

A Novel – Title & words a work in progress:

CONCRETE OPERATIONAL – MANUSCRIPT

Alpha - v0.8

Chronicled at:

www.cementum.co.uk

By

Richard Galbraith

This work is protected and has copyright attributed to Richard Galbraith under the Creative Commons Attribution-Non-Commercial-No Derivative Works 2.0 UK: England & Wales Licence

“Some days you wake up and immediately start to worry. Nothing in particular is wrong, it’s just the suspicion that forces are aligning quietly, and there will be trouble.” – Jenny Holzer

For Her

Your heart stole my soul

Your imagination stole my hand

Your beauty stole my dreams

O' cruel passion

I love every bit of you

Chapters:

1 – Mars Trednme

2 – The Industrious and The Doomed

3 – Richard Vortigern

4 – Germany

5 – Germany

6 – Direction and Opposition

7 – Jack Rawstone

8 – Devil's Hand

9 – Lucy Tower

10 – The Decision

11 – Time and Tide

12 – As I Am

Chapter 1 – Mars Trednme

The air was parched as the sun began to set. The light broken into vast beams by the Great Pyramids and further still by the slits in the heavy velvet curtains of the hotel room, highlighting the dust in the air in the way only broken beams of light can.

Mars Trednme relaxed back into the finely woven Egyptian silk arm chair and poured himself another Whiskey, tall and straight, in his typical manner.

“Psychology 101; if you admit to the bastards you’re crazy they instantly know you’re not. Don't say a word in that direction. If nothing else then they'll listen, at least for a bit,” he said over to himself in his head, while the pouring of brown liquor and the snapping of refined ice broke the room’s silence.

Once the world’s greatest rock star, long gone were Mars’ days of ‘wanna-be.’ He is a has-been of the highest calibre, burning too many bridges with too much excess over too many years. He could still afford the decadent lifestyle to which he had become accustomed; hundreds of millions of record sales had seen to that, and he was just as decadent as ever. As his body grew weary his spirit seemed to heighten, a reverse trend that he hated but could do little about, he knew his time was near and his mind grew keen, like the fading lion, ready for one last epic battle, possibly his finest moment before he crawls under the shade of a tree, and dies in a bloody spasm.

His face was tanned and blotched, a touch of jaundice washed over his general demeanour but his skin was covered for the most part. His clothes took care of his legs and torso. Black and dirty he carried the rock-star persona off with flirting skill that often placed him above his contemporaries. His face was shrouded by matted black and grey hair, and purple velvet gloves

covered his hands. Hunched in posture, foul in presence, his face was like that of a male witch. He lost his appetite when he first started drinking at the age of 14 and never really got it back. Surviving on space aged pills and protein shakes in between binges and fucking, his body never fully developed, though his mind would more than make up for his diminutive stature.

He often thought on how he would have turned out if he had grown passed 5ft8". His small-man-syndrome might never have developed, never taking him to extraordinary levels of arrogance to compensate for his tiny frame. Right now though, he was only curious as to how the journalist coming to interview him would report on the ancient terracotta leg he was drinking from. How would he take the gutted shark he slept in? Perhaps the sword fish he had tanked in the pool just outside of the glinting French windows would make him nervous?

He coughed through the small plume of dust shot into the air by kicking at the table leg in front of him, and knew that as soon as he thought about the bastard journalist, he would show up. So as the light flashed above the door to indicate someone was outside, he stood with a creak of weary limbs brought about by years of bone crunching jumps and mild acrobatics on stage. Opening the door to an apologetic pasty faced young man, he thought of how unfortunate this kid was, not only to be the conductor of such a fateful interview but also because his face was unnaturally sagged, made of the sort of tissue that folds up neatly at the base of the elbow when the arm is fully extended, worn and stretched.

“What happened to your face young man; did someone throw acid on it when you were a child? Fuck it, let us dispense with the pleasantries. I’m Mars Trednme, as you should already know, and what’s your handle?”

“John-Face Ryband, sir,” the journalist answered in a quivering voice.

“Now isn’t that a fine tale of irony? Fuck. Anyway, come, I’ve laid out the table already. Sit over here, I’ve got quite the story to tell you.”

The young journalist looked on Mars with awe and contempt. He could only just make out the remarkable lines on the man's face underneath his limp and wavy hair, lines which looked as if they had been sculptured with hammer and chisel. He noticed his slight hobbling walk in front of him, as they moved through the cool, naturally lit, Persian penthouse suite, in the world famous Mena House Oberoi Hotel at the foot of the great pyramids in Cairo. The world’s most brilliant minds had stayed in this very room throughout the ages, so it struck him to sit back and be reminded of their own mortality next to the vast Pyramids and now to watch this degenerate rock star tread its floors. What a terrible shame, he thought.

