definitely in a new age. In different places and in different times a group of people will have a way about them when they walk; these people were walking with slight subtleties in their movements that I'd never seen before. I knew that these were not Americans. I knew that they would not understand a single word of my language.

My bloodlust was still inexplicably gone, but I nevertheless could not help myself from assuming a hostile posture. I'm quite sure that I was outwardly insane—even though my internal thoughts made sense to me—due to the uncompromising harshness of the punishment that I'd endured to this point. And so they grappled me with their tools and I thrashed about, kicking around the dust on the floor that was a mixture of Padempire's ash and also the long-forgotten remnants of my clothes that had fallen apart, shred by shred, thread by thread, over the millennia.

They led me out of the vault. I had a paralyzing sense of discomfort, and it was not due to the metallic wire around my neck: it was, as I had witnessed many times before, very difficult for me to walk more than a few steps without turning and facing a new direction because I'd been so strongly conditioned to pacing within the well-defined confines of the vault. I had the overwhelming urge to stop and turn around, but I was unable to appease this urge because they were herding me away from the vault.

While I was in the vault, my stories ended in darkness. But now I was free, and this story ends in sunshine.



From my counting I deduced that I'd lost twenty thousand years. As you might imagine, the technology of this age was astounding. This world was so metallic, so electrical, that a mere toothpick would have more processing power than the largest supercomputer from your time.

Everywhere there was metal. Vehicles were obsolete; people could simply fly. Such a thing is just so impossible to describe that I would do you a better service by trying my best to explain how it worked. My best guess was that there was something interwoven in the clothes, or that there was something beneath the skin in each human, and that this thing, or this system of things, fully harnessed the potential of magnetism for this purpose.

There was no crime at all because everywhere there were sensors and scanners that could fully map a person's brain. These scanners, detecting the precise position of every neuron and comprehending their interrelations, could infer from the acquired information the thoughts and memories of a person, and so any crime that a perpetrator might be aware of would become instantly known to society. But I suspected that there would have been no crime even without these measures since this society had eliminated all motives for crime.

There was no competition for resources, there was no monetary system, and there was no private property. Things had worth, such as artistic value or mechanical facility, but there was such abundance and boon of all things that hoarding had become pointless. Religion was obsolete for obvious reasons.

There were some other customary things worthy of note as well. From what I could gather while trying to decipher some of their speech, there was no longer a distinction in pronoun usage when describing a male or a female. Bathrooms were also unisex now, and it was not at all uncommon to see an entire establishment dedicating itself to being a bathroom—a cleaner, more luxurious environment to deal with something that would arise several times

a day.

I would also be deft in my duties to mention the situation with the children: every child was an orphan. They were raised by society rather than by parents. This system, as I would later discover, was easy to implement because there was no longer such a thing as live birth (humans were typically genetically engineered). In addition, the value of children didn't seem to be what it was in our time—a better way to say this is that the occasional demise of a youth would not be mourned more than the death of an established, contributing member of society.

The technology of this world was so impressive because I knew that it all came from nothing more than dirt and rocks. And I was actually very eager to be examined by technology this time around. I was excited at the notion of discovering why exactly I was immortal and invincible, and I was most of all excited about the opportunity of joining this society.



I was wrong, I was so wrong. From my counting I felt confident that I'd lost about twenty thousand years. Fifty thousand at the absolute most. But the reality was that I had lost half a million years. The date was 578,342 Common Era. To be technical, the year was something like 13,800,000,000 because humanity had, somewhere along the line, changed the year-counting system to make the start of Year Zero the moment of the Big Bang.

I can remember such a strong chill emanating through my body when I heard how much time I'd lost. I never had a home and I never had a family, but I think, at that moment, I knew what it was like to lose such things. Everything that I'd ever known was totally gone. Everything that I'd ever done had been long forgotten. When I had thought that it was around 20,000 Common Era, the feeling I had was that I was in a distant future but that there was still some cord keeping me tethered to the bedrock foundation of a familiar time; now that cord has been cut.





Of all the new ways of doing things, the most striking thing, other than some of the things that I've already mentioned, was that the night had become day. People would still sleep six to eight hours per day, but they would now do this during daylight hours. It was like humanity had finally stopped worshiping the sun, and they had entered a new age. Along with this new age came the colonization of nearly every habitable location in the solar system.

The humans had a mobile colony on the dark side of Mercury, and they were able to establish a permanent outpost on each of the poles of the planet because there were natural valleys there that were artificially deepened. These valleys protected the outposts from the intense sunlight, and there were solar panels in a semicircle outside of each valley that provided constant and sufficient energy for both the outposts and the mobile colony until entropy would erode the working parts of the system, at which point reserve energy would be used until replacement machinery could be brought in from the blue planet. Global colonization of Mercury was feasible, given the current technological standards, and plans were in the works for implementation.

Venus was most certainly uninhabitable due to its atmospheric pressure and temperature, but there were many permanent, unmanned research facilities on the surface. The gas giants were also, obviously, uninhabitable, but unmanned probes were in constant sub-orbit beneath the clouds of each of these. There were over a thousand for each of the four gas giants.

The moon was, of course, inhabited—there is a story to be told, though. The colonization of other planets and the other planets' moons occurred very smoothly due to the harmonious nature of humankind; our moon, however, was being explored and exploited before the humans had experienced their collective epiphany, before the time when they placed such great emphasis on non-applicational knowledge and understanding of the universe for its own sake. This was the time during which humanity still sought and fought wars, that regrettable era of humanity's history when people used money for every aspect of their lives and then

somehow wondered why everyone was so greedy and despicable. The very moment it was determined that the moon offered profit, there was full-scale war when it came time to decide which nations would own which areas on the moon, which laws would be applicable in which areas, and so forth. Would each country get lunar land proportional to their country size on Earth, or proportional to their population, or to their net wealth, or would each country get an equal share? The petty humans fought the Lunar War for decades (the war took place on Earth); they eventually came to a worldwide agreement. And thus began the colonization of the moon, which was now a very beautiful place.

(It is an unfortunate reality that terminology in the art of astronomy was very clumsy in your day. I can only offer my own set of terms and henceforth adhere to them with consistency: our sun I will refer to by name, Sol; any star will be referred to as a sun if it nourishes planets and I am describing a setting that is near enough to the star so that its stellar wind dominates the interstellar medium; the moon I will refer to by name, Luna; in general, the moon of any planet should be referred to as a natural satellite but I will still refer to these bodies as moons; the word "planet" will refer only to a solid, rocky planet and I will never be so absurd so as to use the same word to refer to a gas giant.)

Mars was colonized: there was a relative abundance of specially engineered plant life and there were also several forms of intelligent life that had been artificially adapted to survive unassisted (when I say "intelligent life" I mean spiders, wingless insects, and not much more). Other than microorganisms, nothing could naturally survive in the Martian wasteland. But there were new plans. The surface of the planet had undergone significant changes, and there was work in progress to complete the terraformation. The technology and resources to do this had actually been available for thousands of years, but the process had to be done gradually: there was one failed attempt at a hasty global warming of Mars' atmosphere that resulted in catastrophic storms over the entire planet, and there were many deaths.

Colonization of the moons of the gas giants was not feasible, save for a few. Jupiter's Galilean moons were, of course, colonized by humanity, and Jupiter was quite a sight to behold from the surface of one of these bodies; however, most of the moons of Jupiter and of the other gas giants were condemned because they were so small that the escape velocity was dangerously low and there existed too much risk of flying off uncontrollably into space.

Ceres, the bastard child of the solar system, was colonized. Pluto, Charon, and several other Kuiper Belt dwarf planets were also colonized, thanks to the advanced methods of harnessing energy, but most of the other distant Kuiper Belt bodies were too small for human habitation. There were also manned vessels circling Sol in their own orbital planes, many of which possessed exotic orbital inclinations due to their deep trespasses into the Oort cloud.

A potential health problem for all space-dwelling humans, whether they were on a sphere or drifting in the weightlessness of space, was radiation. Sol was constantly producing high-frequency photons that, unless inhibited by an obstruction of some sort, could eventually cause cancers, tumors, and other serious malignants. While the armoring of the mobile vessels and surface structures provided relief for this, there was the desire for a new kind of spacesuit that could be completely sufficient for this purpose. There were projects in the works that, if successful, would create artificial, personalized ozones to protect from the electromagnetic radiation that made outer space so dangerous (the solar wind, which would be particle radiation and the complement to the electromagnetic radiation, was not an issue because all space colonies, shuttles, and suits had personalized magnetic fields).

Of all the new places that the humans were able to set up shop, the most amazing place was probably here on Earth. They had laboratories at extreme ocean depths, and there were people in them. The amount of pressure stomping down upon these laboratories was immense, the darkness was overwhelming, and

the water, I'm sure, was cold enough to freeze your beating heart in place. In spite of everything, they were there, they were kidnapping bizarre forms of life for study, and there was just no stopping them. It was clear that there would soon be cities open to the public, and eventually the whole earth would be fully covered in metal.



They took me to a great library that—for all it was worth—may as well have been built just for me. The library's purpose was to be able to communicate knowledge to a being that had no understanding of the humans' language (or, perhaps, to be able to communicate knowledge to a being that had no language of any kind), and there was an interactive theatrical introduction that needed to be viewed repeatedly until the viewer was able to grasp the basic concepts.

The theatrical introduction could be relayed in most any kind of medium, such as audio, visual, touch, smell, sonar, electric current, and etcetera. There were other ways, I'm sure, but I wasn't able to tell what they were. I assume that my anthropomorphic body led them to believe that I was responsive and vulnerable to the same range of things as any typical human.

And so I was given a visual presentation in the basic wavelengths of light that any human could see. The presentation, which was set to relay the same information no matter which medium it might have been played in, began with no assumption that the audience had any concept of a number. I did like that approach, but what bothered me was the tacit expectation that any intelligent being—one that could see—would have its attention drawn to movement. Humans have always been visually drawn to movement because they were still in the jungle—it is the primal instinct of survival pulsing in your brain that demands your attention whenever you see something move. Who, though, would suggest that a highly evolved creature from an advanced civilization would still be so savage as to require this for survival? That presumptuous faux pas notwithstanding, the presentation was

very professional.

The presentation corresponded symbols with counting numbers. An appropriate number of pebbles, stars, or some other object with which any intelligent being gifted with sight should have been visually familiar were shown in juxtaposition to each of the symbols; I thus deduced their number system: a dot was zero; a vertical line segment was one; an upside-down V was two; a triangle, three; a square, four; a pentagon, five.

I believe that their selection of a base-six number system was related to the fact that six is the smallest perfect number (that is, a positive integer,  $n$ , whose proper divisors sum to  $n$ ). I couldn't be sure if this number system was what they actually used in practice or if it was something purely for this intergalactic ambassador library. Either way, they had a few curators who knew the numbering system, as well as the mathematical language, very thoroughly.

After being tested on the syntax and vocabulary of their mathematical language I was given demonstrations of various mathematical and logical proofs. Of particular interest to me—at least when my attention is restricted to matters such as this—was a whole wealth of various number theories, including the million-dollar question: does there exist a nontrivial formula for the sequence of prime numbers in their natural ordering? I was suddenly aware of the fact that open questions from my day might have been solved by now.

I asked them for the  $n$ th prime, and—instead of giving me the formula—they merely proved that it cannot exist; it was beautiful, and I tell you that it would have made any twenty-first century mathematician ejaculate. At the end of this proof, they, as per the usual, produced the proof signature—a few symbols indicating which axioms were necessary to make way for the proof (this civilization recorded such a thing because any proof that borrowed less axioms was superior to another proof of the same statement that might have required more axioms, regardless of the respective complexities or methods of the proofs).

