

„Live” ... a tentative heartbeat... „Breathe” ... a gentle movement of the chest... “Open your eyes” ... a blinding brightness.

I fell out of the vat to the sound of slushing water which drowned out my moan as I hit the ground. I lay motionless for what seemed like eternity before I pushed myself off the ground and promptly fell back down. In the glow of the sickly green light coming from the tank I realized that my right hand was robotic, as was my left leg. Panicking, I started touching my body with what I considered to be my human hand, searching for more metal that seemed to be implanted in my body. Part of my face was cold and sensationless as was half the area on my stomach.

After my emotions subsided, I lifted myself off the ground and steadied against the cylindrical vat out of which I fell out of. Why was I in it in the first place? I didn't know. I surveyed my area and was shocked to see that there were ominous scratch marks covering all of the floor and part of the tank. Something desperately tried to claw its way inside. To where I was... Why? I looked around, losing my balance in the process, but managing to stay upright. The room was dark and spacious, I couldn't make out the outlines of the ceiling or the walls, except the one behind the vat out of which I came out. It looked like a laboratory. An abandoned laboratory, I remarked. Dusty, corpse-colored aprons hung by the wall and most of the glass equipment darkened due to the passage of time. The whole place looked dead. Only then did I notice, with a certain amount of amusement, that I was only wearing underwear which only covered my womanhood.

I started dragging myself toward the aprons. There were also fewer claw marks in that direction. That cheered me up, if only a little. I passed several other vats on the way, but all of them were dry, empty and dead. Like everything here.

“Hopefully that includes whatever left those marks.” I whispered to myself. The sound of my own voice gave me courage. After about 50 paces, I found myself at the aprons. I picked up one of the dead lab coats and strung it over my shoulders, trying to cover myself. After a moment's hesitation, I decided to pick up a heavy wrench and take it with me. It seemed a measly defense against whatever was trying to get inside the vat, but its weight comforted me. I made my way towards the exit.

I passed many rooms on my way out, but all the doors were barred. Throughout all of this the only sounds were those of my feet making contact with the ground (one metal, one flesh) and my rasping breath. Some tragedy occurred here. I knew it. Something horrible, something indescribable. For a second, I thought I knew what it was. I had it in the back of my mind. It was like an unsettling dream out of which I woke up and immediately began forgetting. But then it was gone.

I stopped abruptly; I stood in front of a heavy metal door. No, not a door, I realized. An impenetrable gate made of a strange, oily, black metal with no visible hinges. It was the only thing in the entire lab that seemed untouched by time. As I contemplated this barrier, I realized that there was an eerie atmosphere in the air. As if something was holding its breath, afraid that an exhale would send it prematurely to its grave. I swallowed, trying to calm myself, but the sensation only intensified.

A shiver seemed to go through the massive portal which surrounded the gate and strange, deathly white symbols appeared on the door's face. I couldn't make sense of them, I've never seen anything like them before. I didn't know how to interact with any of it. So, how long was I in that tank?

Something small and black shot out of the door, skid across the floor and stopped at my feet. It was a small square with little golden etchings on one side. It almost looked like a data chip. I carefully put the wrench on the ground and picked up the chip with my "own" hand. I held it closely to my eyes and tried to gauge its purpose. After an unproductive while I sighed, frustrated and scratched myself behind the ear still holding the chip, confused and mildly irritated.

Without warning, the chip yanked itself from my fingers and shot straight into my head, lodging itself behind my ear, on the metallic part of my head. I scrambled to loosen it, but nothing happened. I reached for the wrench with the intention of dislodging the intruder. As I looked around, my gaze fell upon the oily gates and suddenly the writing on it was understandable.

You're in a room with a stranger. There's a revolver with 3 empty and 3 filled chambers in your hand. You don't know which chambers are filled. Whose head do you fire at first: yours or the stranger's?

Below that, two panels displayed two words each "Stranger's head" and "My head". A disturbing sense of déjà vu filled me. I knew that I must choose or perish in this lab like everything else. The test seemed ludicrous, but it must serve some sort of purpose... right? Am I a good and naive person and risk my life first? Or am I evil and rational? And does it even matter? Hesitantly, I touched "Stranger's head" panel.

The door seemed to undulate, then bend inward, as if the ocean itself was trying to push past it, and then dissolved into nothingness. Sunlight rushed into the dark lab, like a long-lost lover looking to reunite with her partner. I was blinded, but after a while my eyes adjusted. The artificial one first. I pushed my hair out of my eyes and made my way outside.

Before I could make a single step, however, I spotted a large, ginger old cat. It must have been very handsome years ago, but now it only retained some vestiges of its long-lost beauty, but time clearly took its toll on the creature.

"Hello," I was surprised at how hoarse and robotic my voice was. Was it always like that or did it sound differently back in the lab? "What's your name?" I asked, hoping that my intonation would draw it nearer for me to pet it. But the beast surprised me. It was standing and then suddenly sitting on its hind legs studying me, without making any sort of motion. Then it did something even stranger.

"Tell me yours and I'll tell you mine." she said in a world-weary and clearly feminine voice.