Mars was a throw back troglodyte on appearance alone, a bad ladle of genetic soup mixed with granite croutons served in a dirty ashtray, the type to eat wasps for breakfast and brick for lunch. Hedonism and lunacy incarnate, he slept in a hollowed out shark skin with a pillow under his gun. Raw and unnerving, his red wit, intense personality and amazing musical talent had carried him through time, though all three were drifting now, and the journalist almost felt sorry for him.

“Sit down now. Do you want a drink?” Mars uttered coarsely. “I’m afraid I’ve only got the one terracotta leg to drink out of; at \$1.5mil a pop this is fine example of history right here. Taken carefully from one of the terracotta soldiers protecting the first Chinese Emperor, Qin Shi Huang - so as you can imagine, they’re rather difficult to get hold of, hah!” His head shot back exposing the underside of his chin, loose and pale skin. “I may give you it at the end of this interview; I don’t think you would look too out of place in its presence. Anyway, as far as I’m

concerned, rock and roll killed disgrace for the common man many years ago. Now let us get on with this interview. Try not to be put off that man feeding my sword fish, you'll hear grunts occasionally but he's remarkably well trained."

"The sword-fish or the man?" the journalist hesitantly replied.

"HA! Well shitty-face, what do you think, hmm?"

The journalist noticed how Mars' voice seemed to fade in and out: it had the strangest of tones to it, almost as if it were on two waves, loud but quiet, full of life and expression yet monotone and dullard, extraordinary to listen to and frightening at the same time. It was the sound you'd expect after a thick brass tablet had been rolled over a vessel full of souls, tacked shut and thrown into a dark hole. He rubbed the roof of his mouth with his tongue, tried to look distracted and rooted around in his satchel for his questions and recorder, picking out some strange movement in the corner of his eye.

Mars had stood and left the table. A quick shuffle and rough mumblings followed him around the room as he grabbed a range of objects randomly and, bringing them over, he placed them down: ornaments and other paraphernalia that seemed to have no correlation, each making a sharp white noise as he heavy handedly placed their ceramic shells in no particular order, about the glass topped counter.

"Now listen and listen fast," he began in a tone not dissimilar to that of a great general prep-talking his troops, while simultaneously grabbing the journalist's notes out of his hands and crumpling them in a tight fist that brought white to his knuckles. "Few of the ornaments on this table have much meaning; like the majority of things in the universe, they complete themselves by doing nothing; they are for ornamental value so they are ornaments, and that is enough.

“However, some things have more meaning. For instance...” The palm of his free right hand, fingers stretched and stiff, came down lightly and seriously on the top of a miniature bottle of Single Barrel Jack Daniels. “This here sweet liquor on the right side of the table: this is myself, dark and mysterious, performing best when inside someone...this over here, on the left side of the table...” He moved his hand carefully onto a salt shaker. “This is you, salt of the earth, a pillar on which civilizations have leant for millennia...that’s you boy, well-fuck-done.” He winked, opened his jaw slightly, rimmed the sharp point of his carnivore tooth with his tongue and, as he noticed a shy panic kicking in, began tearing the boy’s notes up and quickly threw the pieces in between all ornaments on the table.

“Now, your notes, they’re the universe, they are the cluster fuck of everything that has happened and everything that is going to be. Like I said, I have a story to tell you; you won’t need those notes, no questions are necessary, just listen, take out your laptop and be ready to type and to catch the movements made. Things will change today in a way you could never imagine. You see, I have been given a gift, one that is quite beyond your comprehension at the moment but one that I hope to make clear.”

He stood up. The journalist was squirming in his chair looking even more uncomfortable in his sagged and stretched face than Mars thought possible. What of this poor bastard? Stepping slowly, the Cuban heel of his boot snapped against the thin marble floor, superseding the click of his drop foot on both feet. He realized he didn’t have the time to care about this frail young thing, so picking up his terracotta leg he sipped the whiskey, felt it pierce his drying throat, sink into his belly and awaken him. He could feel the muscles beneath his eyes twitch, feel his lips pert and his jaw tighten, bringing his face into focus. Running his open hand down his face and sniffing hard

the quick shot of dusty and dry oxygen brought a raise to his eyebrows.

“Let me ask you this John-Face,” he started with an intention of sincere importance, jolting as to show him his back.

“What if you knew all your actions were inconsequential: everything you did from the second you were born until the day you die, from every slight hand movement to each goliath leap, screaming orgasm, to perhaps the first punch you threw in high school?” His voice rose in volume and intensity. Turning to face the journalist, he bent over, putting his drink down, raising his right hand in front of his face and clenching his fingers as if to grab an invisible ball. He spoke with closed teeth and bulging eyes. “What. If. None. Of. It. Mattered?”

“What if it had been planned for you? It was all a brisk walk along a path that had been set out for you; you could not deviate from it, you had no choice in anything you did, each movement served a purpose but not your own; would you accept that?! Would you feel safe in the knowledge that you were not responsible for any of your actions?! Would you lie back on a cloud of joy that freedom from responsibility brought you, *or*, would you kick back!? Fight with every muscle in your body, every electrical nerve point in your brain, for the freedom of choice?! Would you indeed, give everything up yourself so others could have that, *or*, realizing that that future was never possible, take it all away, take everyone and everything away in a crowning explosion to end all things? How much of a man do you think you are John?!” He grabbed the arm of an old Persian chair opposite the journalist and, trembling, sank into it. He caught his breath as he bounced on the old cushion, sending a fine cloud of dust into the beam lit room.

