

*Oh fuck, oh fuck, oh fuck.* I can't go home - they're watching the house. I can't go to a friend's house - they're probably watching all my friends too. They're probably watching me right now. I see a blacked out van parked near me. That's a bit too cliché, but I wouldn't put it past them. Or the red sports car with the custom rims. That could be them. That's the kind of tacky shit these guys pull just to show off their money. I'm sure one of these cars belongs to the gangsters.

They found me online, on my darknet website. They asked me if I'd kill anyone, and I said I would kill anyone for the right price. The boss, when he heard that he smiled and said I was his kind of man. I've done it before, and I know how to play it smart, cover my tracks, but what happened with the gangsters was a shock. They showed me their offer, they wrote it down on a piece of paper like in the movies, and I agreed. It *was* a generous offer. Oh the gangsters and their warm generosity. I was signed on, and the boss actually brought me to his house to have dinner with his family. His wife made tortellini. It was pretty good.

Then they showed me the picture of the girl I was supposed to kill. It was an employee photo from some fast food restaurant. Apparently she screwed them out of a lot of money. When I saw the photo, it took me a second or two to catch my breath. I remembered her from high school. The one that got away. The beauty of forgotten romance struck me again and I almost wept right where I stood, until I remembered my company. *Oh God*, I realized, *I can't do this. Anyone but her.* I told the gangsters that I was sorry, I couldn't kill her. They asked why not, and I explained she was an old girlfriend and I couldn't bring myself to do it. They raised their offer. I told them no. The boss wasn't there when this happened, I suppose he has more important business to attend to on a daily basis. The highest-positioned guy in the room, I guess he was a direct associate to the boss, explained to me that the boss doesn't like to back out of deals that he's already made.

I said I was sorry again and then I walked out the door. That was a couple of days ago. Now I'm here. I don't think I can leave the city fast enough. It's a Saturday afternoon in summer and the freeways are surely clogged with tourists. Maybe... just maybe I can outmaneuver them. My knuckles are white around the steering wheel. I'm shaking. *Drive. Just drive.* Fine. I have to get out of here. I pull out of the parking space and start down the avenue. I see the red sports car start to follow me. *Shit.* I knew it. I slam on the gas and accelerate down to road. The scent of burning rubber fills my nostrils as I pull a sharp left. The sports car follows shortly after.

He's too fast. I have to get away. I change lanes. I weave. I run a red light. I make an illegal left. Somehow he's still behind me. Every maneuver I

make, every twist or turn, I don't know how, but he keeps up. I'm desperate now. Suddenly I screech a right turn. Maybe he isn't expecting me to turn and he'll keep going straight. No, he turned, he's behind me again. *Oh shit. Oh shit oh shit oh shit oh shit oh shit.* This is a dead end.

I stop the car at the end of the alley and hop out. I want to escape, to Spider-man my way out of this, but there's nothing I can do. There's nothing to climb, nothing to jump over. The only escape is blocked by the red sports car. Two gangsters get out of the front seats. They both have guns. The boss's associate, the driver, walks toward me and backs me into the corner. The other, a bigger, bulkier one, stands by the car.

I'm shaking so much - I lose control of myself, I fall to my knees and put my hands up.

"Normally," the gangster says, "We hire a guy like you to do stuff like this. It's cleaner and it saves time. But the boss wanted me to do this myself because he considers what you did to be a personal insult." He presses the pistol to my head. The metal circle is cold. I wonder if I'll feel it heat up...

"Look, I'll kill the girl," I say through gasps.

"It's not about that anymore. You betrayed our trust. It's too bad... I kinda liked you." His finger is wrapped tightly around the trigger. I begin to see it tighten.

*Holy shit. This is my last moment. This is the moment where I die.*

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I would really love some pizza right now. *Mmmm. Pizza.* With pepperoni, and some red onions, yeah, and maybe green bell peppers. I would put some grated parmesan cheese on top of that. Cheese is pretty weird. You take the boob juice of a big fat hairy grass-eating beast, then you let it sit and rot for a few months or years, then you just stick it in your face like it's nothing. The really weird thing is, I still like it. I know how they make it, and I know where it comes from, but I still eat the stuff and enjoy it. It's like...

Hey. I just noticed something. It's completely empty in here. There's nothing here at all. There should be something here, anything. There should be some semblance of existence in this expanse of void, otherwise it's just meaningless and non-existent. Even the smallest fragment of substance would pierce the cold emptiness. I can imagine it now. It's just a tiny speck,

smaller than you can picture. It's so small that it's one step away from being absolutely nothing. But then again, it's infinitely more than being nothing, because it's *something*. It's the first step to filling this dead emptiness.

