

The Egregoric Effect

Stanza I

The Boneyard

It's in human nature to tell stories. Adventure stories, fantasy stories, horror stories. They're enjoyable precisely because they're unreal, mostly irrelevant to who, what, and where we are. Even non-fiction is a little bubble of the past, a permanent and escapist experience.

But... what if tales weren't just tales? What if the very unreality that makes them so interesting to us is flipped on its head, and the stories we love and fear are brought to life?

An Egregore is a thing of belief, a concept or creature granted power by the very consideration of it. They used to just be the subjects of religious speculation, before they became terribly real. Something made real through belief is more than a little paradoxical. Did people believing in the Effect cause it to begin, or did it form as a new natural law on its own, and then lead to the creation of thousands of monsters? Any who actually knew are long-dead.

As far as we know, the first Egregore was the Pale Man. A particularly vivid horror novel topped all the charts about 10 years back, and soon bodies turned up, bodies that were killed in a very specific way that matched the antagonist's MO. The Pale Man twisted off the limbs of his victims and stuck them in separate trees, according to speculation. But speculation quickly became fact when an entire news crew was murdered on live TV.

It spread like a virus from there, countless creatures emerging from the shadows to wreak havoc upon those that'd brought them into existence. The creatives went first. Those who loved and surrounded themselves with stories of the horrid and macabre were ripped apart by their own creations. Authors, directors, goths, all of them disappeared in the night. Except for the ones that horribly didn't. I don't think they'll ever be able to sell the house that used to belong to John Carpenter. The floorboards still smell like death.

The key to surviving post-Effect is a kind of doublethink. You need to remember that the Egregoric Effect exists, and that it's out there, but any

conscious acknowledgement of that is a death sentence, as your belief in its power will intensify it.

Society still lives, but it's debatable whether this is a life worth living. Most people survive on a skull-shattering quantity of mind-altering drugs that allow them to be lucid without creating anything. New stories are never written, new lore never crafted. The most we can manage are non-fictional accounts, and even those are treacherous ground. Which brings us to this record, and its author. I am Alex Incantrin, and I'm one of the few people who fight back.

My people are an Anti-Eggregore task force, a gang of monster hunters. I write this now just outside the remnants of Bedford, sitting around a campfire with the other eight members of our group.

Father Smith mutters and rubs his cross, casting a prayer into the uncaring cosmos. His crucifix probably holds more power now than it ever did before the Effect, purely from his faith in it.

Donk checks the scope on his anti-material rifle, aiming down his sights to make sure the alignment is just right. Donk's an enigmatic sharpshooter with an unknown past, and prying has taught the rest of us nothing.

Hattie whittles away at a small piece of soap, her craftsmanship the only thing keeping her hands steady and her mind sane.

Eli can't stop shivering, despite having multiple layers of fleece on. Poor girl joined up with us after her brother and fiancé were both taken in one night nine months back.

Jane flicks a knife at a tree, and it sinks deep into the trunk. She yanks her hand backward, and the knife tied to the other end of the string around her wrist flies from the tree directly back into her hand.

Halfsie adjusts his prosthetics, making sure his artificial knee and elbow are well-tuned for the coming clash. The old soldier's lost everything, including most of himself, and very little phases him anymore.

Kant whistles a merry tune and spit-roasts an unidentifiable chunk of meat over the fire, his large furred hat obscuring his eyes in shadow. The burly cook is unerringly joyful and surprisingly competent, his cheer stemming from a place of acceptance rather than naïveté.

There's a rustle from the undergrowth, and every member of the group glances over wearily.

Dane, our fearless leader, emerges from the underbrush. She is covered in blood that is not hers as she stands and straightens, smoothing her old military uniform as though that'll make her presentable. Dane was a brave soldier in the old world, and she's an even braver soldier now. She's one of the strongest and most level-headed people I've ever met, even in her occasional fits of animalistic bloodlust.

"We ready, Alex?" She growls.