“Those are my chains, the very fabric of the universe by which I am bound, one choice to end all choices, the impact of which is beyond your reckoning. I’ll take you on a ride now, to

explain these things.” He twitched, shot forward with laser like precision, stopped millimetres away from the young journalists face and softly spoke.

“What sort of stuff do you think you’re made of, boy?” He could almost see his whiskey laden breath creeping up the boy’s nostrils, catching the back of his throat, and he could see him gag on the powerful odour.

“Do. You. Think. You. Can. Hack. It? Ah, there’s a chance your eyeballs will explode in your head! But it’s a risk I’m willing to take.” He sat back, closing his eyes and rubbing their brows with his thumb and index-finger.

“You see, my scribe, I’ve been given this gift, if you can call it that; more like a curse - you ever heard the saying ‘ignorance is bliss’? Well let me tell you, that saying is almost exact truth. For I know that all paths are set, all knowledge has been collected and correlated at the point where all had been said and done and nothing original was at all possible, everything that could ever be thought of has been achieved, from technology to the family, all things across the universe have been explained as factual or explained away as fictional. Epistemological study has ended after its apoplectic journey through time. Consequently, the reality of all mankind, what is left, follows a set path, cruises along a fateful line that is impossible to shift; to somehow go against the pure nature of all things and manoeuvre this line is otherwise unthinkable. Destiny is planned and calculated and you have no choice in the matter; you will be what some have come to think as ultimately free, free from all responsibility, with the knowledge of all great thinkers and doers of all times through millennia of history. I know this because of my gift: I have been enlightened in a way that, in some respects, I wish I never had. For the one and only choice any human will ever get again, and which may ultimately bring about its entire destruction, has been

laid on my square shoulders. I have decisions to make John-Face.”

The journalist blinked and closed his mouth, and tonguing its roof he found it had dried and had collected a film of dust on it. He picked up his whiskey and slugged it back. Downing it in one his stomach kicked, unused to the hard liquor, his throat tightened to repel it coming straight back up. He thought that Mars had clearly gone insane; old age had brought about some sort of schizophrenic delusion of grandeur making him think that somehow the fate of all mankind rested on him and this choice that he had to make.

The pet sword fish splashing around in the pool could be explained away by his wild eccentricity; Mars had seen everything from monks wildly fucked by teenagers to men trying to turn themselves into polystyrene, all in a vain effort to surpass the ages by becoming a manufactured and reformed poly structure. The fate of mankind was a different matter. Fuck it though, let the old man finish, as long as he stays calm and steers clear of violence there might even be a good story buried somewhere in this awful tirade of nonsense. So having quelled the fear, the need for a quick, painful and ungratifying shot of vomit, he sat back in the chair and pulled his laptop onto his lap. He squinted, smelt the stale tobacco air that floated around the room, and fixed his stare on Mars.

“Pay attention boy, things are about to get complicated. You see, you’re not actually here, none of this is real. It’s all a grand set up.” Mars stood and raised his arms in a Y shape above his head and spinning in an almost hysterical manner, the heels of his boots clapped against the floor and the words continued.

“You may have existed once, but not any more. I’m not even here, but I do exist...unlike yourself, HAH!” His fingers pointed into the air and made circles through the thick dust. Tilted

shoulders and inane, self-deprecating head movements tried their hardest to hide the fear that had crept into his voice.

“You see, I have come to be known as a Student, soon to graduate and gain what has also come to be known as the Absolute Tooth: a concept created by a man I will come to later. But let us get back to me existing, while you don’t. It’s possible through the collective knowledge of all human kind throughout all time, pretty much reaching the pinnacle of all knowledge; it’s called Cerebral Goo. I have a shell inside it right now. In this invention, creation, discovery, development, this mushy, transparent, gloop, ooze, gunk, I am wondering around in what seems to be a completely aimless fashion. On a gigantic sphere that is at all points exactly 20ft deep with this substance, this prison, this library, university, torture cell, whatever you want to call it.”

“It’s some sort of bio-matter that sustains life, stimulates neural pathways in a given manner and can play host to hundreds of thousands of people. Like I said, I have a shell inside this and currently I am living the life of Mars Trednme, and why? Well, there in lies the key, as the saying goes. The answer is because he, he being me, Mars - try to keep up - he led an important life. You, however, didn’t; you’re a stimulated figure, a series of electrical impulses fed to me by the Goo. YOU!” He stood up straight and in a sword thrusting motion, extended his arm, moved forward again, this time kicking the table that separated them to the ground and, reaching over it, landed the point of his nail of his index finger on the boy’s nose.