(It could be tempting to stubbornly believe that it's impossible to prove the nonexistence of this formula; however, it's important to remember that mathematics is quite literally nothing but assumptions and definitions, and then, of course, the consequences that follow with dependence. No new information can come from an assumption or a definition; therefore, your twenty-first century's lack of insight into the properties of the primes should not lead you to believe that certain statements about the primes must be undecidable. And these mathematicians certainly started with assumptions different from anything I'd ever seen—and indeed there were, as I would later discover, thousands of different axiomatic systems of mathematics in this age—but the beauty of the proof was, naturally, rooted in the fact that primes are so simple and fundamental that a great many axiomatic systems will be arithmetically structured by primes; this produces many different paths that can be explored for the answer. Looking at it that way, I suppose it shouldn't be too surprising that they were able to conjure this proof.)

I was about as intelligent as an ape with a crayon compared to even a layman of this era, and yet I was still deemed fit to be instructed. But I knew that I wasn't fit to be instructed by their standards; I was only deemed such because I was a scientific marvel to them—they wanted to educate me so that I would share their thirst for more knowledge and thus willingly lend my indestructible body to them for such an endeavor. They did not know that my desire was already very much there. They taught me all things, even the things that I did not really need to know, since they would have felt shameful if they were to deny me any knowledge. The historical part was the prize feast of information; I was particularly fascinated simply with the title of one portion: "Interstellar Colonial History." I'd never before been taught history because I had lived through it all; I now had over half a million years of extremely well-documented history to learn, and I couldn't get enough of it.



And so now you will be told the secret of my immortality, why there is no blade, bullet or bomb that can harm me, why there is no poison that can pollute me, why there is no clock that can count to my last heartbeat. I am utterly indestructible because I am made of only one particle. A particle the size of a man.

That's not to say that I consist of only one molecule or one substance such that further decomposition would alter my chemical properties—I am but one elementary, indivisible particle.

There were many consequences that followed from this conclusion of my constitution, one of which being the fact that the humans in this future world were unable to scan my brain, or even detect its existence, since no light could pass through me.

Immediately after I was exhumed from the vault they weren't really surprised that my brain activity couldn't be scanned by their machines—not much more could have surprised them since they'd already found a man in a welded-shut vault that had, judging just from the primitive design, been constructed and sealed thousands of years prior. On the other hand, they were very much perplexed as to why they couldn't so much as draw blood samples from me. They had presumed that I was made of cells, but that there was some dense skeletal structure blocking the electromagnetic penetration of any part of my body; the absolutely impenetrable nature of even my superficial skin cells, however, was something far beyond their expectations.

Then they tried to peek at those super-strong skin cells and they saw nothing. My skin appeared to be the same at any level of magnification, and even when they looked down my throat the same phenomenon persisted. And so, with my consent, they performed tests of mortality on me. The tests gradually rose in intensity until they began to notice that I was luminous—exposure to these levels of heat purified me of incidental dirt and dust, and I shined more than the sun because I perfectly reflected all photons that greeted me.

Despite the technological limitations dwarfing the rigor of these tests, the scientists felt fully convinced that I was

inexplicably indestructible. In the ensuing experiment I was bombarded with quantum particles and it was verified that all collisions were completely elastic. Nothing ever passed through me, no matter the wavelength.

There was never any way to perform a proof in science and so we could not prove that I was made of only one particle, but the test results were unmistakable. The experiment was repeated so many times that the conclusion was probably more certain than anything else that was known in the whole of science, but that was what was necessary because of the humans' reluctance to believe it in the first place. There was absolutely no doubt that I was the one-particle man.

But there were so many questions now. Why did I reflect many photons of light at varying wavelengths, produce friction against objects, weigh as much as a man, and look like a man? Why could I not extend a finger and push through any solid matter, seeing as how there would be no resistance on the atomic level? If the caverns beneath my orifices terminated into the same kind of smooth surface that was lining the outside of my body, then how did I, for example, collect and interpret light? Why was it that I didn't exhibit the properties of any kind of particle that was known, but rather interacted with the environment in a classical way? Why was the timescale of my consciousness exactly like that of a typical animal on Earth instead of perhaps a more or less acute timescale wherein a conversation with me might take microseconds or millennia? Animals have evolved a timescale of consciousness as a function of both brain size and the twenty-four-hour daily cycle; my timescale, being totally arbitrary, was inexplicably synced with this.

But these weren't even the most pressing of questions because they could, presumably, be answered with more inspection. For the humans, there were two main issues that would possibly never be solved.

First issue: data. By what mechanism did I store and recall data? Such a process would require working parts, and that was



exactly what was not available to me. The best guess was... well, there was no best guess. My insides were not observable, and so there was only some conjecture that there were things in me like cilia—which were part of my one-particle entity—that could store binary information by either coiling or standing up straight. Whatever kind of mechanism I was using to store data, it was certainly believed that I could only hold a finite amount. It was also believed that the data was ordered, and that new data would overwrite old data in the order received. This would be why I was unable to recall events beyond a certain date, such as the moment that I came to be.

Second issue: antimatter. There was no known way that I could be annihilated. This was not for a lack of energy or power—they simply didn't know what they would have to do to actually accomplish the task. But there had to be a way, somehow, to make it happen because there certainly must've been some moment in time,  $t > 0$  (where  $t = 0$  is the Big Bang), in which I was pure energy, unless you prefer to lend credit to the absurdity of this image: there's me, and there's nothing else... except everything—the singularity. It is absurd—don't you think?—to imagine a man, perhaps meditating, somehow existing without any space or time to inhabit, waiting and yet not waiting for the singularity to explode.

And so if we dismiss the absurdities, then it can be established that there was the initial Big Bang and then, after some amount of time, something happened: by some unknown process I was forged out of a large amount of heat in a small amount of space, born from the very strange conditions that only could have existed in the time when there were no atoms and the average temperature of the universe was trillions upon trillions of degrees. The first one billionth of a second after the Big Bang can be divided into thousands of different epochs, and I was probably formed in one of these. There was so much going on in this span of time, so much that will never be understood, so much that can never be repeated or observed in any laboratory. I was the clock

without a clockmaker, the result of an adolescent universe uttering half-formed ideas like magnetic monopoles, cosmic strings, and even a cosmic man.



Back when I was in the American prison system I had a fear—a fear that was soon realized—that I would wind up in a laboratory to be tested and then locked up when there was nothing left that they could learn about me. But I wasn't afraid of the people of this era. They were just... civilized. Everything was done with my permission beforehand, and I was always free to leave at any time. On top of this, all of the scientific discoveries were shared with me immediately—this was a priority for them, like an ethical obligation. The last time I was being studied, the American scientists were under orders to keep me uninformed; the only things keeping me in the dark now were the language barrier and also the fact that you'd need an extensive background in physics to understand what was happening.

What I was able to pick up on was that my body, as a particle, was a carrier of several new fundamental forces that had never been seen before. Their interrelations with the world around me made me like a normal object in terms of being able to mimic basic interactions with the world, such as friction or gravity.

I was about as strong as an average man from your day. If I were to lift, say, fifty pounds, then that is an action that requires energy. Where this energy came from was not yet known—I hadn't yet been observed to sap energy from photons, so it was speculated that I had an immense amount of stored energy that was realized kinetically in very conservative quotas and that my body would naturally absorb more energy when needed.

What the humans might not ever understand, though, was why I was alive. They could never see inside me, and they could never know for sure that I actually was a sentient being rather than a nonliving entity programmed to respond to scenarios in appropriate ways—they simply had to take me at my word that I was alive.

Every living thing, except for me, has some form of a metabolism, every living thing has the ability—at least on the cellular level—to reproduce, and every living thing will eventually die. I could not even have been described as alive on the most basic level—as an open thermal system—because, as my stay in the vault suggested, I could live indefinitely in a closed system as entropy becomes arbitrarily dominant (entropy would not degrade me because I was only one thing and thus not a nontrivial system).

My natural bodily functions—the few that I had—were fraudulent imitations of genuine human functions. My tears, so I've been told, were made of moisture from the air, although, of course, the reason that my deep emotional anguish could coerce water droplets to coalesce remained a mystery. Why I felt the need to breathe, to take in oxygen and give it right back, to produce the frivolous chemical reaction  $O_2 \rightarrow O_2$ , was something that I'd been asking myself my whole life.

My bloodlust was merely a purposeless addiction—unlike my minions of old, I'd never drawn any sustenance from blood; I probably just associated blood with the life force in humanity, and I therefore craved its essence to sustain my own life force because I did not understand that I could have been so different from humanity so as to not have any need for sustenance at all. My ability to turn a human was an art that I had long forgotten due to the madness that I endured in the vault... and to be honest, I found myself wondering more and more if I had really done anything more than just garner loyalty from ordinary, unaltered humans.

Whatever I was, and whatever unknown processes were at work in ensuring that I was alive, it was certain that I was the absolutely ideal observer. Many millennia-old inventions that were useless without an indestructible operator were now being pushed past the theoretical stage. There were so many things that the humans wanted to see and so many things that they wanted to show me. Among these many things was the time machine, and all parties involved agreed that we would use that one last. The current level of technology wasn't sufficient to create it, but the

theoretics of how it would work were sound. It didn't matter, though, because no one was in a hurry to cease my existence. We would examine everything that the universe had to offer, and at the end I would be put forth to solve the last mystery...



It did not occur to them that my first experience of leaving this planet was special to me. Probably every human of this time had been to outer space at least several times, and so they were culturally blinded. Even still, strangely, I think that their casual disposition made my experience all the more thrilling—since there were no others to share in my childlike anticipation of going into outer space, I was left to feel all of it like an overflowing cup.

Our destination was Jupiter, and we got there in less time than it would take a twenty-first-century international flight to bring you from Los Angeles to London. We were constantly accelerating toward Jupiter until the halfway point, and then we began the constant reverse acceleration; I never got to experience the famous weightlessness of space until we began orbit of the boisterous beast. They allowed me to play around in the zero gravity for a while, and then they had me suited up in my drop gear.

I was still not perfectly fluent in their language—I suppose that I was lacking in some technical terms—and so it came as somewhat of a surprise when they put me into the airlock and then ejected me into outer space. I wasn't ready for it... I thought that there was going to be more prepping.

The darkness of space was something that I was unable to appreciate until there was no longer a pane of glass between it and my eyes. And then the darkness got into my lungs. I couldn't breathe, and the suffocating feeling was an extremely terrible one. I had to come to realize in my mind that I didn't actually need to breathe at all.

And the pressure difference was just as much of a shock on the rest of my body as it was on my lungs—I thought I felt my eyes bulging out of my head, but I knew that such a thing was

impossible due to the structure of my body. Despite all of this there wasn't a whole lot going through my mind while I was falling into Jupiter, other than maybe the occasional fear that my drop cable would snap and I'd be lost forever in a sea of metallic hydrogen.

When I broke through the clouds I was surprised at how cold, dark, and wet it was. I really didn't even expect there to be clouds—I don't know why, but I just assumed that the atmosphere would be ubiquitous and uniform, like an all-encompassing fog. But the clouds were present and they were blanketing the whole sky, which was probably why it was a bit colder and darker underneath them.

In my mouth were strange new tastes. And the sound was quite loud, louder than anything I'd ever heard, like a million ghosts all whispering at once.

I was in free fall, and I didn't know how far down the humans planned to drop me. But just as I felt myself starting to panic, they contacted me. That's right—despite the thick clouds and the heavy noise and the ever-increasing pressure, the working parts of my one-way earpiece radio triumphed in delivering me a message from the humans:

"I want you to touch your fingertip to your nose and see how long you can hold it there."

And that was all the voice said. I would have asked if they wanted me to recite the alphabet in reverse order as well, but it was a one-way radio and I wouldn't have been able to formulate the question in their language anyway. So I touched my fingertip to the tip of my nose and started counting to infinity.