Just by imagining this tiny speck, I created it. The speck is real. I wonder if I could create more. I imagine another speck. The speck is. Now there are two. The specks love each other, but the specks hate each other. They dance around and around each other, attempting to resolve their love and hate.

I create more. *Another speck*, I demand, and another speck there is. More and more, I create speck after speck until instead of a speck or a pair of specks or even a few specks, I have an ocean of specks. Their dance continues. The specks, each one equal in love and hatred, swirl and collide and bounce and soar. The specks expand in every direction, filling the empty darkness with substance.

The specks begin to form larger systems. They conglomerate into enormous orbs of lively substance that project specks of energy in every direction, and smaller orbs that dance around those orbs, and those orbs have their own orbs that dance around *them*, and so on and on and on. Everywhere there are dancing objects, large and small, shifting and shaking amongst each other. At the first thought it may seem like absolute chaos, but really it is all an elaborate system, a beautiful dance that continues indefinitely.

I brush the ocean of substance across the void like paint on a canvas. I nudge specks together and pull them apart. I have absolute control over them yet they are completely independent. I love them. They make me giddy.

I feel like I am watching the substances for eternity after eternity, but also that I am just seeing them for the first time. *Time. I do not know time.* There is no then and now. There simply is, and I experience all as one.

I notice that among some of the orbs of dancing specks, even more complex systems of dances form. Within each and every one of those systems is another void filled with an ocean of dancing specks. *Life.* This is called *Life*. Life is marvelous. Within each and every speck of life is another ocean of specks to be explored. I find that by far, the most interesting part of my ocean is life.

I examine an orb that is populated with life. I choose a single fragment of life and analyze it. It moves about the orb and interacts with the substances around it.

*I need to consume enough food to survive. I need to get the food somehow. I need to find the food or get it from someone else. In order to find the food I have to consume another living creature. Capturing and killing another creature is difficult. I could take the food from someone who killed a creature. That is difficult because if they are capable of killing a creature then they could kill me. I could give them something they want and in exchange they will give me food. This is difficult because I do not have anything that they would want. I have to do one of these things otherwise I will not get food. I need food or else I will die. I may not die.*

The difference between me and the beings that live on the orbs is that they give themselves purpose. They center their existences on preventing their deaths, a rather paradoxical phenomenon. I am timeless and will never die, so I do not share their concern. Instead I simply view my creation and bask in the entertainment. I take another glimpse at the orb.

*Oh fuck, oh fuck, oh fuck. I should have listened when they all told me. There's no job security as a writer. An out-of-work writer, how cliché can it be? I wonder how long it will be before my heating gets shut off. I think I'm gonna have to steal some blankets. This is how people become homeless. I'm one step away from being a hobo. Cheri will let me stay with her... but for how long? I don't know what I'm going to do.*

Something about this creature feels familiar but I don't know why. It thinks that it's alone. It has no grasp of how vast this ocean is and how many other life forms swim alongside it. That's the one flaw of all life forms. They each have an entire ocean within themselves but they do not even begin to understand the ocean they live in. I take one last glance at that orb.

*"Mr. President, we detect the enemy is preparing to launch long range targeted missiles. We need to act quickly." This is the moment. The moment I've feared since the day I got this job. I never wanted to make this decision. Time and time again I've pondered the question, but I've never found the answer. Now I have no choice - I have to make a decision. Diplomacy and weakness or murder and strength? What would those who came before me do? I'm not the leader of the world, I'm the leader of my nation. I have to protect my nation. This is my duty. I shift a shaky hand and firmly press down on the red button.*

In the the next moment all life on that orb is gone. This is no tragedy, only the nature of life. In one moment it is there and the next it is gone. The life forms are naive for not realizing that nothing lasts forever. All life comes to an end, no matter how hard they try to preserve it.