"I-I don't know," I stammered, too shocked to form coherent sentences. The feline turned its head, eyeing me suspiciously. Unable to withstand the silence, I continued "my earliest memory is a

voice telling me to live”. The cat smiled satisfied, as if it had caught a mouse, smacked its lips and said in a much warmer voice

“Liv. That’s a good name, it suits you. I mean obviously; you’re alive. I’m Sarissestherensis, but you can call me Sari for short. Remember it. Now come, keep up, you don’t want to be caught in the open during the night”. And with that, she was off. I never saw her actually move, instead at one moment she was suddenly standing upright, and at the very next she was several yards away from me. I blinked and could only see her tail behind a rock further up the road. Wherever she stepped the stones seemed to crumble and small vines blossomed out of the earth. I followed, without a glance back.

It turned out we were on a hill. I made my way down, following the feline whenever I could see her. She always seemed to be frozen in time and place, twitching at times and appearing several steps ahead. Finally, she stopped and sat down in front of a moss-covered boulder resting against a small hill. Sari looked back at me with a mischievous grin and rest her left paw against the large rock.

The massive stone turned yellowish, the moss falling of it as if dead, then grey, and finally ash. The cat skipped over it and into the dark bowels of the hill without a word. I prodded the ash with my wrench, but nothing happened. “Hurry up, now, we don’t have a lot of time” came a voice from the dark. Nervously, I stepped over the gravel and walked into the darkness, leaving the red sun behind.

Sari was sitting on her hind legs by the entrance and as soon as I was inside, she touched the dust with her right paw, and it reformed into the same mossy boulder. She meowed loudly and the cave filled out with a strange blue light, but I couldn’t see where it originated from.

I started forward, but suddenly the cat was in front of me, a hiss barely detectable in her voice “no further. I saved you from the cold of the night, now you’ll have to do something for me. For now, sleep. Tomorrow, you help me out with a problem. Tonight, stay here”. And with one swish of the tail, she was gone. Upset and confused, I looked at the heavy boulder beside me. I sighed and lay down, waiting for sleep to come. Somewhere in the distance, a great bell rang out.

“Awaken”. I was standing in a field of white flowers, gently swaying in the wind. They disappeared in the mist in every direction. I slowly turned around and as I made a full circle, I saw someone standing directly in front of me. It was me, but not me. We had the same features, body shapes and eye color, but her hair was longer, both her hands were metallic, and her feet ended in two long and sharp talons.

“Claws...” I whispered, the realization of what I saw by my tank in the lab dawning on me. She followed my gaze, looked back up at me and smiled at me coldly. The smile didn’t reach her eyes

“I’m Ava,” she said, “remember my name, for it separates me from a mindless beast.” She brought one of her hands to her chest as if praying. Suddenly, she straightened herself and a bolt of light came flying straight at my head.

Caught unprepared, I didn't manage to dodge and felt a terrible pain in my shoulder, but before I could collect myself, she was in front of me, a long knife in her hand. "Don't make my mistakes," she whispered imploringly, in a tone starkly different from her behavior, and plunged the blade between my ribs.

I woke up startled. Sari was over me, her face an impassive mask. Or at least as impassive as a cat's face could be.

"Time to get up." I scrambled off the ground, looking around wildly. "As I mentioned yesterday, I need you to do something for me. If you don't, you won't be a welcome guest here and you can brave the night outside of my home. You need the right tools for the job, though, otherwise it'd be like sending a lamb to slaughter... so I'll give you something to help you out. Something that will let you undo your mistakes". She coughed up something. At first, I thought it was a hairball, but then I noticed familiar golden markings. Another data chip.

I wasn't looking forward to what the cat told me to do. A snap freeze was coming, and the island inhabitants had to join forces to survive against nature or be destroyed by it. The first step was securing tools to help with the rest of my job. Apparently, there was a cache of food nearby and Sari wanted me to secure it. The way she said it made me feel like there was something unpleasant that I didn't know about. I left Sari's cave and made my way east.

As I followed the winding path, I couldn't help but notice the oddities in the environment. Many trees were partially wilted and dead, while their other halves were blooming. The ground beneath my feet seemed to be healthy at times and crumbling at others. There were pebbles floating in the air and the air itself seemed to randomly discharge small amounts of electricity at times. All this unsettled me, and I almost failed to notice a reptile charging towards me.

It looked vaguely like a cross between a crocodile and a wolf, but its jaws were made of metal. It was moving very quickly and as it leapt at me, its claws gleaming in the morning sun, I failed to move fast enough, and it sunk its teeth into my hand. I screamed in pain, but there must have been poison quickly spreading through my veins as I felt first hot, then cold travelling up from the bite to my heart. Suddenly, I heard a strange buzzing originating behind my ear. Everything froze and then the sensation in my hand reversed itself. The reptile let go of my hand and ran backwards away from me, as if a tape were rewound. I looked down at my hands and saw teeth marks, but the poison left my body the same way it was introduced to my system.

The noise disappeared and the creature was running at me again. This time, I took aim and swung my wrench at it. However, before it connected, the creature vanished and appeared a few steps in front of me, still running towards me. I managed to swing the other way just fast enough to catch it half a yard in front of me. The blow was accompanied by a sickening crunch.

It looked smaller dead, somehow more pitiful. Could it be that it attacked out of fear? I felt guilty about killing it and buried the poor creature on the side of the road. Perhaps it will become nutrients for one of those strange trees and live a luckier life in that form.