Perhaps I shouldn't have been able to do this for very long, considering the ferocious winds that were at play, but the fact is that I was just able to do it. After some time they reeled me back into the ship and asked me specific questions about what I'd experienced. They then gave me some oblong object that I needed to keep hold of while once again falling through the Jovian atmosphere.

In this manner they kept reeling me back in, collecting testimonial data from me, and giving me objects to hold onto or telling me to do jumping jacks while free falling through Jupiter's clouds. It went on for hours, and I certainly had no complaints because I was the first living creature to perpetually survive unassisted on Jupiter.



Something personal. I needed to see Padempire again because I kept wondering if this was all a dream and if I would wake up. But when I got to the vault, nothing happened. I just felt nothing. That's how I knew it was real. But I already knew it was real—by now I'd been out for centuries, and I had more information in my head than the entire sum of humanity's knowledge in your day.

Padempire's broken body rested on the floor where they'd left him after disemboweling him with the white fire. The side facing me now was the side I hadn't seen since the days when people were still dying of cancer and heart disease. I just sat down on the filthy floor and stared down at him, unable to think of anything else worthwhile.

I slipped into a trance; after some time had passed I discovered that I had been, without realizing it, staring into my light source. It was like a solitary star in this palace of darkness.

Perhaps the reason I came here to visit Padempire was because tomorrow I would be traveling to the stars for the harvest. This moment was possibly among the very last that I'd ever be spending on this planet. Something could go wrong out in deep space, or we could find some other planet of permanent inhabitation. Perhaps we will encounter some abundant source of energy, or we might find a remarkable civilization with wonders yet unseen. There were just so many stars...



After observing and measuring many white dwarf stars with no success, we had finally located one that was just right. It was a solitary star on the fringes of the Orion Arm. We'd found many

other white dwarf stars that were more suitable for our aspirations, but the bulk of them were in the galactic halo; we were not sufficiently sophisticated at this point in time to voyage that far.

Interstellar travel was fairly tedious for us, as the advances of technology over the years first exhausted the limitless wonders of extremely small, extremely fast computers, and so at this point in time we were not capable of exploring much farther than the reaches of our deepest exoplanet outposts (the limiting factor here was not thrust but rather a finitely renewable environment to harbor human life).

We calculated that the dwarf star was in the perfect temperature range for the tools that I would be bringing to its surface (taking into account, of course, the immense pressure differences above and below the well-defined surface of the shining dead star). The temperature of a white dwarf is typically a function of its age since these dead stars deplete their heat supply with no way of renewing it, and so we had to find a star that was of the perfect age—it needed to be hot enough to create a desired effect in our tools, but not so hot that the tools would helplessly melt. The star's rotational speed—the single most important factor—was ideal: the more compact dead stars, such as black holes and neutron stars, have extremely fast rotational speeds on account of the fact that angular momentum is conserved during their explosive stellar deaths, but white dwarf stars typically spin very slowly; we needed a white dwarf star with a curiously high rotational speed. This was because the strength of a star's magnetic field is related to its rotational speed, and we had necessary applications that could not be possible without a strong enough magnetic field. At the same time, the rotational speed could not be too high: if I was going to be submerged in the solid substance of the star, then the ship (to which I would be tethered, just like in the practice runs on Jupiter) will need to be traveling fast enough to keep up with the star's rotation while simultaneously thrusting upward to prevent the escape of orbit. The window of acceptable rotational speed was thus quite small.

Upon discovery of our perfect white dwarf star we left the blue planet. After a bit of interstellar travel we had to dock our deep-space vessel at the station closest to the star and there make modifications to create a new degenerate-matter extraction vessel.

The extraction vessel was brutal to human life. Since it was completely impossible to protect the humans from the intense radiation that will engulf the ship at such close proximity to the shining dead star, it was decided that no resources whatsoever would be devoted to such an endeavor. Thus, aside from having no radiation protection while traveling even through the docile parts of space, the crew would be cooked from the inside while in close orbit of the white dwarf; the solution, as I'm sure you'd surmise, was simply to have machines constantly healing every member of the crew.

With all of this punishment being inflicted upon the humans, you might anticipate that the payoff would be vast. But that is not the way humanity was in these days. Remember that there was no longer such a thing as money. There was no longer the need to benefit in some kind of material way from doing something. We were going to this star for the purpose of collecting a sample, but there was really nothing to analyze or experiment on because we already knew everything there was to know about the substance. This was just some kind of scientific conquest for the sake of doing it.

It was necessary to collect and trap the electron-degenerate matter in a strong container because otherwise the degenerate matter would explode, becoming corrupt and worthless (not to mention the fact that it would destroy the ship). The abnormally high pressure that only a retired star can provide is what's necessary to generate and maintain the matter's strange state of energy, and this pressure will be so immense that even our most advanced artificial crystal, reinforced with efficient shaping, could only withstand the external pressure for a few seconds. That is, the container—I'll describe this shortly—was designed to hold pressure internally, but not externally, and so the extraction could



be successful as long as the container wouldn't be exposed to the vast ocean of degenerate matter for more than a few seconds.

And so I was going to be placed upon the surface of a white dwarf star, and I can already hear your objections. We can civilly agree, I'm sure, that the active and hot stars could not be approached and that complex technology could not be brought beyond the corona. And just as the heat is the problem in approaching an active star, a reasonable objection is that gravity is the problem in approaching a dead star—the gravity at the surface will be so strong that atoms will be shattered, and an object falling to the surface would be super-accelerated so fast that you'd have to use Einstein's physics, rather than Newton's, to track it.

Suppose, however, that we could soften the impact. Would you then find it reasonable to believe that an object—a very special object—could survive for a few seconds on or beneath the surface? Would you believe that this could be done if the object was a cylinder, simple and strong in structure, made from a new kind of artificial crystal—something similar to diamond, except that it could, with respect to the alignment of the molecules, withstand trillions of times more pressure—along with a cork of similar, but weaker, material that would, after slight melting from the surface temperatures of the star, fit into the mouth of the container and then solidify into a perfect seal?

I have seen the tech and I know it can be done. The humans saw to it with tireless engineering. As for me, I had very little to worry about because the humans had taken care of the trivialities of drop depth, drag speed, charge of my drop cable, and evasion of irregular temperature spots on the stellar surface. I literally had to do nothing but be the bolt holding everything together—there was no responsibility given to me because I would be completely powerless to move on my own accord, unable to resist the gravity even one bit.

Perhaps worthy of note is that, due to relativity, a few seconds on my clock or a few inches on my ruler would not correlate to the same amount of seconds or inches for the humans

in the extraction vessel, and so it was a bit complicated to compute the tensions that would be applied to the drop cable; in fact, due to this and several other factors, the drop cable that we were using was so difficult to design that it was probably far more an advanced piece of technology than anything your grandchildren could ever hope to see.

Equally impressive were the aforementioned cork and container that would be provided for me. The crystalline objects will be formed around my hands, since I'll, of course, have no hope of manually holding onto them, and they will be appropriately oriented considering all of the different forces that will be acting upon my arms. Among these forces will be the effects of the super magnets embedded in each of the objects, super magnets that were going to be activated by a charge sent to my person via the drop cable (being of one particle I, like distilled water, cannot conduct electricity, but the impurities all over my body will suffice for this). This would hopefully create the attraction necessary to power through the material of the star, plugging the container with the cork and allowing the slight melting of the cork to create the desired seal.

With regards to the impact event, I will land toes first. Of course, as I slit through the surface there will be a rush of degenerate matter attempting to obliterate the precious crystalline tools in my hands; this, not being unanticipated, was accounted for in the design of the two simple tools, and there was a level of tolerance to instantaneous, extreme external pressure. The main places that made the tools vulnerable to fracture were the handhold regions where my hands would be encased in them; however, there would not be any shockwave traveling through me to shatter my crystalline tools on account of the fortunate fact that I was made of only one particle.

I had to be submerged because I would have absolutely no control over my extremities in the star's environment, as I mentioned already, and bending over to scoop up some degenerate matter was absolutely out of the question. But how were they

going to get me back out after dunking me in? It seems like I will be a bit like the sword in the stone. But by countering the gravity with a charged drop cable I will ride the magnetic field of the compact star, essentially turning the star sideways so that the net forces are pushing me orthogonally to a ray coming out from the star's core; the extraction will be much easier if gravity is partially negated in this fashion. After I'm free from the material of the white dwarf, we will simply use the cable's tension to finish reeling me back up.

There were, of course, many other variables to keep track of as well, and we had to keep the margin of error on each one smaller than how small we were in relation to the star; despite all of these things, I had tremendous faith in the humans because of all the wonders that I'd seen on Earth.



I was tethered to the ship via my drop cable. It was knotted around my neck in a simple noose—perhaps not very elegant but nevertheless quite effective, seeing as how there is no other chokepoint on an indestructible human body that can more readily guarantee a perfect grasp. Then they gave me my final bits of instruction, and out I went.

I had been offered, out of courtesy, a visor device that would shield my eyes to the point that I could clearly see the surface structures of the star during my descent. The visor would, of course, be destroyed upon impact.

While in free fall I gazed upon the photosphere of the star, and the device worked perfectly. Directly below me it was a blinding blur, but off into the distance I could see a vast, well-defined ocean of something like liquid marble. And that ocean... it moved like a pit of serpents... it was like it was a solid, but yet it moved like a liquid.

As I got much closer the intensity of the star became all the more apparent, and after my shielded eyes adjusted to the brightness I was able to distinguish more surface features of the star. There were networks of slim rivers of bright light all over

the erratic surface, as if they were tiny cracks with hope-white light coming out to the heavens like a prayer.

I was soon encompassed by one of those rivers, and it spanned farther than my eyes could see. It was at this point that the gravity became extremely dominant upon my center of mass, and I felt all crushed-like in the intuition area of my gut. Then the horizon swallowed the sky, and then it swallowed me.

There was heat, heat, heat all over, liquid fire like I was drowning in dragon spit, and the sky was made of scorch. I made no splash as I entered the star, but there was a rumble inside me as the degenerate matter rushed into my lungs to equalize the pressure. In the same way my crystalline container filled with degenerate matter instantly after I was submerged, and immediately after that I could feel the flowing degenerate matter slither over my arms, like I was swimming in mud, as the super magnets guided my hands together in order to marry the cork with the container.

I vomited star guts as the technicians reeled me back in. The star was, of course, blinding without my visor, but I was able to observe my zenith as I was being taken back into the ship. The line connecting my body to the ship just seemed to stretch forever into space, slightly twisting and curving, whipping and belting as it perilously carried any and every stream of force traveling from one end to the other.

My recollection into the ship took far longer than the drop, but I certainly didn't grow tired of looking upon the stars. As I ascended I found myself wondering how much time had passed for the humans because I knew that their clocks were ticking faster than mine. I looked back down at the star, seeing it finally in its true form, and it was brighter than pure white.



My naked, glowing body floated into the decontamination chamber where they removed the cable from my throat, cleansed me, and then draped a blanket over me. They then strapped me into a bolted-down chair, secured my arms, and began to cut

through the crystal. The cross section that was visible after they were finished cutting was very strange to look at because it had partially melted and then resolidified. It was like a liquid—it looked just like a liquid—but it was not flowing.

I looked down at my quantum hands and saw all of the small fragments of chiseled crystal clinging to my skin and the large crystalline casts that were still engulfing my fingers. There have been so many stories about heroes being trapped in crystal, and now that was me.

The humans wanted to remove the crystal from my fingers, but I requested to wear it for a while longer. It was an interesting feeling to tap metal objects with a crystal-encased hand. For days on end I just couldn't stop tapping things. The vibration would go from the metal, through the crystal, and onto the surface of my hand; there it would bounce back into the crystal because of my inability to carry vibrations, and the feeling was very strangely addicting as the vibrations continued to echo back and forth. I couldn't say what it was like, only that it was different from anything I'd ever felt before.