I choose a new orb to examine. It is rich in life forms. I look on as the creatures begin as tiny specks then conglomerate into bigger and more complex systems. Their life cycle reflects the way this ocean was created. The creatures swarm around the orb, interacting with each other and consuming different kinds of creatures. They work together to start to make tools that help them harvest and consume the bodies of other life forms. As they build more and more tools, their critical thinking skills grow stronger. They begin to wonder how their universe came into existence. Some of them come up with explanations and share them. Some people favor certain explanations and others favor different ones. Soon enough the orb is divided into different factions, each of which stands by a different explanation of the universe. None of them are very close to the truth. The beings no longer work together to survive. They oppose each other. Like the specks, their conflicting love and hatred causes them to dance, bouncing and swarming and twirling and growing. Their tools grow more powerful and their curiosity greatens. They begin to leave their orb and explore the ocean around them. They land on nearby planets and populate them. Suddenly a large rock collides with their home and destroys its atmosphere. A few of them which were on different planets survive, but quickly they run out of resources and die out.

That was fun to watch. It's the basic pattern that most life forms follow. Eventually this star will explode and absorb the planet on which this civilization lived, and the specks will be launched across the ocean, where they will meet other specks, and form a new star, then a new planet, and a new civilization.

I glimpse at another life form. The story of this being is a comedic tragedy.

*Ryan was a jolly young lad trapped in a poor family. He lived in a studio apartment with his drug-addicted parents and seven brothers and sisters. He was very creative, and showed signs of genius at a young age. Perhaps he could have reached legendary heights if only he were born in different circumstances. But that's not what this story is about. This story is about a clown. You see, every year, the circus would come to Ryan's town. Ryan's family never had money to go and see it. The wealthier boys in Ryan's school would boast about their trip to the circus, how magical and wondrous it was. Ryan heard the stories, and in his dreams he saw them all - the lion*

tamers, the elephants, and the oh-so-hilarious clowns! He begged his parents every year, "Mother, Father, may we PLEASE visit the circus? It is my one and only wish in this world." And they said to him, "Son, there is nothing I want more than to make you happy. But we have nary a penny to spend on a circus ticket." This continued every year, until one day, one fateful day, Ryan's father discovered something fantastic on his stroll to meet his drug dealer. He happened upon a 100 dollar bill, just enough to purchase a circus ticket for himself, his wife, and his seven children. He considered spending it on extra drugs, but then he thought of his son Ryan's face, so he stashed it into his pocket. That afternoon, at family supper, he announced to all what he had found - and what they would be doing with it. The family, Ryan especially, was delighted to discover that they would be visiting the circus this year. Ryan could hardly contain his excitement over the coming weeks, every day growing more and more anxious than the last. Finally the day came when the whole family packed into their beat-up hatchback to head to the circus. Ryan's chubby younger brother, Floppy, lost the coin toss, so he was bungee-corded to the roof for the extent of the car ride. Ryan's excitement grew tenfold every time he saw a sign on the side of the road which read, "Astrap Circus: X Miles Ahead". His excitement grew one hundred fold for every second he waited in line at the facade of the circus. Finally, Ryan's family reached the ticket booth and Ryan's excitement peaked - if he got any more excited he would have exploded. There, at the ticket booth, was where Ryan and his family discovered that the price of admission was a few dollars higher than they thought. They did not have enough money for all nine members of the family. One family member would have to wait in the car while the others went inside and enjoyed the circus. Ryan was terrified that it would be him. Fortunately for Ryan, his fat younger brother Floppy lost the coin toss again, so he had to wait outside. Floppy would later on be kidnapped and molested, but this story isn't about Floppy, it's about Ryan. When they entered the doorway, Ryan was overcome with glee. All of his wildest dreams had come true. He saw the lion tamer - he was amazing! He lit a hoop on fire and the lion leapt right through it! He saw the elephants - they were tremendous! He'd never seen a creature so giant! He saw the clowns - they were hilarious! They goofed around and hit each other in the face with pies and slapped each other in the face with rubber chickens! For the very last act, the head clown asked for a volunteer from the audience. Ryan raised his hand so hard and so high that his shoulder and elbow hurt. He wished with all his heart for the clown to pick him. Ryan almost died of joy when the clown pointed at him and said, "You, young chap. Why don't you come up onto the stage?" Ryan burst out of his seat and leapt onto the stage like a bullfrog. Everyone in the audience stared at Ryan and his grin was a mile wide. The clown said to him, "Alright laddy, why don't you answer some questions now?" Ryan said "Okay." The clown said to him, "Okay boyo, are you the horse's