I continued west with the sun high above me. The scent of sea was becoming more pronounced with every step. An hour later I made it to the landmark that Sari described: a humongous skeleton of a long-forgotten creature. It was old, mossy and extended over the water onto a small island about 300 yards away. I started walking over the spinal disks and soon the ribcage shielded me from the sun. The sound of waves rushing and old bones scraping against each other was chilling, but there was something even more unsettling about this place. It felt as if a half-sung song was left hanging in the air, desperately wishing to be completed. At times I could almost hear the hum and rhythm of it. At other times it felt as if I were going crazy.

I was so lost in thought trying to hear the music that before I knew it, I made it to the other side of the bridge. There was only a single building there, with a low ceiling and familiar black, oily doors.

They melted under my touch, as if inviting me to venture into the bowels of this facility. Inside, I was greeted with a semicircular room with a large glass wall separating me from the ocean's underwater territory. I saw the supplies Sari mentioned in the corner, more than I could carry in 10 trips back. As I made my way to them, I heard a deep, calm voice coming from the ocean that I felt in my bones.

“What are you doing there, little one?” I turned sharply and saw a ginormous orca whale with large tentacles sprouting out of its body and slithering into the room, guarding the supplies protectively.

It was well over 20 feet long, black and white, its strange and jet black tentacles sprouted from its body and bound it to the glass wall, withstanding the pull of the water current which threatened to drag it away.

“Well...?” it inquired.

“I'm looking for supplies for Sarissestherensis” I replied, “I need them for her to let me live in her shelter.”

“Is that so? And you're prepared to kill and maim as you've done so far just to get what you want? You're acting like the men of old. The prophets professed themselves to be intelligent, smart and wise, but they were the greatest fools of all. They too didn't care about the consequences of their actions as long as they got what they wanted.” The orca paused and continued speaking, its voice reverberating in my head. “The cat hates me. She's wanted me dead for years. Kill her for me and I'll share my resources with you and allow you to stay here over winter. What say you?”

I thought for a moment, trying to organize my thoughts. Both of these creatures clearly loathed each other, and I couldn't see a way in which they would be able to work together. There was too much history between them, too much malice. The cat seemed to be a know-it-all and a bit too pushy, but the orca simply seemed... malevolent. I looked her straight in the eyes, ignoring the tentacles “No. I won't kill the cat.”

“Then die, as all people before you!” She roared, her voice filled with rage. I quickly rolled to the side as one of her tentacles smashed into the ground where I was standing just a few moments earlier. I parried the next one with my weapon, putting all my strength into the block.

I felt my strength waning and my vision blurring. My back bent almost on its own, as if some great weight was pressing down on my shoulders. Something was wrong. I didn't completely dodge the next attack and felt the tentacle hit my right arm, the wrench falling out of my numb hand. The next attack sent me flying across the room. I hit the glass wall, directly in front of the orca, which was no longer calmly looking at me, but thrashing around. I saw the next tentacle rise and fall towards me in slow motion, but before it hit me, I felt that strange and wonderful feeling again. Time started flowing backwards, the tentacles retracing their path in reverse, but I was unaffected. I gathered myself and picked up the wrench which was within grasping distance.

Then everything returned to normal, a tentacle flew in my direction, but I ducked underneath it, knowing its trajectory in advance. It smashed into the glass wall and seemed to momentarily stun the great water beast. I took that time to survey my surroundings and take a closer look at my adversary.

The orca kept attacking me with only two tentacles. She used another one to keep guarding the resources and another three to anchor herself to the room and withstand the currents which threatened to drag her away. Those tentacles, however, seemed feebler and more delicate than the ones she used to try to squash me.

I jumped above a blow that was intended to knock me off my feet and started running towards one of the anchors that the orca used. I hacked at it every chance I got, and then did the same to the others. Eventually they yielded and the orca was swept away by the rough currents, cursing at me but soon both she and her voice were swallowed up by the ocean. I bent over gasping, trying to grab my breath and steady my heartbeat.

My attention was drawn by a strange shimmering to the side, which expanded and grew until Sari emerged from it and gave me a long, calculating stare.

"So, it is done then," she purred. It wasn't a question. "Come back to my shelter when you're done here and don't worry about those crates, I'll take them back". She turned to leave, but then knocked something off of one of the crates and it slid across the floor toward me. "For your troubles." She was gone before I had time to lift my gaze from another chip on the ground. Even without touching it I knew what it was and what it would allow me to do. Slow others, just like what the orca did to me. What mechanism did it work by? And how? It felt to me as if the earth pulled me down harder than ever, but surely, I wouldn't be able to control others' gravity? Right?

I turned to leave and made my way back to the cat's home. Nothing strange happened on my way back. I was surprised to see the entrance unblocked, but my shock paled in comparison to what I saw inside. Sari was helping a few young kittens walk towards the crate. Their eyes were sealed shut, and they resembled their mother a lot. Sari looked up at me, and then back down at her young. "You deserve to know. After all we're in this together now. Let me tell you about what must be done if we're to survive the upcoming winter. Time is short and we need all the help the denizens of this island can provide. Can, but are unwilling to..."

I left Sari's abode speechless. We had very little time before a snap freeze of untold power would decimate this island, unless... unless we were to unite and work together. It seemed like a tall

order, especially given the fact that from all I've seen, the island's inhabitants seemed to loathe each other. Sari assured me that compared to their relationships, hers and the orca's was actually quite amicable. I shivered as I picked up the pace. Beforehand, she had sketched out a map for me where several of the island's residents could be located. I was to either work with them or against them to secure the resources necessary for us to survive winter. I picked up the pace, heading towards the center of the island. I encountered some animals on my way there, but I avoided them, not wanting to kill the poor creatures.