"Almost." I reply. "Let me get all my tchotchkes in order."

I pull a drawstring pouch shut and stash it in my shirt, finished polishing the iridescent white pebbles within. Over the last decade I've been collecting, scavenging, and stealing any and all items of interest, things that have evolved arcane significance from mundane insignificance. These all mattered to somebody once, which is the very reason they matter to me now. Interest, energy, connection, whatever. All I can say is that the trinkets that line my belt and fill my pockets do hold some power, because our little band believes they do.

Dane clears her throat, and we prepare to move out. Kant hands out whatever meat's left, and everyone takes a few bites. It's some sort of pork, I think. It's gamey, but expertly spiced.

I finish this up and close my notebook. There is no more time to write now. This will either be all from me, or it won't.

It turns out that I breathe another day. I still cannot decide if that is a blessing or a bane.

The Boneyard of Bedford is infamous for its uniqueness among the Egregores. While most manifestations center around a creature of folklore or contemporary horror, the legend of the Boneyard was never about some beast that lives within, but the Boneyard itself, and as such, the Boneyard itself had come to terrible life. It was an old graveyard for centuries, and the people of Bedford still used it until a few years ago, when the manifestations began. Skulls began surfacing from the mud of the graveyard, the corpses below rising to the surface like rotten meat in

a boiling stew. All the trees died, their roots choked out by the plague of skulls. Traffic thinned out as everyone who entered suffered unnatural unease and many met mysterious and terrible fates within the Boneyard.

The gloomy old woman that sat behind the desk in what remained of Bedford's city hall explained its history to us, gesticulating sluggishly as she spoke, only serving to spread her secondhand smoke around the room.

"So how much is this exorcism costing?" She puffed her cigarette.

"Two pounds of food, one tent, one gallon of lantern oil." Dane said.

"Steep." The crone hissed.

"If you want your graveyard back, I think it's a bargain."

The woman nodded. "Alright then. We'll pay you after the cleansing."

Dane nodded, and the old woman beckoned for a ragged boy standing off to the side. "Please direct this party to the Boneyard." She instructed.

The boy glared up at Dane, who glared right back. The child smirked as though the soldier had passed a test, then turned and beckoned for us to follow.

"Dane," Donk muttered as we left the building, "You know our situation. We need more provisions than that."

"That's our rate." Dane replied firmly. "We'll just have to do more Disbelievings."

We walked through Bedford's streets, zigzagging around the gaping craters in the asphalt. I'd been to a lot of ravaged towns over the last years, and Bedford was among the worst. I honestly have to admire their tenacity. Every settlement with a similar amount of damage I'd beheld was abandoned, mostly or wholly defunct. Bedford still hung on, emaciated people occasionally peering at us through windows that were more wood than glass.

The child moved quickly and coldly, not bothering to make sure we were following, eventually leading us to the fence that lined the Boneyard.

But I suppose calling it a 'fence' is deceptive. It was a massive wrought iron wall, at least 8 feet tall and 2 feet thick. It had existed for decades and was unrelated to the manifestations, which made it all the more impressive.

I leaned in to look through the bars of the fence, and it was a sight. The ground was *covered* in skulls, stuck partway into the dirt like macabre cobblestones. Some were bright white, some were aged yellow, and some had cracks or holes in the cranium. Empty eye sockets glared balefully at those who sought to intrude on their Boneyard.

Ahead, grey graves grew from the field of bones like obelisks, creating an unearthly garden of rock. Petrified trees were dotted throughout the Boneyard, each sickly specimen the color of ash. In every hollow portion or forked branch, a skull rested. They also crowned each limb, twigs sticking through eye sockets and mandible-less jaws.

I noted that there were far more skulls than graves. Could the Boneyard have created some of these itself, human remains spontaneously coming into existence as part of the Manifestation? Had some of the graves been destroyed in the manifesting tide of skulls? Or was there maybe a secret catacombs or mass grave beneath the ground?

“What the hell?” Halfsie muttered, squinting his good eye at the yard.