mouth?" Ryan, confused, said "No." The clown said "Oh, so are you to horse's tail?" Ryan was almost angry at the clown. He wasn't the horse's anything. "No..." he said. "Well then," the clown chortled, "you must be the horse's ass!" The audience erupted into caucous laughter. Ryan's mile-wide grin sunk faster than lead in a bathtub. His shame overwhelmed him from head to toe. His childish glee crumbled before his eyes. His dreams of splendor were shattered like a window struck by a sledgehammer. Ryan stormed off the stage and out of the circus tent and into his parents' hatchback. Something inside Ryan died that day. His soul darkened into something hateful, something bitter, something that wanted to destroy. He vowed that he would exact his revenge on that clown no matter how long it took. Ryan began to work more diligently in school, turning his C's and D's into A's. He made acquaintance with his teachers, making an effort to find a responsible role model unlike his parents. At age 12, Ryan got a job as a grocery bagger at the local Wal-Mart. He would ride his bicycle to work every day after school and do his homework while he bagged groceries. Bagging groceries was incredibly difficult work, because sometimes the customers would purchase eggs, and he would have to put the eggs at the top of the bag or else they would get squashed by the other groceries and he would have to give them a new case of free eggs, as well as clean the sticky egg off his fingers. He saved every penny. At age 18, he was accepted into Axtrap School of Witty Banter, the greatest school of insults in the world. He paid for his tuition with his money from working at Wal-Mart, where he now worked a double shift. 16 hours per day, 80 hours per week. He didn't spend any money on a home - instead, he was a hobo who lived in the street. He would bathe in suburban sprinklers to keep himself presentable for work and school. His parents and siblings, who inherited their parents' drug habits, died of drug addiction one by one. He couldn't afford to pay for rehabilitation treatment for them because he was spending all his money on tuition. In Witty Banter Academy he learned insults from all over the world, from the origin of language to the talk show hosts of the present. Finally the day came when Ryan graduated from Axtrap School of Witty Banter and was ready to execute his plan. That summer, the circus came to town. Ryan was ready to go back, almost 10 years later. He didn't have a car, so he walked to the circus. With every step he took, his excitement grew tenfold. Finally he made it to the circus. The line was long, but he waited patiently. For every second he waited in line, he grew braver. He was never more ready for this day. At long last, Ryan made it to the front of the line and bought his ticket. It was all familiar. He saw the lion tamer make the lion jump through a flaming hoop. He saw the elephants dance around on their fat legs. He saw the clowns goof around and hit each other and honk their horn noses. Finally, the head clown, now withering in his age, stepped forward and asked for a volunteer from the audience. Ryan raised his hand high, high above his head. He raised his hand so hard that his shoulder and

elbow hurt. By fortunate chance, the head clown chose Ryan. Perhaps it was fate. Ryan leapt onto the stage like a bullfrog. Knowing what was about to happen, Ryan couldn't stifle the two-mile-wide grin on his face. He had the perfect insult, the most poetically just desserts right up his sleeve for the clown who ruined his childhood. "Sir, why don't you answer a few questions?" the clown said to Ryan. "Alright," Ryan said. "Are you the horse's mouth?" the clown asked Ryan. He prepared for this. He was so ready. "No," Ryan said. "Well are you the horse's tail?" Adrenaline pumped throughout Ryan's veins. He could feel it coming. "No..." Ryan said. "Well then, if you aren't the horse's mouth... and you aren't the horse's tail... you must be the horse's ass!" The audience erupted into laughter. For the smallest moment, Ryan's shame came flooding back to him. Then he remembered his training. This was the moment. The laughter subsided... the suspense grew. The air hung still, and innumerable beads of sweat trickled from Ryan's brow. In just a mere second, Ryan would spit the greatest insult of all time upon this unsuspecting clown. "Oh yeah?" Ryan bellowed proudly. "Well FUCK YOU CLOWN!"

What a fascinating tale, I ponder.

Now I take a peek at another world and another story.