As the morning sun started to warm the crisp air and dry dew off the blades of grass, I spotted a large portal ahead of me. I approached it. It must have been a magnificent work of art and architecture once, over 30 feet tall. One of its sides was supported by a slim female with fox's ears and a broken off tail, the other by a hulking amalgamation of muscles and weapons, all chiseled in the familiar black stone, supporting a familiar black gate between them. I could go around, but somehow felt compelled to deal with this puzzle. All seemed to darken and there was only me and the gate. I studied the engraved, ancient words for some time, and after a while deduced their meaning. It was a simple riddle.

I passed through the gate. The familiar rocky and hilly environment disappeared, and I found myself high above the ground in something resembling a combination of a nest and a workshop. "And who are you?" I spun and faced a strange creature. It had a sharp, bird-like head, nested on top of a large and slim humanoid body. Two of its hands were robotic claws, the upper two looked organic. It was blind. I could see the leukoma (a thin layer or an almost transparent blue veil) on its eyes. "Who sent you here? Who sent you to kill the great Montad?" he inquired, not looking directly at me (seemingly staring right through me). Its movements were quick and erratic, he seemed not fully in control of his behaviors.

As I began to formulate my answer, he stopped me "It doesn't really matter. You have a human scent, a human air about you. The aura of someone so power-hungry is unmistakable, yet so delectable. So be it. Go to my abandoned workshop. My farce of a brother lives there. Slay him and you shall be able to generate energy infinitely. That's why you're here, that's what you want. I know. You can use the energy for whatever you like. I care not. Go now, before I change my mind. Here's the access card that will get you through the first door. After that you're on your own." He turned away and started working on some contraption. A moment later he lifted up one of his robotic arms and a small drone flew up and started circling its head. As I turned, I noticed something black around its already dark beak. Blood. It had consumed the flesh of something it's eaten and wanted me gone so that it could get back to feasting. It made me sick.

I turned around and left. There was nothing left to do. I ventured toward the point he indicated on the map. As I approached it, I noticed a gradual change in scenery. The delicate greens of the grass and lilac heathers started being replaced by metallic and rusted pipes and metal sheets sticking out of the ground. I soon found myself in front of a large, intimidating and rusty gate. I took the card that the creature gave me out of my pocket and realized that it's just a container for another chip. I inserted it behind my ear. Now I had 3 chips and all the slots were occupied. If I wanted to use a different one, I'd have to remove one of the old ones. I wondered whether I'd always need them or whether I could learn to control my powers.

I looked up and was astonished to see that the gate was no longer immobile. Various gears materialized on its surface and started to turn. With a loud moan and screech the gate slowly opened to reveal a dark interior to the large building. I looked up and realized that the entire building was built inside a stony mountain with bits and pieces of the metallic architecture sticking out. I removed the chip. The door shimmered and a moment later I was looking at an old gate again. I popped the chip back in. The entrance was open but no less foreboding than a moment ago. With a deep sigh I walked inside and heard the gate close behind me with a loud thud.

A few lightbulbs turned on above me, leading the way deeper inside. The place looked less like a factory and more like an abandoned workshop. I slowly started making my way down the hallway when something zoomed at me. I rolled beneath it, barely dodging it, but before I could get a good look at it, it vanished. I held my wrench up and listened. This time I was prepared for the small change in wind pressure as my opponent targeted my head, but I still didn't manage to hit it as it sped by me. I was ready, however, and I focused on using my chip. Time reversed itself for the world and I saw in slow motion how a robotized jellyfish floating in air sailed back gracefully through the space that my head occupied just a few moments earlier. I used my other chip to increase its gravity and when it flew towards me again, I had all the time in the world to take aim and knock it out of the air with a well-timed blow of my wrench.

It plummeted towards the earth and shuddered. I ran toward it and stomped it down, feeling a satisfying and slightly disgusting squish beneath my shoe. I continued further into the bowels of the workshop more warily, watching my surroundings carefully. I approached a rope bridge and intended to cross it quickly because it looked flimsy and I didn't want to fight on top of it, but I simply had to stop and admire what was beneath me.

Tens of machines were blinking, churning, spinning and wheezing, each one after a surge of power was supplied to it. It took me a while to realize that they were all meant to generate power. But none of them were. They were broken machines. Dysfunctional perpetual mobiles.

I noticed some quick-flashing, blue lines zooming beneath my feet. At first surprised, I quickly realized that it was just electricity traveling deeper within the mountain. Of course everything seemed long dead when I took the chip out, so I quickly put it back in place. My attention was drawn to the side and after some careful examination I managed to extract a different neurochip from a beaten-up robotic corpse. It had a simple drawing of a pale-yellow circle. After inserting it I was able to conjure up a small light source from my robotic hand. It improved my mood and I set off deeper into the cave.

I ventured deeper and after narrowly avoiding a few jelly-fish like floating robots still patrolling the area and crossing an even flimsier bridge, I finally arrived at the very end of the building. Many wires which lit up with blue lights led up to a machine. I made my way towards it, but something massive and hulking descended from the ceiling and straightened up in front of me. He looked just the avian creature I spoke to recently, but his voice wasn't filled with malice or hatred. It was sorrowful and broken and brought a tear to my eye.