“I was created and placed inside of it many thousands of years ago, its purpose is to allow the creation of a new super race of humanity. Once inside the Goo I began to play out many thousands of different lives, like that of Mars for instance, each deemed significant by a grand computer and filtered board of people who you will come to know as the Negotiators.” He

whipped his hand away, grinned widely, placed both hands together, patted his fingers against each other lightly and sat back down.

“Now here’s the clincher, boy: I have to live out all these lives, from the great and the good to the degenerate scum and pure evil that has existed throughout humanity; I have no choice in this matter. Once I have played out all of these lives and become a Graduate, the vast amount of knowledge that I have acquired though empirical means should, in the eyes of the Negotiators, make me perfect, absolutely free from responsibility, as my insurmountable knowledge allows me to always make the correct decision, in whatever I may do.”

The natural light was fading in the room, though John-Face noticed that in a manner typically extravagant of his surroundings, artificial light was beginning to pick up where the sun had left off. As the dust beams faded and the yellow-teeth coloured light of the room flicked into life, John-Face continued his efforts to remain focused on Mars, sat there in front of him, his left eye twitching, his voice weaving this intricate pattern of lunacy, then stamping it out into what he thought was perfect sense.

“Further to this there are many hundreds of thousands of shells all having the same experience inside the Goo, wandering around in a trance-like state, playing out these lives, soon to be masters of the universe, of time and all reality. Now, let’s get to my gift. I was woken after a particular life in the Goo, one that needs a great deal of attention so I will come to it in a short while. After I was woken though, I was given a task by one of these Negotiators. See, he wasn’t happy with this Absolute Tooth; he still wants more. Unfulfilled by knowing everything that has ever existed he is driven by greed, he is imperfect, unlike the race he is part of trying to create. Unlike the tabula rasa shells, like myself, he entered the Goo already knowing of his own life, the

life he had lead since birth, and is in turn bound by his own mortal constraints, the most fervent of which is an unquenchable greed. This greed has always bred its hatred in him, for those around him, for his brethren, and for those, like me, who will one day be perfect.” He whipped his hand over his face dragging his bottom lip with it, until his hand passed and it flicked back up against his gums, and he continued.

“He charged me with destroying him, with taking his consciousness and obliterating it, bringing his person to absolute zero and making him no more; not a task that is easy as it sounds when you have a race of ultimately perfect super beings looking out for everything. And so, for this mission he gave me something in return: for the remaining lives that I had to play out in the Goo, I could remember my previous ones. All other Students play out each life, have their memories stored and go back into the Goo a blank slate. Once complete they are fed all their lives in an instant and become as some would argue, perfect. I, however, have been having a different experience. I know what is happening, I know what is coming, I have been and gone more times than you could imagine and, like a submerged vessel would, I have collected a vast array of barnacles and crustaceans, solid and permanent, never to be shaken off.”

“These have changed me, from the man that I was when woken many years ago, into something else; waking me from the Goo has backfired on my stirrer: my future would be like trying to fit a square block into a round hole; I no longer fit anywhere and I am torn inside from my experiences. And this is how I have come to be here, with one choice that I have in fact made without thinking: do I kill this man who woke me, or do I destroy everything? Do I kill this man, and graduate, free from responsibility and safe in the knowledge that I can never do wrong, or is this a horrible fate? Do I instead bank on freedom of choice and the wonderful emotions that that

also brings, free will and man's greatest franchise; and so destroy everything because this can never be had again?" He let out a deep sigh and ends. "Well?"

The young journalist had no idea how to answer or what to do. He felt out of place as if his body had shifted slightly out of sequence with everything else, the out of beat clap in a steady and rhythmical slow applause. He looked around the room; the dust was no longer visible in the dry air but he could feel it all around him and, trying to shake it off he noticed his face in the reflection of a standing glass cabinet, weary and sagged, as duly noted; he hated every inch of it.

"Don't even think about answering that," Mars snapped while standing. Leaning back slightly on the Cuban heels, he looked slightly unbalanced, disconnected from himself, brain and body separated. His arms began to shift again in a wavy, crazy-man fashion.

He began walking around slowly and in silence, then he questioned himself. How could he possibly be giving this interview? He had thought that once it had come to the crunch, his fate line would ultimately deny him the ability to say what he was saying. As although he remembered his experiences and previous lives, he was still bound by the life he was living and unable to change that line. Which meant that either he was not breaking from his line: he, Mars, gave this interview; it had been noted, recorded, but nothing ever came of it; it was just a part of a life that was thought necessary to live but would ultimately not change the course that was as of yet unfinished, but deemed so necessary by the Negotiators. Or, he had indeed broken his line, like a lucid dream, controlling his own actions in the Cerebral Goo and telling this story, trying to clear his mind of his own accord.

Turning his head slowly he rubbed his temples and concentrated on his goal, the way sprinters collect themselves before the release. It is imperative that he gets as much out as he can,

while he can, to conclude himself and his cranked mind once and for all.