Sandy was 13 years old. She had an older sister, Mandy, who was 17. Mandy liked to go out to parties, but Sandy was too young to party. One Friday night, Sandy and Mandy's parents left town for a weekend to go to their friends' wedding in Paris, leaving Sandy and Mandy home alone. Sandy and Mandy's parents, Dandy and Susan, said goodbye to their children and left home and on that very same evening, Mandy left the house to go to a party at her friend Keith's house, leaving Sandy all by herself for the night. Before leaving, Mandy took a smelly poop in the first floor bathroom and opened the window to air it out. "Make sure you close that window tonight," Mandy warned Sandy. Sandy's only companion was her dog, Legolas, who liked to rest under her bed. Whenever Sandy felt lonely, she would dangle her hand under her bed and let Legolas lick her fingers. That always made her feel better. That night, as Sandy lay in bed, she couldn't shake the feeling that she forgot to do something. All that worry faded from her as she drifted into sleep. Suddenly, she was woken by the sound of a faint drip... drip... drip... She peeled her eyes open and checked the clock - 2 AM. If a faucet had been left on, why hadn't she noticed before? She checked her bathroom sink, the shower, then she checked the kitchen sink and the downstairs bathroom. She realized why it felt so cold when she noticed that the downstairs bathroom window had been left open. She shut the window then went back to bed. She did her best to ignore the dripping, figuring that it was probably a pipe in the ceiling or something. Her parents would call a plumber when they got home from Paris. She dangled her hand beneath her bed and let Legolas tickle her fingers with



his tongue. His breath seemed oddly heavier than usual. Maybe the dripping was stressing him out. She faded into sleep. Suddenly she was woken by the sound of drip drip drip drip drip. The sound of the leak got heavier, more noticeable. Sandy got out of bed and noticed the time - it was 3 AM. She walked around the house in her bare feet, trying to find the source of the dripping. The hard tile floor was cold on her toes. She double checked all the faucets in the house. None of them were the source of the leak. She even pressed her ear against the wall to try to find out if it was a pipe, but she couldn't locate the sound. Eventually she gave up and climbed back into bed. She hoped her parents didn't kill her when they inevitably discovered the water damage. The thought stressed Sandy out, so she dangled her hand under her bed and let Legolas lick her fingers to calm her down. His tongue seemed strange. It was... rougher, or dryer or something... than usual. She thought maybe she should fetch him some water, but before she could complete the thought she was fast asleep. Her sleep was interrupted by the sound of running water, like a faucet turned all the way on. Sandy was almost frightened by the mystery of the flowing liquid. She saw that it was now 4 AM. She was determined to find the source of the leak. Sandy triple checked all of the faucets in the house. Then she made a second effort to locate the sound through the walls. It was louder now than it was before, so it was easier for her to find the source. She traced the sound back to the hallway coat closet. "Why is there running water inside the coat closet?" she wondered. She opened up the door and saw the most horrifying thing she could possibly imagine. There, in the closet, she saw Legolas. He was hanging by his tail, which was tied in a crude knot to the coat rack. His neck had been cut and he had died slowly as he lost blood. This was the source of the dripping. But the most horrifying part was this: scrawled on the wall of the closet in her dog's red blood were these words. "Humans can lick too".

That was spooky. I wish I could save that girl from her untimely demise, but then again, I don't care.

I examine one more life.

Sir Noah and Lady Gretchen were in love. The two lived under and served Lord Marcel, a fair, just, and honorable leader. Lord Marcel was the High Lord of Bellalot, where Sir Noah lived. Sir Noah and Lady Gretchen would often frolic within the meadows outside Sir Noah's castle. Soon, those meadows would be crushed beneath the foot of evil - trodden upon by the steeds of Lord Critch's men. Lord Critch was the High Lord of Belair, the land to the south of Bellalot. Lord Critch was a superficial leader. He always made an effort to make himself seem strong, but everyone in the kingdom knew that his army was small. When Lord Marcel's keep in Bellalot was raided by Lord Critch, it came as a surprise to most of the kingdom. Lord