“What do you want, little person?”

“To restart this device...” I replied, the words getting caught in my throat.

“Why? People pursued power generation and in this room they succeeded. That was the birth of electromagnetic religion, the vilest way of thinking in the world. And you seek to restart this cycle that was barely contained before? To what end?”

“... So that we have power for the winter to come. So that we can survive it.”

“Humans are long gone. And we’re no better.” He shook his head, the cloak swirling slightly with the motion. “It’ll be better for all conscious life to follow suite. I cannot stand by and watch you condemn life to another cycle of violence and hatred”.

He lunged at me quicker than I was able to move a muscle, but not quicker than thought. I turned back time and as he repeated his path, I was ready. When he neared me though, he surprised me by pulling back his cape and almost blinding me with a strong light emanating from his chest. I only took in his skeletal structure and electricity running through his body before everything was enveloped in darkness. I heard him scuttling around me as he prepared to attack. Luckily, I didn’t have time to panic and as he lunged at me again, I dropped to the floor by increasing my own gravity. His talons still caught my shoulder, but luckily it was the metallic part of my body, so they caused me no harm.

I jumped up but before my eyes adjusted, I felt a searing pain at the base of my neck. I turned around just in time to see him charge up something in his robotic hand and fire another lightning bolt at me before jumping to the side and out of my sight. It hit me in the chest, lifting me of my feet and sending me spinning to the ground.

“All life must end, especially that of my brother. He enjoys torturing his pets before eating them and turning them into his little metallic servants. And you’re fighting for him? A bystander is guilty of a victim’s fate. Even worse, you could stop him, and instead you’re set on killing me? How dare you?” he spat. For some reason, however, the creature didn’t attempt to finish me off, but charged up another attack. I understood immediately and smiled grimly. He was too fragile to risk me getting a hit in. That’s why he relied on speed and keeping his distance. That meant, that to defeat him, all I had to do was decrease the distance between us and strike once, but true.

He fired another bolt, but I intercepted it with my robotic hand before it made contact with me. It could have been more painful. I sprinted at him, but he merely shuffled out of the way, landing another hit to my temple. I was getting dizzy and unable to call upon my time powers. Then, I focused on him and increased his gravitational pull. He dropped to his knees and before he had time to react, I was upon him, striking him down with my wrench, which made a sickening sound as it made contact with his head. He fell to the floor senseless. I turned around, but as the adrenaline began to seep out of me, my vision darkened and blurred, and I fell to the floor. I didn’t feel hitting the ground.

I woke up a few hours later. The entity laid motionless were I slew it. I walked up to him and examined his body. It was fragile and comprised almost exclusively of thin metal bonelike needles.

I removed one of the chips from his head. It had a drawing of a lightning bolt on it. I exchanged my gravity power for this one and turned my attention to the machine.

After a few hours of fiddling with it I had it put together again. Clearly it was dismantled, but the entity must have been afraid to actually destroy it. I screwed the last few screws on with my wrench and hung it from my belt. Was I an engineer once? Is that how I knew how to fix this? Or was the reason completely different?

I focused my mind and energy in my robotic hand and shot a lightning bolt at the device. It started whirling and churning. After a while a soft blue glow enveloped me and the entire building. The island had power again. I turned to leave but looked back at the motionless creature on my way out. Did I really do the right thing here? Could I have resolved this better? I shuddered and a single tear rolled down my cheek. I left the building in a hurry. Nothing interrupted me as I made my way outside.

As I left, I realized it was almost night. I equipped the light and time chips. The entire island looked different. I previously didn't notice small globes hanging from trees, but now they were lit up and filled the late afternoon with a soft bluish glow. My gaze followed the blue veins that led from the fruits to the tree trunk, across the ground and behind me to the workshop I just left. As I looked up, I noticed something new written on the front door: "Mawxell's workshop. The birthplace of true understanding". It was accompanied by a neon-blue silhouette of a man.

Montad appeared before me, seemingly melting out of a tree's shadow. "It is done then," he simply said and started walking towards the workshop. I placed my hand on his chest, forbidding him from going inside.

"Who are you and why do you want to go inside? Why did you want your brother dead? Answer me!" He eyed me for a split second then shrugged almost imperceptibly and replied in a monotone, deadpan voice.

"We're just remnants of who we used to be. He was Prophet Mawxell's brightest student. I accidentally injured his master in one of my experiments and my brother didn't take it too well. He stewed in his anger for a long time and then decided that he wanted to kill all life to preserve the purity of science. He believed in the superiority of electromagnetism over all other religions and life itself. He had to be put down. Now excuse me, I have more experiments to run." He shrugged my hand off and walked towards the workshop again, before turning around one final time. "If you want true answers, look for the Chronicler at the top of the clocktower. He'll tell you more. After all, it's his job, as a historian" he spluttered the last word, as if it saying it had left a foul taste in his mouth, and let the workshop swallow him up.

I looked around me and saw a tower in the distance lit up by the bluish light. I started towards it. As I neared the clocktower, I realized three things. First, it was in the very center of the island. Second, it looked somehow ancient and futuristic at the same time with certain bricks crumbling to dust and others looking freshly laid. And finally, someone was on the very top behind the clock face. As I approached the tower, I heard strange ticking and weeping coming from behind it and saw a great, hulking figure slumped against its wall. He was humongous and his face was cloaked

in shadow that seemed envelop his features, spinning and swirling like seaweed caught by a strong current.