“Watch your mouth, brother.” Father Smith said. His words were harsh, but his tone was not.

Halfsie ignored him. “How are there so many skulls without any other bones?”

I noted that Halfsie was right. Despite the abundance of heads there were no other bones anywhere.

“In manifestations of the Effect,” Kant mused softly, “logic takes second fiddle to symbolism. Skulls are more... iconic, in a way, than the rest of the skeleton. They’re a symbol of death and the macabre, and unlike our other bones they’re unmistakably human, even to a layman.”

Kant didn’t speak much, but when he did it was always something philosophical. His comments are honestly pretty hit-or-miss, but we were all too uneasy to challenge him on this one.

We hopped over the fence a few at a time, and started a slow walk across the skulls. Every other step was met with a crack or crunch as we stepped on a particularly weak bone and broke through. We could all confirm that there were no brains inside.

We moved a little into the Boneyard, the thin child watching with sunken eyes from just outside the fence. We didn't have an actual goal in mind, and the field of skulls stretched out in all directions further than we could see.

"Any idea where we're actually going?" Donk grouched.

"Our fearless leader will find... something." Jane looked to Dane.

Dane suddenly stopped, and held up a hand for us to do the same. There was no argument or discussion. Dane was worth obeying. Everyone readied their weapons.

Eli was taken without warning, the skulls beneath her falling away. Father Smith lunged to grab her, but he was a second too late. She shrieked as she was sucked into the underground, scrabbling on the skulls and dropping her knife on the ground that sealed up above her.

We all tensed for action, but there was nothing to act against. No beast emerged from the fog, and no objective was made clear. Eli was simply gone, and the climactic tension slowly, frustratingly, faded away.

Kant rolled to the right as another skeletal sinkhole ripped open under him. Dane screamed for us to head for the trees, which made some sense. They were the only things in the whole Boneyard not made of skulls, and it may have been harder for the place to control them. Pure speculation, of course, but the alternative was a violent death.

We all took off, and we all made it to the trees despite a close call or two. I clambered up the branches two at a time until I was perched just above Jane and Father Smith, the others moving up the tree right next to us. A branch snapped under Kant's hand, but he swung his foot up and hooked it over the branch to safely clamber up.

Our tree shook as the skulls beneath us shifted and clacked, but didn't budge. Its roots were deep, despite its withered state. The Boneyard seemed frustrated.

The shaking stopped, then began again, the carpet of skulls writhing and coagulating about 20 feet from us.

We all froze, cursed, laughed, or prayed as a mound of skulls rose upward from the plain, forming a giant hunched pile, sockets glaring at us from a mound of cracked off-white. The Boneyard took form before us, skulls and skulls and a few other bones too. Shoulderblades served as

armor plating for its underbelly, and ribs rose from its back to form spines. Ribs also tipped the awful grasping claw jutting from its shoulder, composed of at least four interwoven arms. A second limb made of femurs sprouted from the other side and terminated in a scythe-shaped assembly of spines. From the center of the mass emerged its face, or nearest approximation. It was just another skull, but larger than the others. It was also wet with gore, glistening red gristle making the large cranium shine. As the skull rose from the forefront of the Boneyard's form, a rapid-fire clacking rain filled the air as teeth poured from every orifice in the thing's face-skull. Every hole in its head was filled with teeth, and they continued to clatter to the ground as the thing studied us.

It reached out an appendage towards us, at which point we snapped out of our collective stupor. With every new Egregore, there's always a "What the fuck is that?!" moment, when we're all paralyzed by each beastie's unique monstrosity. But it requires quick thinking to stay alive and stay on our feet, so we all quickly moved past that. All of us except Halfsie.

The amputee still stood stunned on one of the lower branches as the thing reached toward him.

It grabbed Halfsie with its rib-fingered claw and lifted him into the air, the man struggling and yelling. He unclasped his false arm and leg, letting the thing squeeze the false limbs as he slipped out of its grasp like a gecko. Halfsie fell several meters to the bone-covered ground, at which point he started using his good arm and leg to pull himself forward, back towards our tree.