Critch and Lord Marcel had had a treaty until then - until Critch betrayed his friends. Sir Noah was not surprised by this betrayal because he had never trusted Lord Critch. He advised Lord Marcel to prepare for an attack, but Lord Marcel was too trusting. Sir Noah fought bravely on that day, leading the defenses, even though he knew that they would lose. The Belair army penetrated the walls of Lord Marcel's keep and burned his crops and kidnapped his women. That was the day that Sir Noah lost his beloved Lady Gretchen. That was also the day he vowed he would get his Lady Gretchen back, no matter how much it took. Lord Marcel and the survivors of his army were exiled to stay with allies to the west - the realm of Lord Alecks, Westbay. Every day, Sir Noah would train for combat against his mortal enemy. Then he would hone his blade and pay homage to his liege Lord, Marcel, and his gracious host, Alecks. Sir Noah formulated a plan to make his way into Critch's Keep in Belair and get his beloved back. After weeks of training, Sir Noah finally began his plot. He bowed one finally homage to Marcel and Alecks before leaving. Sir Noah borrowed one of Lord Alecks's fastest steeds and began his ride to Bellalot. After three days' ride, Sir Noah finally saw the familiar towers of Lord Marcel's keep on the horizon. Lord Critch's army was stationed here. They are undeserving of these halls, Sir Noah thought. He kept his distance and made camp underneath some trees, where he waited for nightfall. The sun went down and he could see the torches of two spear-wielding guards in front of the gates. Sir Noah lit his small fire. It was just the right size and distance to capture the attention of the two guards. The two marched out across the meadow toward the woods, where Sir Noah hid within a tree, his blade drawn. The guards arrived at the small campfire, right at the base of the tree, now trying to locate the fire's maker in the dark of the woods. "Who's there?" one of them called. Sir Noah dropped from the tree and landed on the shoulders of one of the guards. The guard crumbled into a heap on the ground and yelped in pain - many of his bones had broken. Sir Noah plunged his blade into the exposed back of the guard's neck, silencing him, then dove to the side to avoid the frantic spear-swinging of the second guard. As the second guard lunged forward with his spear, Sir Noah batted it to the side and stepped in. He cut the guard's arm so he dropped his spear then cut his leg so he fell to the ground. Sir Noah put his foot on the guard's chest. "A woman named Lady Gretchen. Does she still live in Lord Marcel's keep or was she taken back to Belair to be a concubine?" "Lady Gretchen? I think she was... yeah I think they took her back to Belair..." the Guard wheezed. "Good," Sir Noah said. "What's the name of your commander at Lord Marcel's keep?" "Uh... uh... Sir Marc," the guard whimpered. "Thank you," said Sir Noah. "That's all I needed," and he stabbed the guard in the neck. Sir Noah stripped the guard of his clothing and changed into it. It was a bit small but it would work. He found a bag of bread crumbs in the pocket, so he would be fed for the rest of the ride. The next dawn he got back onto his steed and

*began his next three day long ride to Lord Critch's keep. This time, when he arrived, Sir Noah didn't hide and make camp in the outskirts, but instead rode all the way to the gates. "I have a message from Bellalot. Sir Marc sent me." The guard saw his emblazoned clothing, nodded, and opened the gate. Sir Noah hid a smile. He tied his horse and walked into the castle hall. "Do you have business with Lord Critch?" a brown-robed man asked. "Yes, Sir Marc sent me with a message for the Lord," Sir Noah lied. "I'll take that to him," the robed man said. "I'm his advisor." "Actually," Sir Noah went on, "Sir Marc told me to give it to him directly." The robed man stared at him for a second then said "Fine. I'll show you the way. But you'll have to leave your sword outside." Sir Noah was prepared for this, so he snuck a dagger in his pant leg. He followed the robed man up a flight of stairs and down a narrow hallway. The robed man cracked open a door and said "My Lord, a rider has come from Bellalot. He says Sir Marc told him to give you the message directly." Sir Noah heard a snivel, then "Send him in here, and close the door." The robed man bowed and held the door open for Sir Noah. Sir Noah could not believe what he saw inside the room. It was a plush bedroom. Lord Critch was a man who looked like he had been forced from his mother three months too early. He seemed like he had been crying. Next to him in the bed was none other than Lady Gretchen herself. What a lovely coincidence, Sir Noah thought. He stepped into the room and the robed man shut the door behind him. When Lady Gretchen saw him she had to mask her surprise. Sir Noah bowed and said, "My Lord." Lord Critch sat up in bed and said "Well, what's the message?" Sir Noah stepped close to Lord Critch and said, "I have it down here." He reached down and lifted up his pant leg, then yanked out the dagger. He covered Lord Critch's mouth with his left hand as he stabbed him in the chest with his right. Blood splattered all over the sheets. Lady Gretchen was clever enough to silence her scream before it drew much attention. When Lord Critch slouched over, oozing blood, and the tension in the room settled, Sir Noah looked at Lady Gretchen and whispered "I've come to rescue you." Lady Gretchen embraced him and whispered into his ear, "How are we going to get out of here?" "The best way," Sir Noah replied. "We're going to fight our way out."*

I tire of watching the same cycle of civilization again and again. I wish to create a civilization greater than all others. I must start with the perfect planet.

*Form a new star, I command. I find that I have to give the specks a bit of a nudge. Now a planet revolving that star. Again, the specks do not obey as soon as I dictate it, but the planet does form. I start by giving the planet the right conditions for healthy life. Chemical balances, atmospheric levels, the like. Sure enough, organisms begin to appear on their own. The*

organisms grow and quickly adapt to their environment. As they grow and change, I interfere by altering their environment with each generation. I make survival tantalizingly more difficult with each moment, just the right rate for them to rapidly evolve.