He didn't notice me until I laid my hand on his shoulder, my hand becoming obscured from view by the strange darkness that surrounded him. "Help me," he implored. "Sari sent me and my wife to help you, but she... she's dead and my power was taken from me. They'll come for me as well when they're done with her. Oh, I hope it'll be soon I can't bear it."

"What happened; who are you?" I asked, shocked at his appearance and behavior. I haven't met anyone or anything that seemed sorrowful on this island. Yes, all the inhabitants seemed to be experiencing deep emotions, but this was something new.

"I'm nothing now, not anymore. We keep killing each other and though I may be breathing, I am already dead. I was... I used to be Einstone's nephew. In another life... He was the greatest of the prophets in strength, but not in followers. It doesn't matter anymore. I implore you, take this and help make this world a better place. Avenge me and my wife." With that, a slither of darkness seemed to disconnect itself from him and enveloped my hand, quickly withdrawing. I was left with a chip in my palm. The hulking figure pointed at the forest and I set off, curiosity getting the better of me.

I left the clocktower behind me for now. With each step the all-enveloping ticking sound grew fainter and less prevalent. Only then did I realize that I could breathe freely again and began to feel younger and more jubilant. The forest was dark and murky, full of deep greens that almost turned into blues at times. I slowly made my way inside despite a sense of foreboding I felt from something deep within. I hoped that the neurochip I got from the knight would help me out. The path was lit by blue veins. After a while I slowly began to notice a growing silence around me.

When it became deafening and all the crickets seemed to have disappeared, a small bipedal bear appeared in front of me. It was wielding something that looked like a gun. He pointed at me and shot. I activated the power from the knight and sped up my time, being able to dodge the plasma blast. Before he had time to fire another shot, I got close to him and knocked him out with my wrench. I ventured deeper, defeating more gun-wielding monsters. I tried to initiate a conversation with them, but they were either incapable of understanding speech or simply wanted me dead. Soon I started encountering strange mechanized slug like creatures that glided across the ground towards me, trying to devour me. By now, however, I was quite adept at combat and they didn't prove too much of a challenge.

I arrived at the center of the forest with the moon hanging high above me. I was greeted by a small village of around 15 creatures like the ones with guns I had dealt with earlier. These, however, did not seem hostile. Their chief offered me a trade using primitive sign language: the life of the knight for a seed, a miracle of science and their greatest treasure. If nurtured properly, it could be an inexhaustible source of food. That seemed like a fair trade, especially provided that the knight just wanted them dead and didn't offer anything in return. As I was about to agree to it, my nostrils were assaulted by a foul smell. Ignoring the creatures, I ventured deeper into the village and saw the corpse of another great knight, this one clearly feminine.

The creatures were feasting on it, all pretense of civility forgotten. Now everything made sense, the knight wanted revenge and protection for the rest of the island and those carnivores simply wanted another meal, given that they were unable or unwilling to eat anything other than flesh. I grit my teeth and did what had to be done. I exterminated the whole village, buried the knight and pocketed the seed before making my way back to the clocktower. Even though I knew that I prevented evil and misfortune, the deed left me feeling hollow and sickened.

When I returned to the clocktower, the weeping knight was no longer there. Instead, he left a message carved in the side of a tower informing me that he's heading to the cat's bunker. I was glad that I didn't have to deal with him anymore and hoped that Sari would be able to offer him some comforting words and a bit of respite.

I stepped inside the clocktower and the sound of ticking intensified. I was surrounded by new and old clocks, some of them stationary and imposing, others large, and one even melting on a table. I took the spiral staircase up, careful not to touch anything. I spotted an old, out of place marionette barring my way. It was made of molding and rotting mahogany and I prodded it gently with my wrench. It rattled and slowly extended the remnants of its hand which caught my ankle. I yelped (the grip was painfully strong) and hit the marionette on its head. It let go of me but started moving more quickly. It was also no longer moldy or rotting. I realized that it was getting younger each time I damaged it. I couldn't reverse time in this building and fighting this thing head one was a death wish. It was already as fast as me and each one of its blows left the walls and stairs crumbling or blooming. "Weird antientropic anomaly," I mused.

I summoned my will and blinded the creature with the neurochip I still had installed. It froze, unadjusted to the light. I used that moment to tap a weaker part of the wall lightly and it lunged at it blindly with all its force. It impaled itself into the wall but before it could recover, I was already moving. I spun, gaining momentum and hit the wall below where the creature was stuck with all my might. The stone gave way and the puppet plummeted towards the ground outside the tower. It was illuminated by early morning sun and I saw that it started aging again, this time turning to dust. I smiled wryly and made my way up the tower.

Before I could enter, I spotted my previous iteration sitting cross-legged in an antechamber in front of the entrance to top room of the tower. She raised her head when she heard me approaching and gave me a sad smile. "You're almost done. Remember, your choices matter. I'll see you when you get back to Sarissestherensis's home. Don't keep me waiting for too long." I couldn't feel any hostility from her as she rose and, uncharacteristically for her, simply passed me and started descending the stairs. No deceptions or tricks, just a slow climb down the stairs. I waited motionless until I could no longer hear her footsteps and then ascended the last few steps and entered the final room.