I couldn't help but ponder about the many unfortunate hands that had been chopped off for diamonds. And now it was crystal that was going to be pecked away to recover my hands—a new kind of crystal that was far more valuable than diamond ever was. I had spent so much time in this enlightened society that it was hard for me to believe, despite having witnessed it, that there was a time when human life was considered to be worthless.

I eventually grew weary of the crystal and had it removed, but I longed for it once again during the years of travel time to our space base. Fortunately, I would have more opportunities to wear the crystal between my fingers: in the manner described previously we harvested quite a bit of degenerate matter from the white dwarf star, except—since we knew the extraction was going to be a success—we sent entire fleets for each expedition.

Every time I dropped to that star, every time the star tide swallowed me alive, every time I wore the crystalline cast... every

time there was never a let down. It was just so incredible. The stars were always so untouchable, but now that was no longer the case.

These awesome journeys were not without risk. This was the first time that I'd ever been in danger of the ultimate game over—the danger, of course, being that the drop cable could snap and I'd free fall to the core, trapped forever like a seed sown in stone.

But the line never broke. I harvested hundreds of gallons of the electron-degenerate matter, samples that had no practical use other than to exist as a shrine to science. We eventually had to return to Mother Earth because we only had a finite amount of ships on our dock planets and we lacked the local resources to build new ships or repair our existing ones of the abuse that they'd taken. And we decided, when we got home, that we had acquired enough of the degenerate matter and that there was something new that we wanted to do, something that would perhaps be even more impossible than what we'd already done—we wanted to visit another galaxy.



Traveling through our band of stars in the Milky Way Galaxy required little more than a means by which we could harvest nearby energy sources every once in a while as we followed a zigzag path from one star to the next; traveling through intergalactic space, however, presented many more obstacles. Having nowhere to dock for fuel, supplies, or repairs, a ship will have to be fully self-sustainable for an immense amount of time. With the current technologies it was already difficult enough to create an interstellar space vessel with a lifespan of around fifty thousand years or so; to create an intergalactic space vessel with a lifespan of hundreds of thousands of years was not even conceivable.

Life is able to profusely perpetuate on Earth because Earth is an open system—we are receiving a constant energy supply from Sol. But while in intergalactic space we will be in a closed

system with an imperfect method of recycling materials vital to life. Unfortunately, the imperfection of the recycling doomed a trip with such a long duration; even the shorter trek to a nearby dwarf galaxy was simply not feasible for human life. Such limitations, however, did not apply to vessels that were not carrying life.

A few hundred thousand years ago, while I was still rotting away in the vault, humanity had begun deployment of thousands of unmanned space voyagers en route to the various galaxies and dwarf galaxies in our galactic cluster. This was possible because they could power themselves down for thousands of years while drifting through intergalactic space at the optimal velocity; the lifespan of a given voyager would not be drained during this hibernation.

Around thirty thousand years ago the humans began to receive transmissions from the voyagers that were arriving at the nearest dwarf galaxies; the same method, of course, could be used to send a vessel with me in it to any location, arbitrarily distant, since the engines and the vast majority of the electronics could be held in stasis indefinitely.



We began construction of a special telescope that would be anchored on Charon. The upper lens of the telescope was to be the largest ever constructed in the history of mankind, and that's saying a lot if you consider that by now it was almost a million years after the invention of the internet. The telescope had to be high above the surface of Charon since the celestial object clutched to a slight trace of an atmosphere that hovered over the ground like a morning mist. In a large circle around the telescope there were guns stationed on the ground that were set to deflect any space dust or debris that might threaten the lens.

(The telescope on Charon was actually the master telescope, not the whole telescope. The whole telescope was a bit strange—it was a system of slave telescopes working on a network with the master telescope on Charon. The slave telescopes were

in space, in the orbital path claimed by Pluto and Charon. Together the telescopes produced, with the usual ingenuity of the engineers, an image unimaginably more refined than anything that the master telescope could produce by itself.)

Once completed, we used the telescope to observe stars in Andromeda that would have been otherwise too dim to scrutinize. We weren't interested in the stars that we were able to study without this new technology since they would have been either part of a stellar orbital group or else too large, powerful, and dangerous to support human life. We searched for solitary, main-sequence stars—stars like Sol.

Spectroscopy, together with the observation of a star's wobble, allowed us to deduce the properties of the star's planets and determine the likelihood of whether or not a given planet could be terraformed to support life from Earth. Checks and inspections were performed on every indirectly observable candidate planet in Andromeda until we finally found Terra 1A.

There was also the issue of making star maps, and the process was, due to the sluggish speed of light, quite a bit more complicated than it might seem at first. The vastness of the void between Andromeda and the Milky Way Galaxy might make you think that the actual size of Andromeda could be thought of as negligible, and that, in projecting the movement of the stars in the galaxy and the movement of the galaxy itself over the anticipated travel time to the galaxy, we would only need to take into account the two-million-year photon delay. But the galaxy was over a hundred thousand light-years across, and so our photographs would depict, due to the galaxy's orientation in relation to us, light from the back end of the galaxy that is about a hundred thousand years older than the light from the front edge. This was no longer something that we could just fib away because I was actually going to be landing on a hard surface, a very precise set of coordinates in comparison to a whole galaxy; it was clear that even slight imprecisions could cost hundreds of years to correct. We needed to not only have perfect calculations and extremely accurate data



but also the ability to make navigational refinements as often and as precisely as needed.

And, of course, much more than navigation would be required of the deep-space vessel. Since so much of an emphasis had to be placed on its traveling abilities, the mammoth vessel was constructed entirely in space and completed without the ability for it to dock on the hard surface of a planet. It was a mothership, and it had a brood of thruster pods that would actually go down to a planet's soil. The ship was miles long, and it was so fragile and anti-aerodynamic that it would significantly disintegrate before much of it could fall through our atmosphere and onto Earth's surface.

I'm sure the biggest objection that any twenty-first century rocket scientist would propose is that of propulsion since the ship would have weighed thousands of megatons on Earth and was designed to be accelerated almost to light speed. Such feats of propulsion almost sound preposterous, but the majority of my velocity would be gained from many uses, reuses, and abuses of the tried and true gravitational slingshot method; for this purpose we had, on previous ventures, exploited a binary black hole system.

Whether or not you can agree that the propulsion was technically possible, I think we are in agreement that certain other deep-space problems were not much a problem at all. For one thing, most of the travel time would be in intergalactic space, a place where there would be no hazards at all for a creature like me; while roaming the interstellar space and interplanetary space of Andromeda, however, there will be the issue of space debris. Given the predicted travel time within the galaxy, the ship will be unavoidably pelted by meteoroids. Anything over a certain size will be either avoided or deflected by the ship's defense system, but the smaller rocks—such as those that are the size of a grain of sand—will be permitted to pass through the ship at the risk of colliding with me. This would only be a nuisance, and nothing more, since I could not be injured and since the important data,

mission materials, engines, and all other critical things onboard were in armored sectors (and the defense system would make an exception for a small projectile if it threatened vital areas). There was also no risk of explosive decompression since the interior of the ship maintained a constant vacuum.

The ship was completed, the star found, the planet presumed. Maintenance of my sanity was the first priority, as I was to be the sole operator and observer. In stride with this endeavor the humans were going to maintain interactive contact with me in the very beginning, so that part of the voyage, at least, wasn't at all going to be like being in the goddamn vault. Additionally, they installed a reality simulator wherein I could interact with the artificially intelligent programs that were indistinguishable from real humans. What they could not do was prevent the floating, which began, just as I was foretold, after I had acquired my optimal velocity by slinging around a couple dead stars.



When my speed, relative to the Milky Way Galaxy, had become a certain value that was slightly greater than  $0.99c$  (that is, 99% of light speed), the inertia of the ship became so immense that it was very much impractical, given our technology budget, to maintain the precision thrusts required in order to further escalate my velocity via gravitational assistance. It took tremendous energy to reach  $0.99c$ , but it was worthwhile: even this close to the speed of light, even with this much time dilation due to my velocity, the destination was simply so far away that I would still need hundreds of thousands of years, on my clock, to get there.

Once I reached my optimal velocity the engines were shut down. And when the deep-space drift began, so, too, did the floating. Technically speaking there were, of course, many ways to solve this problem—sort of. Even in your day this problem could have been solved via magnetic boots or Velcro carpet with Velcro boots. There were similar remedies that the newer technologies offered me, but they were all just as worthless: even with my feet steadied on the ground I would still have the floating

sensation in my body, and so I rejected all such proposals.

The humans had also offered to make me a centrifuge ring on the ship that would be able to simulate gravity: if I were to lodge in such a structure that was constantly spinning to a desired degree, then I'd feel right at home. I declined this offer as well because dedicating energy, space, and structural accommodation for such an endeavor would inescapably subtract from the maximum potential volume of the ship. At all costs I wanted the ship to be as large as possible so I would feel less trapped... trapped like how I was in the vault. Additionally, the centrifuge ring would restrict my movement to a plane, whereas a zero-*g* environment would offer me something more like a cube in which to roam.

Like I already mentioned, the humans wanted to do all that they could to keep me mentally stable; to this end they not only designed the ship to my likings but also kept in contact with me as I progressed through my journey. As I distanced myself more and more from home, fluid conversation evolved into a system of delayed news updates due to the photon lag; the gaps in transmissions got bigger and bigger until I was essentially cut off—transmissions were taking thousands of years to be received.

I was officially in intergalactic space. Every being in the universe had some address: planet, star, galaxy. I had no address. I had no galaxy. If some intelligent being were to ask me my location, then I'd respond, "Nowhere."

I felt my identity starting to slip away as well. The reality simulator was supposed to help ease the burden of such a long journey—and in this regard it was successful—but sometimes, during a lifetime, I would spontaneously wake up, unsure of which world was real and which was a dream. The humans were unable to completely avoid this occasional error because my body was impenetrable. I was receiving all of the sensory data that was consistent with the situations that I was encountering in the simulator, but there was no prod or wire that could communicate directly with my brain.

I could do anything in the simulator. I was born, I lived,

and I died—and it was all in real time. There was little confusion about the difference between reality and the simulator when I ended the program properly—that is, by death—because there was an addendum program that would be activated to assist with this matter.

There was an extensive database of personalities and environments, some fictional and some nonfictional. Most of the time I would choose to live in the recreated historical world, setting my birthdate to the various times during which I was preoccupied with the vault's interior.

I'd check for new transmissions from the real world between lifetimes, but whenever I woke up by malfunction I felt the need to silently gaze upon the galaxies. I was chasing light with such aggression that all of the galaxies were crunched together, as if they were fleeing from me. I would sometimes be filled with terror at this sight, at the sight of the entire universe being so very small and so very distant, at the sight of an unedited, unaltered image being so alien to my intuition. I sometimes had the fear that these relativistic effects would be irreversible, even if I slowed down.

It was difficult to distinguish one galaxy from another without the help of a rigorous computer that was blind to the awe of it all. But in spite of the warped image and the vague fear there was a familiar motif, and it somehow helped remind me of who I was. Each dot was a world full of worlds, and there was so much that we would never, ever know about the cosmos.

I was the first child of the earth to exit the Milky Way Galaxy and observe it from the outside. I could see the brightness in the middle and I could see the starlit nebulae collectively forming their swirl shape, but I could no longer see my home.



At this point in time I was closer to Andromeda than I was to the Milky Way Galaxy. I'd spent the last hundred years or so out of the simulator because I'd just grown so bored of it; I decided to use the time to perform some of my necessary tasks. Aside from

these tasks there were the two main objectives to the mission, and it could not quite be agreed which was of greater value to science.

One of the objectives was to sow life throughout the new galaxy. The ship was carrying, for humans and various other modifications of Earth life forms, artificially sequenced DNA, the vast majority of which was that of single-celled life. The DNA did not exist in physical form, but rather in the computers; there were the necessary substances onboard to generate the digital DNA when the time was right.