“It’s outside of your capacity to even think about such a question but, for the time being, I will try to make it as clear as possible. You seem to have stopped typing. Pick up the pieces and put yourself back together; let me explain how things came to this terrible juncture.”

He sat down again on the exquisite chair, and placing his forefinger on his chin he leant forward, rested his elbow on his crossed knee in philosophical manner and thought of whom he would talk about first.

“Best to start at the beginning I say. Richard Vortigern, the terrible swine, the creator and bearer of all. And Jack Rawstone, the progenitor of doom, the one that would give me my gift, would twist my mind up so that I have to make my decision. I’ll tell you their story as obviously I have lived as them. There are some key points in which things can be summarized to a decent length, when Jack Rawstone first coined his own plan, and the great speech, ‘Exitus Omnis, Novus Inceptum,’ or ‘All Ends, New Beginnings,’ that Richard Vortigern gave just before the original 15 Negotiators went into the Goo.”

2 – The industrious & The doomed

“What if we could change it all? What if the millennia had passed under a different light Jack; what if they hadn’t explained everything away? What if we had the opportunity to make all existence bright again, to bring us all into something better, something greater? Something more than just strolling alongside this infinite backdrop, more than a role in a play without end, a tragic display with no audience and no conclusion in sight?”

Jack Rawstone looked up for a moment to catch Richard Vortigern bring his slender fingers down through the air slowly, as if to signify he was stroking an invisible stage backdrop. He made him sick; he made his insides turn and vibrate. Every minute he was around him he felt soulless, a hollow and futile being, unsettled and unsatisfied with everything that he was and ever could be. And he lowered his head again, trying to lose himself in the book of 34th century legislation detailing the laws of Ghosts, on one of the outer worlds of Humanity’s once great Universal Dominion

“There are so many possibilities Jack; you and I know how great our people once were, millennia ago. How mighty our race was. How, at the pinnacle of science, we stood and purveyed the universe with our God-like technology, and laughed at the black, because we knew how to control it. It no longer frightened us, or quizzed us; it was ours, to be moulded how we wanted it to be, and we tore at the matter that surrounded us and made it listen to our will. Although Jack, with every great triumph, there is loss. No gain is ever perfect, and as we weaved the strings of the universe between our mighty fingers, we lost the most important thing of all: we lost our inspiration, our fire. We lost...”

Jack continued to do his best not to listen, to block out his Richard's familiar monologue about their current state of affairs, as they wandered through the white of the Great Vaults of the Negotiators. Though, as every impassioned word breezed over him with great fluidity and fervent vitriol, he could not help but get sucked in. He shook his face violently, making the inside of his cheeks clap against his gums, and he tried to focus on something else, to get lost somewhere else in his mind, away from Richard's words. He focused on the horizon of their surroundings, straight ahead, around the body of Richard, who was standing slightly to the right of the wide aisle, and down, as far as the eye could see, to the apex of his perspective. The pristine white vaults were over a thousand years old at their most aged point, but where they stood, had only seen a few decades of use.

He squinted and tried to pinpoint the furthest rippling wave of Smartputty, a substance that could be pulled at, manipulated and commanded to form or do almost anything, carrying along its latest categorised and digitised artefact: one collected from a distant part of the Universe, brought to the Negotiators home planet of Volition-Six, for classification and storage. He needed the Putty's regular and sweeping movement to follow, something he could focus on as Richard's all too familiar words continued to spill over him. Like focusing on a single droplet of rain, watching it, from as high as possible, fall to the ground, transfixed, paired and engulfed by its movement. Jack felt his insides quiver again at the sound of Richard's voice, pitched at the perfect frequency to make them resonate with jealousy and hatred.

“...and here we continue to collect all aspects of humanity, recording all, pulling together every part of the human experience into one vast and infinitely complex vault. Here we can see true triumph over time and space, our race destined for the greatest of things, for victory over our

setting and place, in-between the corners of the Universe. It takes us through tens of thousands of miles of tunnels, spread underneath our entire planet, to categorize everything that we once achieved.”

“In some ways this is our greatest achievement, the Anthology of Humanity, though to me it only demonstrates how far we have fallen. Is there no reason for this other than to store it? That is all we do Jack. Is there nothing more? We know how we have explained away the fallacy of God or the chance of warring with other mighty creatures before finally settling on a beautiful peace. The top has caused us to cease being what, at our fundamental building blocks, we are. No longer humans; just vessels of weak requests and petty arguments, lacklustre, honourless and grey. And now, we, the negotiators, the caretakers of these wet beings...” He arced his arm out in front of him quickly in a signal of dismissal. “We categorize everything, and why? So that we can continue to do our arduous task of Negotiation. We collect convention, from everywhere humanity has ever settled; it is recorded, stored and then it rests. It rests for when we may have to perform our task, to Negotiate somewhere in the universe, between two inverted and grey samples of humanity, a pair or collective that has an argument over some meaningless piece of matter...”