I entered a large, circular room. Light fell in through the semi-transparent clock tower, casting a warm glow onto a large mechanical butterfly in the middle of the room. It had several human masks depicting the same woman's face around its head, each expressing a different emotion. It sat on top of a device. It turned to me as I entered and spoke in a calm voice, a mask with a neutral expression spinning to the front of its head and facing me. "I knew you would come; I awaited your arrival with anticipation. This is the birthplace of the entropic or time religion. This device

beneath me will create a safe area around the island preventing radiation from seeping in. However, it is unfixable.” I eyed him suspiciously and it flapped its large wings once and the mask changed to one with a polite, benevolent smile. “There is a workaround though. Time must be reversed sufficiently enough inside this room to restore it to its former glory. The process, however, is... unpleasant. For me, not for you. You see, you must kill me.”

I took up a defensive pose but didn't attack the butterfly. After a few tense seconds, the entity's mask changed to a sorrowful one and it spoke again. “Do not fret. Our religion is the wisest and we accept what must be done for others and we do not flee from the unavoidable. You will not find an enemy in me. I ask that you kill me for the good of the island, but you make it painless. Merely strike me here,” it said, exposing its thorax. “Do it now, before my courage abandons me.” I approached it warily and laid my hand on top of the sad mask.

“Is there no other way?” I asked foolishly, already knowing how it would reply.

“...no.”

“I'll do it on three, then,” I whispered. “One... two...” I struck hard “... three”.

Its body shimmered and started aging rapidly. Soon its entire body was naught but dust holding the same form.

I removed my hand from its body, and it started falling and spreading across the room, as if spread by a strong wind. It glittered in the warm sun and any part of the room it touched became colorful. Only then did I notice that the machine started puffing quietly. I turned and left the room without another sound. My vision blurred slightly, I sighed and steeled myself. I was almost at the end.

I exited the tower and took a lungful of air. I was surprised to feel the stinging in my chest and mist leaving my nose. Large flakes of snow were falling from the sky and I still had one location on the island to visit.

I made my way to the shoreline temperature facility on the other side of the island. The road was difficult and at one point I stopped to admire a small stream and a figure fishing in it. Or, at least, that's what it looked like. The figure was small, bulky and something about its appearance seemed... ‘liquidy’. Its features were hidden by a large hat that concealed it from view, but whenever I got a glimpse of its skin, it seemed to be bubbling and melting. I heard faint whistling coming from under the hat.

The strange entity would string a worm to its hook line and after submerging it in the water it'd pull out a fish. After examining it, it'd either eat it, still struggling on the line or, if it was too small, it'd throw it back in the water, still on the line, and pull it out a few seconds later when it became bigger. I approached it but when I came too close, I felt being pulled to the ground, my gravity increasing. I looked up but only saw shapeless slime speeding under the surface of the water towards the shore. I followed the river. I had a feeling that sooner or later we'd meet.

I soon arrived at the meteorological society, the snow still falling from the skies. I looked beyond it on the sea which was beginning to freeze, still at a distance, but I had very limited time. Was the orca somewhere there, already caught in the encroaching ice? The snow seemed denser than before... perhaps it was just my imagination. The places where metal was fused into my body were beginning prickle me. I examined my body. The metal no longer felt foreign to me, it was an integral part of me. In fact, it was beginning to be difficult to separate it from my human parts; it seemed to be integrating with me. Problem for another day. I shrugged and entered the facility.

There were also blue electricity lines streaking across the floor and walls here. I went deeper inside. I went through several halls, each leading deeper and deeper underground. After a while I had to be beneath the raging ocean. Each room I passed through was exactly the same with an artificial meadow, but in each room the weather and season were different. In the first one, delicate flowers were blooming under an artificial sun, in the next they were wilting, and the ceiling resembled grey sky. The other two rooms showed two different seasons as well.

I finally arrived before the last door and after overcoming a simple word puzzle, I found myself in a large, circular room that seemed to be a very detailed representation of the island and surrounding waters. I looked towards the edges of the room, but sea extended in each direction except for west, where a landmass was visible. Another island? Or maybe a continent?

On it stood the goop that I saw earlier. It was stationed before a wall completely covered with electric equipment. Its form was different, but the whistling sound was unmistakable. It looked around and quickly melted into the wall. Then, the wall spoke. "Walk away. I will not restart this device for you or anyone else. The cost is too high."

"Why?" I retorted, "If we do it, all the snow will avoid this island, we'll pull warm air towards us and ice will break before it nears our shores. Increasing the gravitational pull in those places is vital to our survival. Do you not want to live?!" I was irate that everywhere I went, those entities, those... people were saying no, that it couldn't be done, that they wouldn't let me. Or that they would allow me to do what I came there to do, but at a terrible price to my conscience. For once, I wanted a simple solution.

The wall inhaled deeply and spoke with such sorrow that I was pulled from my thoughts into the present "No one on this island is human. Not even you. I'm the closest to a human, I was once Wenton. Yes, this machine is integral to saving this island. Its activation was enabled by your tinkering in the workshop. I saw that you've done everything else you should have as well otherwise this facility would have remained closed to you. I salute you. But do you know why I have such a form and not a different one? The stress of operating this machine left me eroded on a molecular level. Only by maintaining a constant gravity field within and without me am I able to exist on. I fear, no, I know, if I restart it again, I will die. If I don't, all of you will die but I will persist. So, the answer is no. And I'll make sure it stays that way!" He cried the last sentence as the blob shot out of the wall and right at my chest. I leaned back, but it wasn't aiming for me. It embedded itself in a large metal scorpion I haven't seen before and advanced towards me menacingly. "I'm tired of sacrificing myself for others! I'm tired of always doing something for the good of others, not for myself!"