Dane screamed at us to fire and we did, to little effect. Father Smith thrust his holy symbol towards the beast and yelled chants, while I searched for a similarly-powered object. In the other tree, Dane fired her handgun at the thing, nicking off fragments of bone, and Hattie hucked a seemingly endless supply of knives at the thing, but they only served to make it even spinier.

The hulk ignored the barrage and brought Halfsie's limbs up to its face, at which point it seemed to notice his deception and clench its hand shut, pulverising both prosthetics.

The thing roared and the ground shook. We all paused firing to hold our grasp on the tree.

A set of ribs shot up out of the ground, stabbing up between the skulls to skewer the prone Halsie's neck, stomach, and knee. He gurgled one last time before the ribs retracted, pulling his impaled form into the ground with them.

"You motherfucker." Donk muttered as he finally finished readying his rifle.

He took aim and fired, and a large chunk of the skulls and shoulderblades in the side of the thing suddenly just disappeared, blasted apart by the gun.

Unfortunately, this drew the Boneyard's ire, and it moved for him next.

It swung its scythe limb at the tree, breaking the branch Donk perched on. He fell to the ground but recovered quickly, reloading his rifle in time to blast another chunk out of the thing's side. He rolled out of the way of the sinkhole that opened beneath him.

Jane leapt from the upper branches of the tree with a battle cry, landing directly on the scythe limb with her axe. She shattered the equivalent of its elbow into shards, and its forearm and scythe fell limply to the ground. She rolled to land gracefully on the carpet of skulls, smirking and gesturing at the thing to make the next move.

Donk retrieved his rifle and scrambled back up the tree.

The severed scythe behind her struck like a snake. One second it was lying still on the ground, and the next it was sticking through Jane's abdomen. Jane stared down at the tip in surprise. She'd never considered that the creature could still have control of severed limbs.

The limb began to flail like a beached eel while still lodged within her, and the spikes on the spines mulched her viscerae.

Donk clambered back into the tree as the thing set its sights on our cook. Kant grinned as the claw came towards him, and easily countered the strike with his machete. But the thing wasn't trying to injure him, it was trying to grab him. It succeeded in wrapping its ribs around his waist, and yanked him off the tree before slamming him into the ground. The floor opened to pull him in.

I finally found something useful, a feather that faintly glowed when I hid it from the sun. I rubbed it between my hands and popped it in my mouth, before spitting it back out. With a slight whistling sound it came out like an arrow, streaking in a deadly golden line towards the monster. It slammed into its facsimile of a face, crumpling an eye socket and half of its face and causing another wave of clattering as more teeth fell to the ground.

It made a deep rattling sound and turned to me, but I was out of its reach for the moment and so it moved to the annoyance directly below me.

It pulled Hattie right off the tree, and seemed to regard her with a kind of malicious glee. It reared up, exposing its underbelly to us as the shoulderblades shifted. A cavity opened in the center of its carapace, a cavity that it carefully placed Hattie into as she kicked and screamed. Then the bones slid back towards their initial position, the motion pausing as the bones pressed in on Hattie. Eventually her flesh gave, and a horrible crunching sound punctuated Hattie's screaming as the thing's chest closed up. Blood ran in rivulets across every seam on its belly and dripped onto the bones below as Hattie was juiced.

It turned next towards Father Smith, reaching for him, but it stopped just short, seemingly blocked by an invisible barrier.

Smith raised his crucifix higher, which was probably the best course. Regardless of gods, his and so many others' belief in the power of the cross gave it enough power to protect him. The Boneyard swiped at him twice more, but each strike veered just offcourse. The thing made a frustrated rumble, but then stopped and seemed to reconsider. It whacked a direct hit at the spot where Smith's branch connected with the trunk of the tree, and it fell.

Smith landed on his stomach with a grunt, but seemed to be okay. Until he rolled over, and the bisected remains of his crucifix were revealed. He had landed right on it.