The grow in intelligence quickly and the time comes where they begin to question the origin of the universe. I know I must interfere. I find it difficult to decide whether I should tell them not to worry about the origin of the universe or if I should tell them the absolute truth. I choose the latter. I choose a single, random member of this species and in its expansive mind I implant all the knowledge of the universe. It attempts to share its knowledge with its neighbors. The others do not fully understand, but they see that it is knowledgeable so they rally around it.

While following in the footsteps of their prophet, the creatures build elaborate tools quickly, completely unified as a race. They create tools that makes survival as efficient and effortless as possible, so that now they need not fret about their ultimate demise.

Because survival is not priority to them, the creatures center their lives around creation - art, beauty, the vast oceans within and around them. They live to share and communicate with one another. I notice that they attempt to create tools to communicate with other civilizations on other planets. I do not wish for them to be tarnished by the mediocrity of alien races, so I stifle the signals sent by the creatures. They are mute to the rest of the universe.

The race grows and strengthens. They do not war or clash. These beings are in touch with the oceans within themselves and are capable of unveiling that wealth. The greatest trouble they experience is their apparent loneliness in this universe. The generations-old prophet preached to them about billions upon billions of species residing upon orbs floating within the vast ocean, yet they find themselves incapable of discovering a single one.

Perhaps I should give them a new prophet that tells them they are alone in the universe. I wonder how they would react. Perhaps that would be for the best.

Or perhaps I should stop silencing their messages to outside races. Maybe they will not be tarnished by other species. Maybe they will spread their peace and wisdom to other planets. No, of course they won't. They can't.

I decide to send another prophet. I choose a creature and implant the knowledge into its mind. This time, I show it that its race is alone in the universe. I cannot risk their interaction with other beings.

The creature shares its knowledge with its neighbors. They are confused, because they remember learning, generations ago, that the universe was rich in life, but most of them accept his preaching regardless, albeit troubled by the inconsistency.

Some of the creatures find the teachings of the prophet to be false, and they stray from the rest of the species, calling the other blasphemers. The race has been split in two, with those loyal to the new prophet in one faction and those only trusting in the old prophet in another.

I may have chosen the wrong course of action here. With the race split in two, they will soon start warring if I do not resolve the conflict.

I could send another prophet to appease both sides. That might resolve the tension but it could also add to it tremendously. I could take those loyal to the old prophet and send them away to another planet. Or I could just kill them.

I decide that the safest action is to kill the old-prophet loyalists. They are a minority who only cause trouble and they need to be erased. It takes a surprisingly large amount of willpower, but I successfully infect them all with a critical malfunction of the organs.

The rest of the creatures understand what happened, and make special care not to stray from my word. They fear that if they defy the teachings of their prophets, they will meet the same end as their neighbors.

There is a problem. The old-prophet loyalists, despite being difficult to control, were the most intelligent of their race. After all, the philosophy they stuck to *was* the correct one, as controversial as it was. Now that the smartest creatures have been eradicated from the gene pool, the race becomes less intelligent. They are also more death-fearing than before. They cease creating arts and manifesting beautiful original thoughts, and instead center their lives around appeasing me for fear of ending up like the old-prophet loyalists.

My creation is failing. The creatures are no longer creators. They are becoming death fearers. I cannot send another prophet to show them the way or else they might become more religious and worship-centric than before. I don't know how to correct them.

Despite their growing flaws, the beings still know how to build tools and perpetuate their survival. They survive longer than any civilization has ever lived before. When a large rock comes, they pulverize it. When bursts of radiation strike, they deflect it. Finally, at long last, the time has come for their star to explode and consume their planet.

I realize that the creatures are not going to be able to survive the collapse. They realize it too. *Help us, Great One. Save us, Holy One.* They cry in unity. Generations after generations of faith have lead them to trust utterly in my ability to protect them from harm.

Yet still, I fail them. I try at first. I command. *Stay composed, star. Do not explode.* But it does not obey. I nudge the exploding star to obey, yet still it doesn't do as I command. My nudge becomes a push. I exert every scrap of willpower that I can muster but still the exploding star is too strong for me to stop it. I used to be so powerful. I needed only say the word and my ocean was formed. Now I cannot control even a single star.