Jack continued to follow the ripple he had targeted and fixed on as soon as it came to a focusable distance. Getting closer all the time, the silently gliding nubbin of Smartputty could be carrying anything, any random part of humanities long history. From ancient weaponry to mummified animals that no longer existed except when someone called one for food or some other unnatural pleasure. He could feel Richard’s words getting to him again, bringing a dead passion to him. One that drove him, but only into hate.

No good came of their friendship; little ever did, but now as they grew, he knew that they both realised how the friendship of the young Negotiator was soon coming to an end. Their abilities were refining, gaining speed, pushing out the facility to have what was traditionally thought to be friendship. Although, this was no normal friendship in the first place, and Jack tried to focus on something else, away from how it was turning dangerous.

Both were over 100 years old, but just beginning to exit their adolescence when related to the period of time Negotiators were kept alive. They were halfway through their learning, trying to absorb as much of humanities 7000 or so years of recorded history as they could, daily, by that most steadfast of techniques: academic study. A technique that neither of them held in particularly high regard, especially Richard.

He knew Richard was right in many ways though: about what he was saying, about the state of the human race and how it had gradually grown into a furry moss on the face of the Universe; but this only saw his hate grow stronger. He hated how easy he had it, how naturally he succeeded at everything. How seemingly without hurdle or burden, Richard moved forward through their training, in all aspects, reaching the very highest of accolades that any Negotiator had ever reached. He felt no pressure, no victimisation or weight of ranking. There was never any doubt in anyone's mind where Richard was going, what he was destined to be and how easily he would achieve that most heralded of positions, as Alpha-Negotiator.

Both were from the greatest of families; the Rawstones and Vortigerns have sat on the board of Negotiators since they began, and even prior to the Negotiator system, had massive interests in interplanetary politics and industry. This had all built up gradually until now, when their two brightest sons continue to steadily settle the last of humanity's problems and quarrels

through the infallible system of Negotiators.

A system of sitting any fraught or quarrel-ready groups of people across the Universe on their collective knees, patting them on the back, singing them a lullaby and gently sending them into a smiley sleep.

Of arguing away any point of dissatisfaction anyone had, any reason any person had to bicker or think for themselves, or to want. No longer would they push the walls of their surroundings and reach out for more; everything that could have ever have been thought of had been thought of, and the Negotiators were there to douse any final sparks of thought, just enough to stop humanity finally going insane. To stop the minds of men from imploding at the prospect of never again having to pertain to anything, to want for anything, to feel or anger for any life, object, doctrine, philosophy or faith. Everything had been answered. The Rawstones and Vortigerns successfully headed up the final management of the Universe with the rest of the Negotiators, the greatest minds to exist and the final products of natural breeding. Natural and fervent, they continued to claw at what purpose they could find for themselves, and settle what minor disputes continued to arise, where and when they happened.

Millennia into their task now, the Rawstones and Vortigerns, along with the other 13 families of Negotiation, had little to do. They rarely bred any more, living for hundreds of years at a time. Jack and Richard, half way through their teachings, had few tasks; training exercises and assignments were irregular and, at best, easily settled.

Jack's brow furrowed as he quickly came back into focus, remembering where he was, why he was there and what he was doing. He knew their existence was becoming ever more

unnecessary, as humanity quietly fell into its own lacklustre and ultimate slumber; but as his natural breeding allowed him certain privileges, there are also the pitfalls. Emotions continued to sweep through his body always, allowing for heightened altruistic responses and the continued feeling of self-satisfaction in the face of Negotiation. He, like the other Negotiators, hid them until necessary, using the Se Lier D'amitie Protocol as determined and revised through the life of Francis Parlore in the mid 33rd century. That which allowed Jack's jealousy-fuelled rage toward Richard to remain a secret.

As soon as they began Negotiator school they began the ancient tradition of learning the Protocol. It took decades to grasp the basics of it and centuries to be able to fully comprehend and use its power in the field of Negotiation. Employing it, they could control their ready emotions at their base level, essentially hiding their natural and primitive urges. Yet, when negotiating, it was an extremely powerful and pivotal tool. It gave them the facility to form a bond with the parties they were negotiating, quickly and without harm. It meant they always had the upper-hand and allowed the negotiated parties to believe their satisfaction had been reached, at no time feeling like they had lost out.

Jack thought on the first four principles; imitation, silence, humility and vitriol - the founding pillars of the protocol, out of which a relationship with any person could be quickly formed and easily dominated. Varying levels of action and in-action, reacting precisely to the subject; a science to gaining trust, to making friends, to pulling people in and securing their comfort, and using it against them. He knew how much of a handle Richard had on these, how he could utilise them with great command even at this early stage of their education. And all the while we could be hiding what his true intentions were; all the while he could be manipulating the

subject, his knuckles kneading the putty he had turned them into, then shaping them, without a flicker of doubt, or blink of misgiving, into the person they would need to be for the best result of negotiation to be attained.