It wasn't believed that any planet's atmosphere could naturally form into something like that of Earth's—by "naturally" I mean without the assistance of microbes to process the atmosphere. So my task was to find candidate planets (the main requirement being the presence of liquid water) for this process, sprinkle large amounts of artificially enhanced microbes on them, and then later return to these planets for testing. I would revisit the first planet after I was done with the last; even with the most efficient path planning the process would take over half a million years on my clock due to travel time. We had already located one candidate planet, Terra 1A, before I even set sail into space, and the computers on my ship were to seek out more during the very long transit between galaxies.

My other objective, perhaps more or perhaps less important, was to simply be a sentient observer. While the life that I was going to create in this galaxy would certainly be observing the galaxy in which it would be living, the thing that interested the star gazers back home was to have an observer who could, in the same lifetime, observe both the Milky Way Galaxy and Andromeda from the inside. To some, this very act would be the single most significant achievement in the history of the world.



I had breached the ill-defined property lines of Andromeda several centuries ago, and the front of my ship was scorched from the intergalactic medium. It was quite wondrous to think that my voyage made into physical reality that which was once a mere

abstract dot in the sky.

In terms of magnitude of distance traveled from Earth, my ship had passed, several times over, the most distant of the unmanned voyagers that were sent to explore other major galaxies. It easily crushed them in this race because they had been constructed so long ago with inferior technology. In the same way it was thus tempting to say that it was possible—although not theoretically possible—that the humans back on Earth, before their transmission on the matter could have even reached me, devised the technology to send something so fast that it could have passed me by now; I entertained such thoughts only out of an abundance of free time, however, and I could surely look at the walls of my ship and know that never before had an object with a human fingerprint on it gone so far.

By now the computers onboard my ship had selected 981 candidate planets for seeding. I was finally nearing Terra 1A, the first of these, and it was time to seek black holes for the purposes of deceleration via gravity assist. For the first time in hundreds of thousands of years I would have my feet beneath me.

I remember thinking, so long ago, that Pluto was so distant. I remember that picturing myself standing on that world was the limit to how far my imagination could wander... and now I was in another galaxy.



I was sitting in the incubation chamber, focusing my attention upon a tube of specially designed microbes. I hadn't seen anything that was alive for so long. It was pink, and it was floating. It looked like some kind of oceanic plant life.

I sat there for days on end, just watching the life inside each of the hundreds of tubes. It took my breath away. Humanity had always wondered if there was life in other galaxies, and now there was. The beauty of where I was and of what I was doing came over me like the unearthing of a thousand secrets. The life behind the glass wasn't cold and dead like the universe. It wasn't mechanical and predictable like the machines in my ship. It was a

living thing, flowing, glowing, growing, undulating like a lava lamp.

I wanted to open the tube and touch it, I wanted to feel some kind of intimacy with this new life, but that would have contaminated the incubation chamber. I could do nothing but remain the sterile and impersonal observer that I'd always been.



Terra 1A was nothing like the real Earth, and its sun was more powerful. To describe the new stellar system in terms of the one that you know, I'll say this: there was the sun, then the main asteroid belt, then four terrestrial planets, and no gas giants.

The asteroid belt was possibly once a planet, but it was so close to the sun that it was ripped to pieces from the gravity—either that, or the gravity was so strong that the shrapnel was never even afforded a chance at becoming a planet in the first place.

The first planet of the four was barren of atmosphere and extremely volcanic. It was actually geologically dead, but the gravitational field of the sun, in conjunction with the planet's eccentric orbit, was persuasive enough to induce violent uprise of liquid material.

The next two planets were a dual planet, like how Earth and Luna almost are. Both planets were like Luna in that they were void of atmosphere, geological activity, or anything else that might be interesting. The only curious thing was that, by standing on the smaller of the two planets, you could observe a stellar eclipse similar to that which can be observable on Earth (although it was different here because there was no atmosphere for your eye to look through).

And then there was Terra 1A. There was a fairly high level of certainty that Terra 1A had once been a gas giant—a very small gas giant—before losing the bulk of its atmosphere over time due to stellar wind and also its own lack of gravity. The planet had methane lakes, exceedingly high levels of raw diamonds, and dozens of very small moons. The planet itself was about twice

that of Earth in diameter, but, due to its lower density, its strength of gravity at the surface was about the same.

Despite having lost much of its atmosphere, there was still an extremely thick coat that remained. It consisted mainly of innate nitrogen, with a bit of methane and ammonia as well. Most of the molecular hydrogen had been whisked away as the planet lost its layers of sky, and so the components for making water were lacking. There was still enough liquid water for a planet's population of life, but barely—the competition for survival would be far greater than anything we've ever seen on Earth.

Terra 1A lacked the satisfactory spin necessary to generate a magnetic field strong enough to protect the future inhabitants from the sun's wind; as a consequence of this radiation, life forms with long lifespans will have difficulty flourishing. Fortunately, the planet was, like Uranus was in your time, tilted to such a degree that a line passing through the north and south poles would almost intersect with the sun, and so there was always an area on the planet that would never be pelted by the sun's light during the daily cycle. Although the dark face would always receive harsh light during the complementary phase of the year, intelligent life finding itself in this situation could thrive by way of semiannual migration; and although the planet will wobble erratically on its axis over time as a result of having no stabilizing moon, my ship's computer projected that the planet would never realize a sufficient tilt such that both poles would be exposed to the sun at the same time.

The planet was not perfect, but it was as good as we thought it was and it had the potential to be a New Earth.



We had predicted the compositions of thousands of different types of atmospheres that might be dwelling on the planets of Andromeda, and we therefore engineered specific microbes that could convert these atmospheres into something more hospitable for our intelligent life. And so given all of this foresight, the contents of Terra 1A's atmosphere, while an annoying obstacle, were certainly not a surprise.



A process that took upward of a billion years on Earth could be done in less than a million years here. Why? Firstly, I would be fathering highly advanced microbes that were specifically designed to process the contents of the given atmosphere—microbes that were refined from billions of years of evolution and then later repurposed by intelligent engineers with incredible technology—rather than an accidental chemical with the inexplicable ability to self-replicate using materials around it. Secondly, I would be seeding the life over the face of the entire planet, instead of just one spot, so that the process would be quicker (and also to avoid a catastrophic single-point failure). Colonies will spread out and then begin to compete with other colonies, and on the bright side of the planet there will be sharp radiation coming down from the heavens to encourage rapid mutation. As resources become scarce there will be new forms of nutrients being tapped, and the blind, defecating, savage life will thrive.



Terra 1A was on the opposite side of the sun relative to where I was coming from. I was able to set my course in such a way so that I could make the dual planet system intercept my path, thus allowing me some time to walk upon the surface of one of them before visiting Terra 1A. They were barren, like Luna, but believe me when I say that they were worlds.

I went to the smaller planet. The light from the sun was a bit strange in the black daytime sky, and the shadows on this planet were unlike any that I'd ever seen. They were so long and dark. They weren't dark grey—they were pitch black.

The whole surface was one all-encompassing titanium sand dune. I picked up some jagged pieces of sand and let them flow through my fingers, and they fell to the ground as slowly as snowflakes. It was remarkable to me that this place was real. It was so distant from Earth, and in construction and constitution it bore no resemblance, but yet it was still subject to the very same physical laws and rules.

I took a moment to appreciate all of this because no human could ever experience what I was experiencing. The humans had made spacesuits to be much, much smaller, lighter, and more flexible than they were in your day, with the ideal goal of making them as lightweight as the emperor's new clothes, but the fact always remained that no human could expose himself to the nothingness of the vacuum like I could. None of them could ever go anywhere without having a layer of Earth's atmosphere over the skin. None of them could stand on this world and hold in a bare hand titanium sand.



There was thunder, there was moisture, and there was heat. Here, on Terra 1A, life would surely flourish. But then I looked down at the pink, flowing life in my hands, the life that was content as it was, and I suddenly felt overwhelmed with apathy. My ability to love had been broken long ago, and so in spite of my previous investment of genuine affection and connection I now found myself unable to care if it was going to live or die.

And as I stood on the naked planet, surveying the landscape before me, I suddenly felt nothing. It should have been so beautiful, but instead my lack of passion was suffocating me. My heart was a balloon, but the sky was a vacuum. I couldn't tell you why I went through with the mission... I could've just as easily overridden the failsafe controls on my ship and flown straight into the heart of the sun. I didn't give a shit anymore. But I still followed the procedure in the hope that this would pass.

A convoy of artificially piloted thruster pods would, in accordance with the as yet virgin procedure, travel with me as a precaution against the unforeseeable. After they'd find a suitable location for docking, I'd get out, set a microbe tube down, and push the button on it. That was all I had to do, as the life-dispersing task was almost completely automated. Then the tube would open up and such, and it would form favorable surfaces upon which the microbes could thrive. And then I'd repeat the process hundreds of times all over the planet.

I also checked for indigenous microbes on Terra 1A, and when that was negative I returned to the mothership. In this manner I distributed artificial microbes throughout the galaxy. The plan involved three loops around the galaxy: first, to sow the atmosphere-specific, single-celled life on each candidate planet; second, to situate human, animal, and plant life; and third, to record observations of human development.



After a few hundred thousand years in this godforsaken galaxy I began to lose hope in the mission. I had started the second loop many thousands of years ago, and the life wasn't taking. Terra 1A, once a hope, was now a barren tomb. And all of the other New Earths fared no better. There was something wrong, something I was doing. Something had to be wrong because not a single planet that I revisited for inspection had any life at all.

And I never found any natural Andromedan life, either. I wish I could report that I'd encountered the ruins of some great civilization, some monumental city with technologies yet unseen, cosmic gateways to other parts of the universe or answers to mysteries that were once believed unsolvable. I wish I could report that I'd simply found some microscopic, indigenous life form frozen in a crude fossil that could do nothing but self-replicate when it was once alive. But the cosmos was just so vast that there was no chance. It was like the whole universe was my vault, and nothing had changed since I walked over Padempire's corpse.

But then there was Terra 719A. As I was approaching it my computer indicated that intelligent life was identified on the surface—there wasn't supposed to be intelligent life on any of the planets yet since I'd only seeded single-celled life. Granted, the microbes were highly advanced and in large quantity, but the evolution into multicellular life still should've taken a half-billion years at minimum.

There are a couple factors here. Firstly, due to relativity, I,

in my traveling spaceship, had experienced half a million years in Andromeda while the essentially stationary planets throughout the galaxy had experienced several times that. Secondly, all forms of microorganisms that were used for converting atmospheres for the purposes of this mission were laced with special information in the non-coding genes—specifically, all necessary instructions pertaining to all known plant and animal life (this was intended as a failsafe in the event that I could not return to a planet and place humans on it). This might have induced a sort of meta-evolution, where a favorable gene would be a gene that activates other genes.

As I neared closer to the planet, various life forms became discernible. Judging from the observable death rates, their lifespans were quite brief. As for the body structure, there was an overall tendency toward something very familiar: an interior skeleton, four limbs each with five digits, and a central spine that protruded at the front, in a head, and at the rear, in a tail.

Cannibalism was prevalent among all intelligent life on the planet, and it appeared as though all intelligent life had the capacity to consume vegetation as well. Nothing ever went to waste in such a violent world, and every living thing died in the process of being eaten on this planet of horrors.



I had no other words for it. It was the head of a man... embedded within a clumsy mess of meat and cartilage. And if you were to look at it, then you would vehemently say that it was not the head of a man... and yet if you were charged to describe it, then you would have to begrudgingly admit that there was no other fitting description.

It was bizarre because the head was so small in relation to the body. It was like there was this gigantic beast and there was a man inside with his head pushing out through the thin, transparent skin of the belly. And that face—I will never forget that face. It was terrifying. Its mouth was like a puncture wound, and the eyes were like... they were like pain, and the nostrils were like the vacant cavities in a skull.