I am forced to watch as my people, my perfect race, are consumed by fire. *You failed us,* they cry as they burn.

I do not know what to do now. I examine other, lesser civilizations, but find nothing but frustration in their petty violence and futile attempts at understanding this ocean.

I wish to return to my time of wonder, when I first discovered my ability to create and giggled amongst the dancing specks and painted on the canvas of void with a paint of specks. Something inside me is dying. Something about this ocean is fading. The passion, the love and the hatred of the dance are fading into nothing but indifference.

I notice that fewer and fewer civilizations are popping up throughout the universe. In fact, fewer and fewer star systems and galaxies are appearing as well. Everything is blurring, becoming more neutral, transitioning into a state of uniformity. The specks spread out and out, filling the void with substance.

I look on helplessly as star system after star system crumbles and fails to rebuild itself, instead leading to the disintegration of galaxy after galaxy.

The universe is sand blown away in the wind. All that's left is a complete, utterly boring balance. The specks spread and spread and spread, no longer dancing at all. There is no life anymore, no beauty. Once more, I am

trapped in a void - it is a void of specks. I am drowning in my own ocean. The universe is out of my control.

I should have known this would happen. I thought the life forms were naive for not realizing that death was in their nature - yet here I am. I am stuck in a void, helpless, purposeless, for all eternity. I am nothing. I am dead.

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“He’s waking up. Get the doctor. He’s waking up!”

Where am I? I only see black emptiness. I think I’m in a bed.

“Sir, can you hear me?”

A series of seconds goes by in which I don’t remember what words are. Then it all comes back to me and I say “Yes.”

“Okay, I’m going to do some quick tests, just lay back.”

I don’t think I can do anything other than lay back. To the sound of the nurse’s shoes clapping around the linoleum floor, I begin to see spots of light. By the time the doctor enters, my vision is back. I notice that an assortment of tubes and shafts are plugged into my body through various orifices.

The doctor asks me if I know why I’m here. I tell him no. He gets quiet and sits down and tells me I was in a coma. I ask him how long and he says it was six years. Apparently, the doctor explains, I was found in an alley with a bullet in my head. He says the bullet was a millimeter away from killing me.

*Six years. It doesn’t feel like six years have passed.* I don’t remember getting shot in the head. I do remember that I am a professional killer, so perhaps it was only a matter of time before someone tried to kill me.

The doctor explains that it was probably a random street crime that got me shot. I don’t tell him about my profession. He says that recovery will be difficult but I might be able to leave the hospital within a few weeks.

I go through physical therapy. My life support and treatment were paid for by an old friend. He has since moved out west. He’s coming to see me in a few weeks but he’s busy with work right now. Apparently he works at a big tech company.

The day finally comes when I can leave the hospital in a wheelchair. I move back into my old house. It looks the same as it did when life was normal, at least normal for me. When I look in the mirror I look twenty years older than I remember. Maybe I should feel sentimental or sad or just emotional in some way, but I don't. I feel nothing.

My friend finally gets a chance to come visit. He acts like paying for my medical bills was no big deal, but I can't help but sense that he resents me. It's awkward between us. We used to both be criminals, living on the edge and defying authority. Now he's a suit and tie and I'm a crippled husk of a man.

One day I decide to look up my high school girlfriend. If anyone or anything can make me feel happy again, it's her. I call her mother and find out that she died of a heroin overdose in Mexico.

I think I really did die when I took that bullet to the head. My body survived... but I don't feel alive. I don't even feel human. I feel like an empty shell.

I'm tired of living this way. It's meaningless and dark and empty. Today I make a decision. I unbox one of my old pistols and some shells from the glory days. *One Last job.*

I load the pistol and cock it. I decide to sit on the couch. It's a comfortable spot, so why not? I'm ready. I put the barrel of the handgun in my mouth. The steel is a familiar cold. I rest my finger on the trigger. I do not hesitate as I tighten my finger around the trigger.

*Free. Free at Last.*

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I would really love some pizza right now. *Mmmm. Pizza.* With pepperoni, and some red onions, yeah, and maybe green bell peppers. I would put some grated parmesan cheese on top of that. Cheese is pretty weird. You take the boob juice of a big fat hairy grass-eating beast, then you let it sit and rot for a few months or years, then you just stick it in your face like it's nothing. The really weird thing is, I still like it. I know how they make it, and I know where it comes from, but I still eat the stuff and enjoy it. It's like...

Hey. I just noticed something.