Jack's command was nearly at the height of Richard's, but as always, Jack had to work for it, to strive for what he wanted with all his being. His command of the Protocol was a display of great practice, learning, revising, and simulated experience. It was not that of natural ability, and it made him snarl inside, stamping on the floor of his imagination in a fit of anger. He knew how the Negotiators weren't meant to use it on each other, but they all did, everyone trying to topple and command each other all the time. Jack thought on his and Richard's friendship and how it was a constant barrage of manipulation on Richard's behalf, and hard-fought avoidance by Jack.

Richard had most of the other trainee Negotiators in his hands already; he had them without them even realising, in the palm of his hand to be manipulated in whichever way he saw fit, as was his advanced ability and natural affinity with the Protocol. Whether or not Richard realised he was doing this constantly did not matter. Whatever he needed to do in the future, as his plans formulated and he began to bring them into fruition, Jack knew Richard could achieve it all with the unequivocal permission, confidence and solidarity of the other Negotiators.

The nubbin of Smartputty finally reached him and he grabbed at the artefact that was upon it, replacing it with the 34th century book of legislation he had been flicking through. He looked down with an adolescent smirk of superiority over the ancient piece and realised it was the 'List of Wants' put together by Great Vixonious the Troubled in the 42nd century. Over 250,000 entries, a vast list of things he wanted, objects of desire, actions he wanted to take, futures he

wanted to see. Troubled as he was, he sat from the time he became sentient, writing a list of everything he could think of wanting. He was troubled so because he knew, in his reality, he could achieve these wants with little effort.

He wanted to discover something that did not exist, something that could not be replicated or formulated, brought into reality through technology and the twisting of matter; essentially, something that could not be, something he could not do. He gathered quite a following over the course of his lifetime and a group of the earliest type of Negotiators were called upon to settle his anguish and disperse his followers. They talked him into being caged, Jack read, surrounded him by an ancient form of dog that they had evolved to talk, and left him. He killed himself. Justice wasn't his death; the Negotiators felt that if he were truly driven beyond the point of rational thought, he might gain solace in complete madness, creating a maddened alternate reality in which he knew no logic or hyper-existence where anything he wanted was attainable.

They classed it as a success; he got something that couldn't be replicated or found or brought into reality in any other way than finally stepping into it. And as Jack perused the list, his adrenal gland kicked, pursing his upper lip for a split second, almost noticeably giving away his inner turmoil.

He was not too dissimilar from Great Vixonious; he wanted for something he could not have. Jack snarled silently, because he knew, he was beginning to realise, that where he stumbled in this regard, Richard succeeded. Jack wanted, Richard wanted, but Richard had a plan; he was formulating his ideas in his perfect mind, he was creating something so perfect that it would take them to their next step and make everything complete.

“You see, Jack, humanity deserves so much more than what we can both clearly see as a faint pop at the end of what started out as a big bang, a limp and desolate future.” Richard lowered his head, bringing his eyes in line with Jack’s and raised his eyebrows as if looking for him to agree. Jack, having raised his head from the book, grinned and nodded slightly, approving Richard’s statement, and silently went back to the list as Richard continued.

“The millennia of evolution, progression, striving and pushing at our continual boundaries, all these long and hard steps that have brought us to this pinnacle, they are worth so much more, Jack. The Elders don’t believe so; they’re satisfied, they’ve grown to accept what they believe to be inevitability, and I weep for them. We, their sons, we still have fire. Fire that we gain as we learn more about the might and beauty of our ancestors, the death and punishment that humanity has pushed through. The brutality that has been quelled by beauty, time and time again, as the greatest minds of their time continued to think man would inevitably fall into a hellish cesspit of unavoidable self-destruction. As we learn how great our race has been, what it has held in its hand, we can both see that there is more...”

Jack knew there was more, he knew what Richard knew, but Richard could formulate around it. He could take what they had learnt, and he could plan, make a structure of thought around his own ideas - the ones that had been pushed upon him - and refine them into a path of inspiration that would take him further, higher, faster than Jack could ever achieve.

Jack knew how he fumbled, how his own inner being was consumed by his greed, constantly, and although it drove him, although it made sure that he was the one that could keep up with Richard in everything from their meagre assignments to their continual study, he could not play with it. He could not manipulate it like he could manipulate the Smartputty in front of

him; he could only absorb and try to remain satisfied with what he had. But of course, he could never do that. Richard drove him; he polished his greed, made it into a working machine that took him further than anyone had ever expected him to go, but he was not thankful. He stayed close to Richard, but he hated him; he knew that if he moved away from his greatest friend and arch nemesis at any time, he would fall behind, and any remote chance he had of becoming Alpha-Negotiator would crumble instantly.

But he also knew that any chance of becoming Alpha-Negotiator was lost anyway. Richard was preparing and inventing, analysing and imagining. He knew that as Richard continued to put the blocks of thought he currently had into a positive structure, reinforced by its own brilliance, that any chance of becoming what he wanted was gone and an even more hateful and belittling future awaited. He flicked the pages still, reading the Wants, the list, silently raging and constantly being reminded of how much he wanted, and how he would never achieve any of it.