The creature was quite hideous, although it was fortunate enough to have the symmetry gene so as to thwart even more ugliness. It was essentially like some amalgamation of many different kinds of vertebrates from Earth, except that the nutrients of its world caused it to express its genes much differently than anything that would ever be alive on Earth.

And then something went wrong—I didn't know what the problem was but the creature started to writhe uncontrollably, and then it died. It was a captured specimen that I had brought aboard my ship, and I thought that I'd perfectly simulated its living conditions in a controlled room.

I had to go down to the planet. I needed more samples, and I also needed to go down there in person just so I could be a sacred spaceman on their world. So I came down in my convoy of thruster pods to visit my abominable children, and I had barely set foot on the soil before something caught my eye. It was movement: something nearby and going straight up in a hell of a hurry. There was a distant sound, too, like a missile whistle, high in pitch but with something like a burning sizzle crisp trailing the shriek. And it got fainter, fainter and fainter; and then, when it was gone, instead of still and quiet there was a shockwave that knocked me off my feet.

When I rediscovered which way was up I saw that there was an enormous fireball in the sky, shrouded in ribbons of smoke and debris. The fireball was an artificial object, huge and massive, totally disintegrating and burning as it fell through the thick, aerobic atmosphere.

And then I had that feeling in my gut, like there was something moving inside it, and my eyes grew larger, and I could feel my lips moving and saying things that I could not control. This was because the fireball had thrusters behind it, and it had human symbols on it, and it was the place that I'd spent the last several hundred millennia of my life. It had never occurred to the engineers that a projectile might have scramblers on it to confuse the mothership's defense system.

The temperature of the air was rising and now the beasts of the world were coming for my blood. I saw them running toward me, galloping in a miserable limp, and it was at this moment that I realized—despite the fact that they were naked, filthy, and savage—that they were sophisticated, that they were users of technology, and that they did not take kindly to the alien abduction that I had so rudely imposed upon their unfortunate comrade. I understood that I'd mistakenly correlated their primal nature with technological ignorance; I did not know that the mathematical parts of their brains were very akin to that of a human's.

I hadn't detected any artificial structures while in the mothership, meaning they were, of course, likely deep underground, and they apparently did not use vehicles either because either the concept eluded them or their morbid bodies precluded the possibility altogether; I was thus quite shocked at their level of tech.

I didn't have to stop and think about what I wanted to do. I just got into the nearest thruster pod and left the planet. If I had been thinking, then there would have been some reservations in my mind.

There was absolutely no knowing what the little blue planet in the Milky Way Galaxy would be like by the time I got back: by Earth's clock it was a few million years after the invention of disco, and so all the progress that the humans had made since I last knew them could have been undone by some unforeseen calamity. Their other planets of habitation, being dependent upon Earth for resources, would have been unviable if Earth was destroyed. Humanity could have been extinct, making Terra 719A home to the last of all life in the known universe; if this was true, then departure was a bad idea.

There was also the issue of cosmic bombardment. The thruster pods, while having a defense system, weren't fitted with the same kind of armor as the mothership—they were largely see-through, seeing as how that would obviously be preferable for a vessel surfing the surfaces of a planet. Consequently, there was

a danger of extremely small, extremely fast chunks of matter colliding with critical parts of the vessel. The probability of being struck by such objects in intergalactic space would be slim to none; while traversing interstellar space, however, such collisions would be inevitable if given enough time.

The issue of space rocks will not be significant once I enter the Milky Way Galaxy since, by that time, my trajectory will be sufficiently fine-tuned to ensure an impact with Earth. While in Andromeda, however, I will have to deplete precious energy for surveillance and deflection of incoming space rocks. This also meant that I could not use the slingshot method for augmentation of my speed because being in the close proximity of a sun would greatly magnify the risk of being struck by random rocks to the point that a collision would be inevitable; a collision in a vulnerable area would probably kill my engines and doom me to drift helplessly through the infinite void of space.

After the galactic gauntlet I will have to travel for over thirty million years before I could arrive back home; this was due to the fact that the thruster pod was so slow. Using all of my fuel (saving nothing for reverse thrust that I would need at the end), I could only accelerate up to  $0.07c$  because the thruster pod was designed to do not much more than escape the gravitational influence of a small planet before being recharged on the mothership.

Of course, reserving no fuel for reverse thrust would mean that there will be some complications down the road. The momentum of my thruster pod will make its impact upon Earth quite significant—nothing like the rock that killed the dinosaurs, but still very destructive. If the humans were all gone, then I could use the last of my fuel reserves to refine my velocity vector so that I'd collide with Earth at any location of my choosing; however, if the humans were still around, then they'd likely have adequate technology—even if their civilization had been destroyed and rebuilt a dozen times over—to shoot down my thruster pod before it could wreak havoc upon their planet. This occurrence

would convert my vessel into debris and give my body a new direction of travel through space, resulting, due to my velocity being more than sufficient to escape the galaxy, in excellent chances that I'd wind up wandering through the void for all eternity. Fortunately, there was preparation for this scenario before I'd ever even left the Milky Way Galaxy:

Onboard my thruster pod were instructions that were programmed to be continuously sent to Earth starting from several centuries before the earthlings could possibly detect me, and there was a sufficient amount of information in the packaging of the message to allow them to deduce the syntax and vocabulary of the language. The instructions would explain the situation and tell them to send a rescue vessel for me. (I would certainly prefer to send this message now, or at least during the great intergalactic migration, but my thruster pod, having been designed only to send local transmissions, could not send a coherent radio signal very far.)

But all of this wouldn't happen for millions of years. And there was nothing in this thruster pod that could keep me entertained for more than a day. There was only the massive hull hole that I could not help but stare at: as I was escaping Terra 719A—dispersing the other thruster pods in random directions as decoys—the creatures hastily launched explosive projectiles; while the other pods were destroyed, I managed to coerce my incoming missiles into premature detonation through the manual use of my thruster pod's defense system. My pod sustained significant damage, and the event could have been catastrophic due to the explosive decompression that occurred: my thruster pod's door was left wide open while I was exploring the planet, and so the cockpit had assumed the atmosphere, and thus the atmospheric pressure, of the planet that I was on; I, in my rush to escape, did not expel the air after sealing myself in, and so after the attack, which occurred at a high altitude, all of the air went through that hole—and I almost went with it. I saved myself by pressing my body against the opposite wall so that all of the gusting air was between me and



the breach.

I patched the hole, disposed of all the tools and loose items onboard, and then destroyed all computer circuits to permanently secure all of the locks. I could only leave the radio and the emergency precision boosters intact, although I would have to put them on a thirty-million-year time lock. If I did not do this, then there would be no possible way that I could stare at that mended hole for thirty million years and perpetually resist the self-destructive urge to slink through it. No possible way.

And then there was nothing left to do but memorize every feature of the interior of the thruster pod and count to one quadrillion.



Nothing but darkness and stars.

Even with all of these years of travel ahead of me, I managed to convince myself that fleeing Terra 719A was the best response to the situation. I would surely return safely to a metal-paved earth. If I had stayed on Terra 719A, then I would have been captured and held in captivity long enough for those monsters to rip my last remaining thruster pods to pieces.

While their technology was sufficient to take down a nonmilitary mothership, and while they certainly could have learned a lot from reverse engineering the thruster pods and the remains of the mothership, there was still no telling what their future would be like—they had no track record that I could gauge. As for humanity, there was a great chance that they'd progressed while I was gone and that they would continue to do so even more over the remaining millions of years of my journey.

The time I spent in the thruster pod was quite a bit different from the time in the vault. Here I could see the stars and galaxies. It was just the stars and I, and I dreamed peacefully. I was confined in a space that couldn't even fit a hundred men, but my eyes could see the whole universe and my mind could go anywhere it wanted.

I went into deep thought during the flight, going so far as to

conjure my own languages, mathematics, philosophies, and methods of science; my consciousness was permanently altered.



When you get off of a plane that has carried you across the seas, you will find that you have to change the time on your wristwatch. When I came back to the little blue planet in the Milky Way Galaxy, I had to change my watch, too. I'd reached extreme speeds in deep space, speeds that, in your day, only subatomic particles would've had any business doing; consequently, my elapsed time and Earth's elapsed time differed by several million years.

It made little difference, though, since I was gone for over thirty million years on anyone's clock. I was gone for so long that Sol's radius had expanded by a measurable amount, the gas giants looked noticeably different, and all the new constellations that I had to learn upon my release from the vault were warped utterly beyond recognition due to galactic rotation. And there were a lot of changes on Earth, too.

For one thing, the human gene pool had drifted significantly—there were thousands of different species of humans, and I was now the only being in the known universe that might have looked anything like you. Actually, instead of the word "drift" I should use a term more like "directed flow" because the evolution was by way of artificial selection, not natural selection. Their bodies, genes, and biomechanical enhancements were all customized. On the cellular level these humans were completely advanced: their cells could absorb almost anything as fuel, and general human DNA was incrementally upgraded over trillions upon trillions of experimental generations so that in its current stage it could last millions of years before beginning to decay (and even after the normal processes of decay begin, the DNA structure could yet be artificially prolonged); the average lifespan was essentially indefinite. Sex no longer even existed—there were no such parts in the anatomy. Given the progress that had been made all the way from when man first stood

upright up until now, it was commonly believed that the final stage of trans-humanism would be realized within around another hundred million years or so.

Human civilization was so advanced now that... well, I couldn't even describe it. They were doing things now that were thought to be absurdly impossible even after my emergence from the vault. The humans had somehow solved the problem of machines, heat, and working parts, which allowed them to send volunteers deep beneath the vaguely defined surface of Sol. Also there were now thousands of human-populated cities on Venus. Mars was completely terraformed and had a new magnetic field and atmosphere, each artificially and strenuously bound to the planet, that could support naked human life (while the many different varieties of humans could survive in many different varieties of environments, each and every human was, of course, engineered so that earthlike conditions would top the list of favorable environments; the terraformed Mars was now earthlike so that all humans could inhabit it freely).

There was even a human-populated city on Jupiter. And there were sky castles on the other gas giants—from what I'd heard, the other blue planet was the most choice destination because the winds there could reach up to a thousand miles an hour, creating a magnificently serene, breezy sound in the musically shaped wind roofs of the city. The view of the aqua-blue clouds could take your breath away, and it was just so beautiful to look at Sol and see it as a pale white dot.

But all I wanted to do was stay on Earth. There was no other place in the universe quite like it. If I stood on another planet, then I'd still feel like I was in outer space, like I was still in that terrible thruster pod. To me there was just Mother Earth and outer space, and all of the other planets were in outer space and they were part of the outer-space world.

And so I sought out the last few nature reserves on Earth that weren't completely covered in technology. I went to a beach preservation so that I could feel the sand run through my toes, and

I felt the old, familiar sun smiling down upon me, and I interrupted the tides with my body, and I breathed in the air that could only be found on Earth. I was finally home.



There were all kinds of new technologies now, but they bored me. There was one thing, though, that was different: it was a new telescope that had found a miracle. The universe becomes opaque at a certain distance away, cheating us out of a view of the early universe; our new telescope, being highly sophisticated, found a specific spot in the cosmic sky where we could see, through a very small gap in the curtain, into the mysterious early stages of the universe.

I was only able to ponder these new wonders for so long; the astronaut in me was awoken, and I set my sights for the veiled planet.

I asked them to take me there—having no actual purpose or objective in mind—and they indulged me. Upon arrival I was, at my request, dropped from above the atmosphere of Venus. It looked the same from this spot as I'd imagined: a big blanket covering the planet, a creamy white like what you'd get if you mixed all of the colors of Jupiter and Saturn.