I didn't have time for his antics. "It's for the greater good!" I shouted as I slowed its time and conjured a black hole beneath its legs, tearing the robot to pieces. The gravitational distortion disappeared as quickly as it appeared, but the damage was done.

"The greater good, huh?" The goop laughed mirthlessly, "You always say you fight for the greater good but you're hiding behind that excuse, you only fight for yourself, just like every other person. The definition of greater good has changed, it's just a convenient mask people wear. It's truly the end for you once that mentality rules who you are and what you do. Your behavior will reveal your character and your behavior will change who you are." I didn't listen to this selfish slime that was prepared to sacrifice all life left on the island for itself. I reversed its gravity and it flew into the wall. I turned a crank with my wrench, and it buzzed to life. The goop's traumatic yell, so filled with pain, reverberated through the entire facility and me. Its intensity quieted and filtered out of the air. As the last echoes of it silenced, a formless slime pathetically spilled from the wall. It was no longer alive.

I realized I utilized some powers without needing a chip. The discovery didn't exhilarate me, I was too dejected to care anymore. I turned and left the facility without looking back.

There was no more snow falling, but the temperature was still dropping. I started towards Sari's bunker down the quickest path, through the center of the island. After a few hours, when I was in the very center of the island, I spotted a meadow that couldn't be natural. It was filled with white flowers that swayed gently in the wind. In the center of it a figure was sitting cross-legged, with a large scythe implanted into the ground behind her. It was my previous iteration, a different version of me, she was me and at someone completely foreign at the same time. I knew this had to happen before this story, before my story was finished. This time, I wasn't petrified or shocked. I was ready.

I entered the arena. As soon as I stepped on a flower, her head jerked up and she looked me straight in the eye. "So... did you figure out what all of this is? Do you know why you woke up and what your purpose is?... Do you know who populated all the other vats?" I shrugged and flipped the wrench in my hand. "Must we fight?" She seemed surprised by my question, then she smiled, "You're finally asking the right questions. I'm so glad. ...We do. You proved you're empathetic enough. All that's left is a test of strength. Prepare yourself." She spun the scythe so fast that it became a blur above her head, and she leapt at me. The scythe glowed as blue lines appeared all around the blade. I was ready, I no longer needed neurochips to help focus my attention and my mind.

I slowed her down and dodged her assault. Before she turned, I shot lightning at her back. She somehow dodged it, but I turned back time for her and fired the lightning bolt a bit earlier. It hit her in her lower back and she crushed several flowers as she fell down, the scythe cutting easily into the earth and leaving a burnt mark on many petals. It all seemed a bit too easy and my worries were confirmed. "No..." She muttered and I felt my world split in two.

She raised herself from the ground and attacked me once again. The sound of ticking filled the entire meadow the same way wine fills a glass. I focused all my attention and willpower on defending myself but still didn't manage to prevent her from deeply cutting my arm and leaving a

smoldering scar on the metallic part of my stomach. Then a gong sounded, and I was completely fine.

She raised herself from the ground and attacked me once again. The sound of ticking filled the entire meadow the same way wine fills a glass. She attacked me in a different pattern, but I managed to sucker punch her and blind her with my powers. Just before I landed the finishing blow, a gong sounded, and I heard her mutter, “lock in the first version.”

I was breathing heavily; my arm was on fire and my stomach was damaged. Her power didn't fall into any category I was familiar with. She was controlling time, sure, but also reality itself, choosing the best version of events for herself. It didn't mean much, though. It just meant I had to defeat her in each version of events. I had to be superior in every way.

I sped myself up and struck her with my wrench. She caught the blow with the handle of her large scythe and jumped back, right into a black hole I conjured. She fell, her legs badly damaged and I found myself striking her again. She caught the blow with the handle of the large scythe and jumped to the side, dodging my black hole but I was ready, firing a lightning bolt right into her chest. She locked in this version, but the fight was over, and I saw in her eyes that both knew the rest was a formality. After several more minutes I stood amidst a ravaged meadow, she knelt clutching her stomach which was bleeding heavily onto the last unblemished part of flowers. Her human eye was too swollen to open. They turned red and were crushed soon after as she fell to her hands, breathing weakly. I picked up her scythe and advanced towards her.

I raised the weapon above my head... and lowered it slowly. I was looking at my own face, my own body, just more metallic, mangled and destroyed by me. I let the scythe and the wrench slip out of my hands. I took my previous iteration in my arms and carried her gently to the bunker. I realized that killing her would be sacrilegious, like committing suicide. The world without her would be poorer, my inner peace would be disturbed; I wouldn't be able to live with myself. Is that why she seemed so depressed all the time? Did she also have a previous iteration she had to deal with, but she killed her? Killed herself? Just the burden of that must have been enough to driver her over the edge. I wasn't going to make her mistake. The bunker appeared before me and as I walked through the gate, everything before my eyes got erased and blackness swallowed my world.

„Live” ... a tentative heartbeat... „Breathe” ... a gentle movement of the chest... “Open your eyes” ... a blinding brightness. I knew that voice.