Smith muttered a prayer and a curse in the same breath, pulling out his Bible and frantically leafing through the pages to find something helpful.

"The name of the Lord is a strong tower!" He shouted up at the monster, *"and the righteous run to it and are safe!"*

The Boneyard somehow seemed angered at the passage, as much as a thing like this could feel any sort of anger. It moved right up to Father Smith, towering over him. It rumbled loudly as Hattie's blood and the seemingly endless supply of teeth rained down upon him.

Smith remained undaunted, glaring up at the hunched figure and continuing to shout.

"The Lord is my light and my salvation; Whom shall I fear?!" He spat up at the thing. A drop of blood fell right towards his face, but sizzled and cooked in the air just above him, evaporating so he remained un-soiled.

"The Lord is the strength of my life; Of whom shall-"

The creature swiped at Smith, and despite some resistance from the air it slammed its claw into him, knocking him prone.

Smith clasped his bible tight to his chest as he wheezed for breath, several large gashes on the front of his torso. The mound moved towards him, ready to deliver a finishing blow, when- **KRACK!!**

There was a deafening crack as Donk fired again, the round passing straight through the thing's skull and tearing it apart on its path.

The skull shattered and fragments and teeth flew everywhere. The thing teetered on the ground, and Donk let out a celebratory whoop.

But the hunched thing didn't fall.

The Boneyard turned to Donk. The skull was gone, but that didn't matter. It never did.

It reached for the tree as he shrank away. He scrambled to get up until he lost his grip, falling back down to the branch and dropping his rifle to the ground.

It grabbed him and pulled him off the tree, bringing him up to where its face used to be. The front of the mound split horizontally, as a hole like a massive mouth formed itself on the front of the creature.

Donk went limp, resigned to his fate, and glanced back at Dane with a gaze that contained multitudes.

Dane shouted something at him. Maybe it was words, maybe it just emotion. I don't quite remember. What I do remember was the tone of her voice, an agonized anguish making up most of her scream.

Donk's hand emerged from the top of the thing's clenched hand, holding a worn and dirty object. He brought the grenade to his teeth and

pulled the pin. As the creature pulled him in, he exploded, scattering viscera and bone fragments everywhere.

The thing's claw was blown clean off, but it doesn't seem to care.

Dane and I, the only ones still in the tree, shared a glance, and I pulled out a final item.

"When you pass through the waters, I will be with you!" Smith shouted from below us, his voice quiet but strong. He had sat up on the carpet of skulls and was shouting more prayers from his bible.

"And through the rivers, they shall not overflow you!"

The Boneyard glided towards Smith, ready to tear him apart.

I looked down at my talisman. A yellowed photograph of the times before, a happy family with a single small child standing against a meadow so nondescript that it could be located anywhere from here to Germany.

But I knew exactly where it was.

"When you walk through the fires, you will not be burned,"

With a deep breath, as the thing reached for me, I lit a match and burned my only remaining childhood photo, and the Boneyard burned with it.

"Nor shall... the flame... scorch you." Smith finished, wheezing.

As the mound burned and roared, we leapt off our respective trees and found a surprisingly still alive Kant. Buried to his waist in the skulls, he'd been wrestling with the Boneyard for a bit, and while it was preoccupied with being on fire, we were able to pull him out. The cook helped Dane carry Smith over their shoulders as I led us back towards the gate.

I don't know how it burned for so long, or how the fire spread to the rest of the bones. They shouldn't have been flammable, and yet they caught anyway, and were eventually dust. Maybe the fire of one's childhood desires burns brighter than wood, or some shit like that. All that matters now is that the four of us are still alive, and the Bedford Boneyard is nothing but a melted iron fence surrounding a scorched ashen plain.

"Well," Kant remarked, shielding his eyes with a hand as he peered at the column of smoke now several miles away. "When all those people chose to be buried, I don't think they expected to also get a cremation."

None of us laughed.