The sound of the air rushing by me was very weak at first—I couldn't even hear it. I felt nothing, either, except the human-preservation suit that I was wearing from my neck down—it was pressing against my body, and it felt good. I clenched my fists and felt the resistance of the gloves, like I was gripping something. As I hit the clouds I began to hear the faint sounds of wind, and it got louder and louder as I continued to fall into deeper levels of atmospheric pressure. At some point I broke through the clouds—I can tell you that much—but I still couldn't see the planet's surface because of the haze.

Near the end of the free fall I could hear a sound, many sounds, like a thousand dying dragons, like the entire prehistoric world had awoken. The impact was much softer than I expected, although it was, of course, one of the many things that would have

killed any human that might have traded places with me in this inferno. I rose to my feet and looked down with pride at my impact crater, but I lamented the fact that I didn't make such a landmark on a meteorologically dead planet that might preserve it like a scar.

And then suddenly there was an angelic figure of light in the sky, like a glowing anti-shadow made of pure sunshine, and it was descending upon me. It was a winged man, coated entirely in some kind of lightweight crystal, a fiery orange in this place with twinkling sparks all over him. The wings were fastened to his forearms and held by his hands, like something that could be one of da Vinci's unfinished inventions. He swung his legs out so that they were beneath his body and then he extended them into a landing pose, ever so gracefully: one leg was straight, with the toes dipped down, and the other was bent at the knee. He landed perfectly, flapping his wings once more while on the ground as if it was a tragedy that he had to stop flying. He held out his hands like a praying mantis, wrists all limp-like, offering me his wings. I accepted them, and he then removed extra wings that he had in a sheath on his back. He immediately took off flying because he was just too good to remain ground bound, and that was the last I ever saw of him.

I wondered how exactly I was meant to fly with these encumbering wings of crystal, but then when I flapped them, almost carelessly, I gained lift and my feet left the ground. I flapped the wings some more and I was flying, like a spirit rising up out of a graveyard. Once I was up high I surrendered some altitude for speed, and my body naturally shifted itself into a flying position.

I just sort of glided for a while, flapping my wings for altitude when necessary, keeping a safe distance from the ground level because I couldn't see any hazards in the distance. And then I heard a strange noise—it was artificial, and it sounded like it was for navigation. I assumed that the humans had their gadgets and tricks embedded into the helmets (which I lacked) of their

human-preservation suits, and so there should have been no need for such an audible siren since each helmet would produce its own private audio. Therefore this repetitive sound, which was definitely a guiding beacon, must have been something specifically for me.

I meandered in the direction toward the sound and, after some time, I could see a large dome below me. I circled and descended like a spiraling vulture, and then when I was low enough I executed my own professional landing: I swooped upward sharply to kill all of my forward momentum, and then I covered my face with my wings so that I would begin to free fall; I then put my wings outward again to catch some air so that I might touch down as I would with a parachute.

I was either incredibly lucky or there were doors all over the perimeter of the city dome because a door opened up right in front of me. I entered the empty room, and another door was opened and I found another empty room. In each successive empty room the air held more clarity, less heat, and less pressure. I outlasted the duration of the doors and they soon revealed to me the innards of a great city with flying people and flowing water.



The wall before me had clocks on one side and a window on the other. Except, instead of these being analog clocks for, say, the time in Los Angeles or London or Tokyo, these were digital clocks to tell you the year, as reckoned by man, for the major stellar systems across the various galaxies that we'd colonized. Earth's clock was always ahead of everywhere else since we star men had left there at relativistic speeds; according to the clocks on my wall, Earth was about ten trillion years ahead of the clock here.

The only clock that really matters is, of course, your own clock, which, in this era, is going to be different for everyone since the average human—if I can use such a loose word—will travel so very far in a lifetime. There will also be well over a hundred different names for each planet or sun, seeing as how humanity was so spread out by this time and hopelessly relying upon the

speed of light to broadcast a name. A sun could be named after its galaxy, after its location in its galaxy, or after its type. Sometimes a planet was named after its sun, followed by the number corresponding to the planet's ordering in the stellar system (like how we sometimes refer to Earth as Sol III); many times a planet—particularly if it is perhaps not quite a planet by conventional standards—would be named after one of its prominent or recurring features; other times a planet might be named Terra, followed by a sequence of digits, so as to convey that the planet is easily inhabitable and not some ferocious gas giant. One thing, however, that would never become the name of a planet was its discoverer—be that the first to observe it or the first to stand upon it—since humanity by this time had very much outgrown its own vanity, and every last human knew full well that his lifetime of achievements would more appropriately be credited to the previous generations who labored to make everything possible.

In the end, all of this bureaucracy was somewhat pointless, I suppose, seeing as how neither the time on a standard clock nor the name below it could be agreed upon. I looked out the window and saw that it was the time of day when the sky was a twisted computer-green, and I was falling into a deep depression as I tried to reminisce about the languages that I used to speak. I knew intellectually that such languages existed and that I'd spoken them, but I could not remember the languages themselves, the people to whom I spoke them, or anything from those time periods; I had only a textbook understanding of the life that I'd lived due to the mechanics of my memory. When I closed my eyes and looked really far back I could only see the vault. Well... there were a few other things, but there was nothing that haunted me like the vault. Padempire should have been expunged from my memory ages ago, but I kept thinking about him, thereby activating the information in my mind and reinserting it as a new memory. Padempire's name never changed, but I've lost count as to how many different languages I've used for my internal thoughts while

remembering him.

The primary language of humankind was something completely new when I came out of the vault—something that did not share in perceivable derivation with any language that I knew of before having gone into the vault—and then that language itself changed completely into a new language a few thousand years later, and then it changed again, and again; in total I had no idea how many languages I had passed through, but I would estimate it to be in the millions.

Our current currency of words had a term for what had happened to Earth around eighty trillion years ago. The rough translation into English would be something like "inflation of the frog." It is the story of the death of Sol and the burnt earth:

The dying sun grew much larger, like a frog's vocal sac. At some point, Sol expanded so much that it engulfed Mercury. Mercury's surface was incinerated but the planet itself continued to orbit, clawing its way through the diffuse fog of Sol's atmosphere. Mercury was wounded, its precious inner parts exposed to the world after having been hidden away for so very long, and oceans of molten iron leaked away as it continued its slow spiral into oblivion. The solar friction eventually sapped Mercury's will to drudge on; 18,609,434,112 years after the beginning of time, the bleeding planet fell into the core of Sol.

Next was Venus. The ambitious frog expanded more and more, and eventually this world needlessly fell into the infernal belly.

Earth, once called the blue planet, had now turned black and red like a rotten apple as Sol threatened to fill the entire sky. The magnificent oceans were unceremoniously confiscated by the heat of the expanding sun like a disgraced princess being stripped of her violet velvet, and the sky's last trace of blue was lost forever. The burning moon shared Earth's sorrow as the insatiable sun grew ever larger, and Earth's bravest mountains melted into nothing. Every building burned, every flag was forgotten, and every buried skeleton was scorched as the sacred planet accepted its tragic end.



The only thing that remains of Earth is its imaginary clock, still ticking.

Terra 5179816056373094294669421, which was my current residence, was not destined to suffer the same fate since it was the moon of a gas giant that was sufficiently far away from its sun; Terra 5179816056373094294669421's fate will be much more subtle. Eventually, over a span of time that we do not even have words for, the ring dust from the gas giant will disintegrate Terra 5179816056373094294669421 while the tidal forces rip it to pieces.

I volunteered to station here as an observer of the gas giant since its surface clouds were so volatile and active. There was a constantly rotating crew of humans to help with maintenance of machinery and such, but most of the humans in this dying stellar system were elsewhere.

(I should probably refer to them as trans-humans since long ago humanity had fully completed this process; they were totally unrecognizable as having originated on Earth.)

My current sun was the same type that Sol once was. It was an old star, and the universe, as a whole, had begun the stage of death. The era of starlight had passed, and the trans-humans could do nothing but hop from world to world in search of rare warm suns. Long ago I stopped counting the centuries and instead started counting the suns that shined down upon my permanent-home spheres; so far I'd made a home in around a hundred thousand stellar systems of the trillions, both in this galaxy and in others, that the entirety of trans-humanity had colonized.



Resources were becoming scarce because of the heat death of the universe. The intergalactic medium was starting to dominate the galaxies in terms of gravitational influence, and the cosmic background radiation—once an abundant static—was now a weak whisper. Entropy was approaching its asymptotic maximum, galaxies were dimming and stellar formation had ceased due to the

hydrogen exhaustion. The universe did not have very long before it would go completely dark and starless.

Sufficiently sophisticated societies throughout the universe (if they existed) could possibly survive the heat death longer than trans-humanity. With this in mind we had been searching for advanced societies for an extremely long time. Despite our searches, despite having the technology to send a trans-human observer to another galaxy in mere hours by his clock, despite dispersing billions of colonies throughout every galaxy we'd ever visited, we could not find life. Not even simple life. Even Terra 719A barely had any evidence of ruins on it before it was swallowed by its sun. It was a cold, dark, empty universe, and eventually, due to the cosmic expansion, there was a last galaxy that could be touched.

Most galaxies from your day had, by this time, disappeared completely due to their velocity, relative to us, being greater than  $c$  for longer than the travel time of their light to us. And the majority of the galaxies that we could still see were mere illusions, as we could never reach them because their light would disappear before we could get there.

The phantom galaxies that we could still see but yet never reach had trans-human civilizations there, civilizations that we'd sent long ago, civilizations that were forever cut off from the rest of us. Every once in a while we would send out signals to our companions in another galaxy that was soon to become a phantom galaxy. It was the final farewell, wishing them the very best as their lights go out for the eternal cosmic night.

I saw it happening once... a phantom galaxy falling off the edge of light. It was facing us at the perfect angle so that its galactic eye was open. Bit by bit, star by star, it disappeared. Every day we looked at it and there was something new that was missing, and after a few centuries it was totally gone. I always wondered if there were eyes in that galaxy that were also watching us disappear forever.

The universe was dying and the use of the time

machine—despite the fact that its success would send me to time and location unknown—was my best choice for self-preservation: after the last sun dies out, after the trans-humans have burned up all of their stored energy, there will be only one place left in each galaxy that's still warm. Trans-humanity, despite all its splendor, will one day have to resort to refuge inside the enormous, devouring hole at the center of a given galaxy, that old, bottomless pit of destruction where things of substance are crushed into things of shadow. There, underneath the event horizon of the supermassive black hole, dead stars will swirl into the insatiable galactic mouth and the stellar friction of these shredded stars will provide the final haven of warmth. And that is a place where I would never, ever follow mankind.

It is interesting to consider that the universe is, was, and always will be tending with strong bias toward the completely opposite state in comparison to its conditions "before" the Big Bang. At that time—if I can say such a thing—the universe was a system with only one possible state. And then something happened and the universe has ever since been approaching the opposite state: an unbounded amount of space and time instead of none at all. The end will be as cold as the beginning was hot, and the end will be as gradual as the beginning was sudden—it will be so gradual that I won't even be able to discern it if I'm still here to watch. Things will unfold so slowly that I won't even notice when the last speck of light is gone and everything has faded to black, and the subtlety of the transition might leave me wondering if anything ever actually happened at all... maybe I would eventually come to believe that the era of starlight was just a dream.

And so, after all things in the universe succumb to their final fate, I will have nothing but my insanity to keep me company for all eternity. There is no doubt that Padempire will be awaiting my return, waiting for me with his devilishly grinning eyes of darkness. Only the time machine would spare me from this hell.

The trans-humans knew that they would drain resources in

the making and operation of the time machine, and they knew that they would be doing so when the resources were more scarce than ever. They also knew that they'd get very little out of the experiment, even if it worked—the only thing their investments would buy them would be to see me vanish. But to them, to these altruistic knowledge seekers, the only thing that mattered was to send an observer back so that he could solve the last mystery, even if they themselves would never know the answer.



I promised an engineer's description of the time machine and so here it is, from the inside out:

The components of the time machine were the pod (I would be inside this), the accelerator arms, the engines to power the accelerator arms, and the observers.

The pod was uniformly made of a homogeneous mixture—a super-strong material having a composition that does not concern a twenty-first century reader. The pod was spherical, and in the middle there was something that looked like an exotic dancer's pole. It ran along the diameter and it was fixed in its position simply by being cast from the one and only mold that was used to make the whole pod; the pole's role was that of structural integrity.

There were only two moving parts in the pod: at two opposite ends of the sphere there were simple trapdoor mechanisms. I would only need one entrance, of course, but there were identical mechanisms on the two opposite sides because of the need for symmetry. The accelerator arms, which I will describe shortly, will apply pressure to the pod and so it was very important that there could be no weakest point. It would have been quite a bit easier to design a pod with no weakest point if it had no entry hatches, but then that would have required us to make the pod with me in it from the start; the engineers didn't want to cast the mold of the pod with me inside it because the interior surface needed to be designed and developed in a special way so as to deter deformation that would result from the exertion of my relativistic body upon the material.

The exterior of the pod was scarred with specially placed lines and grooves all over. They were there to guide the accelerator arms, which will glide all over the pod like a bow on a violin, giving the pod spinning acceleration. The spherical shape of the pod was purposeful in maintaining its structural integrity while being chewed by the accelerator arms.

Those accelerator arms, powered by enormous, planet-sized engines deep underground, will move faster and faster and faster, spinning the pod into a blur that no camera could ever photograph clearly. The arms were constructed out of a new special crystal that would not scratch the particular material constituting the pod.

The accelerator arms looked very much like the forelegs of a praying mantis—crooked, evil, and with lots of spikes on the under parts. The spikes were actually more like very long (horizontally) and short (vertically) dorsal fins, and their purpose had to do with the very brief moment of locking an accelerator arm in place within a groove on the pod.

When footage from the half-speed test runs was slowed down I could perceive the motion of the accelerator arms. They looked like the hind legs of a spider busily wrapping its prey in silk. They moved smoothly in some constant and yet unpredictable gesture, endlessly twirling around and around; the purpose of their movement was to produce perpetual acceleration in a particular way that would make the observers' difficult task a bit easier, and also to avoid certain weak structural areas on the surface of the pod so that the pod, in effect, would have no weakest point (so I would have been more accurate if I had said earlier that the whole time machine system—not just the pod itself—was designed to have no weakest point).

If your thinking is anything like mine, then you're wondering why we would be using this strange spin method rather than a particle accelerator. Or perhaps you're wondering why we can't just use the diametric pole as an axel that could protrude from the pod and be spun by simple machines. The problem is an issue of frames of reference. If the pod were to just spin about an axel,

then, as a result of relativistic length contraction, it will, from the observers' frame of reference, contract into something like a string. This was unacceptable because I needed to be moving away from all observers in a  $360^\circ \times 360^\circ$  sphere around myself, and therefore I needed to become something more of a point instead of a string; neither an axel nor a particle accelerator could produce this effect. The system of accelerator arms, however, was not restricted to a single plane of motion, and it could spin the pod in a complicated precession so that I would, upon the application of relativistic length contraction, be observed as the desired point.

The point was that we were trying to create a barrier in causality between myself and the rest of the universe, and to do this we would mimic a known instance of such an occurrence. This happens, as I mentioned earlier, with galaxies—when a galaxy slips off the event horizon, into the world of the half-real between the event horizon and the light horizon, it becomes causally isolated from us. But if, instead of retreating beyond the event horizon, the galaxy were to jump backward in time, then this would be, in every practical and functional sense, physically indistinguishable—while we can still see the incidental light that was emitted before the galaxy had fallen away forever, this old, dead light reveals nothing; there is indeed no measurement or method of detection that could correct one who believes that a causally isolated galaxy goes backward in time rather than beyond a horizon. Equivalently, we would be able to visit a causally isolated galaxy if we first chose to perform one of two impossible tasks: either traveling beyond the event horizon, or traveling backward in time—again, this suggests that the two are physically indistinguishable, that the one is a characterization of the other.

There is, along with our hypothetical, causally isolated galaxy, an entire universe on the other side of the event horizon, a universe spanning to the light horizon and beyond. But if we could somehow wrap the event horizon around the galaxy, then it would be causally isolated from the entire universe, which is to say that it would be sent backward through time. And that is what

they were going to do with me—they were going to wrap an event horizon around me, creating a bubble in causality.

And so it was a bit strange to think that I, a mere particle, the smallest of all things, would become like a galaxy, a stellar hive, the largest of all things. But indeed I would become just like the distant galaxies because I was going to shrink into a small dot until disappearing forever off of the horizon of reality, exceeding  $c$  and never being seen again.



In order to surpass the speed of light I needed to first approach it. And I certainly agree with your preemptive objection—that it is not possible to directly accelerate up to or beyond  $c$ . But before proceeding to address this problem I should first call attention to the fact that the engineers who designed the time machine did so with technology and scientific wizardry that was limited only by that which was physically possible (our technology was actually equal with our theory at this point—not an unreasonable thing to believe given that, by this time, it had been over eighty trillion years since the invention of the wheel), and that the machine was powerful enough to propel me to one indivisible unit of speed shy of the speed of light—having no wave properties I was, quite uniquely, not subject to the uncertainty principle, and so the naïve description above requires no refinement because we were fairly sure from empirical observations that a physical infinity could not exist in this universe.

Therefore it would certainly follow that there exists—at least, for me—some well-defined, physically attainable velocity,  $v=c-\varepsilon$ , such that there exists no well-defined, physically attainable velocity between  $v$  and  $c$ . If you now acknowledge that the metric of space is expanding in a way that is irreverent to the perceived rules of space and time, then you must see the possibility for the metric of space to expand in such a way so as to produce an effect equivalent to the distance between myself and my observers being increased by two or more quanta at the exact moment when my relative velocity will be just one quantum short of  $c$ —giving

me a net velocity of, at minimum,  $c+\varepsilon$ .

Now, of course, a project like this is going to come with a long list of obstacles and problems. One such problem was the issue of wiggling: I will fit into the time machine pod like a fetus in a womb, and the pod will spin to produce the velocity that the observers will see; the amount of wiggle room that I will have while in the pod will be a critical variable because even a few inches of slippage or physical indentation into the material of the pod (produced by my footholds and other areas of pressure that I will be exerting on the pod) would alter the location of my center of mass and ruin everything (my center of mass is what will remain to be observed after the process of relativistic length contraction has asserted itself).

But I shall once more call attention to the date, reminding you of both the current technological prowess and also the current rate of expansion of space—a rate that has been accelerating since the beginning of time—and simply assert, without any reasonable refutation available to you, that the bounded range of the permitted negotiation of my position could be sufficiently small so the net difference between it and the predicted increase in distance between myself and the observers due to metric expansion will be in favor of the latter while my reasonably certain velocity is  $c-\varepsilon$  for our sufficiently small  $\varepsilon$ .

(While the scale of metric expansion is certainly more dominant in the voids between the galaxies, the stuff of space is exactly the same regardless of if it is a particle of space comprising one of these intergalactic voids or if it is a particle of space inside an atom. That being said, I will reveal now that we were actually arranging this experiment in a vast intergalactic supervoid on an artificial planet that we had created and then shepherded away from the clutches of its stellar nursery. It is true that the planet itself will exert modest gravity to inhibit the expansion of space-time, but there will be no ambient gravitational expanse to exacerbate this.)

And so, as I approach the speed of light, the observers will



occasionally peek at my velocity—although, in this context, "occasionally" might mean  $10^{45}$  times per second. The observers, as I described earlier, would be placed on the surface of an imaginary sphere centered around me; the radius of the sphere, being a bit larger than that of the planet we were on, was optimally determined by the radius of my revolution, the speed of my revolution, and the rate of the metric expansion. The sphere was profoundly dense in terms of observers per square Planck length: there was in fact an oversaturation—more observers than the required amount to obtain the best measurements physically possible.

Hence the observers were arranged so that every photon attempting to pass through the sphere would be intercepted. The photons from the outside world were, of course, blocked out, and the region of space inside the sphere was scrubbed of wayward photons as best as possible. Each observer will send out a high-energy photon—energized many, many orders of magnitude higher than even the limit of what was thought to be theoretically possible in your day—that will pass through the specifically optimized material of the artificial planet and through the pod to reflect off of me, and thence it will go through the pod and the planet again to complete two radii of the imaginary sphere and be collected by other observers; I will therefore be indirectly detectable as an obstruction by the intended observers directly opposite of the emitting observers, and, as mentioned, I will be incidentally detected by other observers as I systematically reflect each photon according to my instantaneous orientation (the observers will be in constant and immediate communication on their own network via applications of quantum entanglement).

Being a spinning point I will have a tangential velocity,  $v$ , which, with help from the metric expansion, will be greater than  $c$  for an observer whose bombarding photon is collinear to my tangent at the instant of contact. The observer, in this instance, will not detect the reflection—nor will it receive indication that the signal has been picked up by another observer—and it will thus

conclude that I have disappeared; this is what would be considered a successful observation. If only a few observers are simultaneously successful, then the other observers will continue to corroborate my existence—there will merely be some disagreement among the observers about an event in the recent past. Suppose, however, that all observers agreed on  $v > c$ , and that the symphony of successful observations were to persist long enough to account for the fact that the notion of simultaneity is not very well defined when the effects of relativity are at the forefront. If literally every single photon bouncing off me was redshifted beyond the brink of total darkness, if there was an artificial light horizon around me and all photons proclaiming my existence were simultaneously wiped from the ledger, then all of the observers will be forced to agree that I'm simply not there.



I had to visit the blue planet before I could go through the time machine. It was totally black now, and there were no more oceans. The oxygen had burned up and the vaporized water had escaped the planet long ago, along with much of the rest of the atmosphere. It was quite like the lunar surface: dead, barren, and covered in craters. There was no living thing on this planet.

And then I woke up and remembered that the blue planet didn't even exist at all anymore, that it had been snuffed out by Sol so long ago. I looked out the window at the trans-humans that were working on the time machine project and I didn't know any of their names or any of their features and I had no home.



They set me into an incinerator and it burned for a few minutes, and then all of the air and ash was sucked out. Then they took me to the machine.

As I walked my final walk I was thinking about the various potential consequences of time travel, and it was then that I could finally see that I was wrong. I was wrong all along. I was not forged out of the heat of the young, tiny universe; there was indeed no way to create me or annihilate me. I actually owed my

existence to my own actions, that is, the act of going through the time machine and creating my own existence in the past. And, of course, my timeline was no line at all—it was a circle. I should say that it was a circle for me since I will carry with me my memories through the time machine, but it was a line segment with two dead ends for some omnipresent observer since he would see me come into existence out of nowhere with memories of things that hadn't happened yet and then later exit existence by way of the time machine. I will go through the dead end of the circle and then I will drift aimlessly through space until I plummet to Earth, an event that would be all but impossible if it hadn't already happened, falling head over heels into the bootstrap paradox—a strange occurrence made possible only because of my immunity to entropy.

And so now I suppose you're anticipating the cliché ending. Perhaps I will step into the machine and everything will turn black for some reason, and then there will be a chill in my heart and a burden of pressure on my eyes like a weeping sensation, and then I'll feel like I was drowning, and I'll reach out with my hands and feel Padempire in front of me.

No. I've spent billions of your human lifetimes out of that vault, and I will never again wake up in the darkness. So much time has passed now that even the thirty million years wasted in between Andromeda and the Milky Way Galaxy could not be thought of as significant. This was all real. It was as real as the instruments of death that I used back in the days when I was a magician, except this time, for the first time ever, the magic trick itself would be real.

Goodbye, Starla. I stepped into the pod, they sealed me in, the acceleration began, and my field of vision shrank into a pinpoint. And then it happened, and I saw a world full of stars again.