“Jack, you see, there is more; I’m planning, I’m thinking. I am a constant thought, one pulsating organ...” He held his right hand out, clawed upwards as if he were gripping an invisible human heart, extending and retracting his fingers. “...the task of which is to create a better future.” He moved and put his arms up in a Y shape, pointing fingers out towards the white ceiling of the vast vault. He took a deep breath, fuelling his mind, readying for a dispersal of words and thoughts that he had been collecting and developing for so long now.

“I know I will have to betray our Elders, I know I will have to lie silently, I know it will have to live inside of me, and I know that one day, I can open my eyes and push my mind onto everything, and they will accept it, the beauty of it. All of this that surrounds us, this convention, the memory of life that has been - here lies the key, here lies our future.” He bent over, balling one

hand into a fist and pointing at the artefacts behind him with the other. “It will exist again on some level of reality and, out of it, the perfect and deserved summit of human existence will be created. We can take from our past and push it into empty vessels. Everything that we have acquired here, we can build upon it and with it we will create perfection. All the accumulated knowledge of the universe - we will push it upon those who know nothing, and through time, through vast streams of time, they will gradually learn. They will absorb everything that humanity has ever experienced, all of the greatest minds, the instances they created and walked through, their happiness, pain, suffering, elated ecstatic pleasures the witless dullards today could not even imagine.”

“They will learn from these, from what you have there, the lists of the Great Vixionious to anyone in any time. We can replicate them, their lives; we know what happened; we can allow the empty to become full and brim with the knowledge of all mankind. And in an insurmountable fire, as the phoenix of the universe itself, they will emerge perfect. They will have perfect freedom, because they know everything. We, Jack, you and I, can yet reach one more time into the dark and pull further greatness from it. You can reign at my right hand side and we can step forth...”

Jack continued to sit, tempering his breathing, gripping his emotion, wrestling his anger and jealousy. He remained motionless and silent as Richard’s words, tone perfect, reinforced with faultless confidence and delicate flecks of aspiration, whilst retaining the inevitable humility of a work-in-progress, pierced his ears.

He knew Richard’s plan held the key to the only decently conceivable future of humanity, one of pure knowledge and absolute confidence on and over the universe. Not one of floppy decadence and infertile beings, with no lust or honour, no need or want for anything. But it did not stop his fury; it fuelled his jealousy that acted as the perfect catalyst for his terrible greed.

Nothing ever came with such ease to Jack, the constant level of greed in his mind, his being, stoking his own internal firestorm, surrounding all lines of sight with towering infernos of jealousy and greed, moving him to try and keep up and go beyond, fight the impossible fires.

“I believe in you Richard, your vision and your future”, Jack interrupted, smiling with humility. “You know, my brother, I am here for you, to act along side you, to put into motion the inevitable, when the time may come.” As he spoke, he rose to his feet, putting down the List of Wants onto a moving stump of Smartputty that silently glided past, and signalled they should both continue to walk through the vault.

A walk of careful forethought; one of rendering ideas into plans for one of them, and one of spiteful hate and ugly anguish for the other. But Jack mused to himself as they walked, as Richard carried on spurting his thoughts into the air, believing all the time that his brother in arms was listening tentatively, ready to correct him where necessary, but more importantly, ready to prop his thoughts and instinctively agree. But he was wrong, Jack thought.

Jack was a product of his own black and evil insides, and although his overriding lust for more often sent his mind wondering, he was beginning to realise one thing. Over time he had come to accept that pure, undeniable fact; he would always be over shadowed by his closest friend and most bitter rival. But there was a way around all of this, a way that could bring him to a point from which he could take solace. It was gruesome and tragic, but with no heavy heart would the decision be taken. He was driven and volatile, horrified and sick, almost physically gagging at the actions that he was formulating, that must be undertaken to achieve this awful goal. It meant the inevitable downfall of all that anyone knew or held, and as they walked along the great vault surrounded by artefacts, by the greatness of their species, he was keenly aware of

what he could potentially do.

The hairs on the back of his neck stood and his ears spiked; he could almost hear the light softly reflecting off the gliding Putty on either side of him. He raised his head slightly, turning it a few degrees until Richard was in his peripheral vision and, in a moment of clarity, the likes of which he had never felt before, his throat went dry and his jaw clenched. He could see Richard walking and talking, though his words fell on closed ears, and he thought to himself.

“I will take it all away; I will destroy everything so that Richard cannot have anything. In an instance where I cannot reign, I will topple, because without all, I have nothing.” He smiled.

He was God now, he was the black mist. He knew he was better than Richard at one thing, he knew he had one ability in abundance: he was the harbinger of doom and he could deceive, even the astute ability of Richard Vortigern.

It was self evident: Jack’s ability to use exactly the right levels of the *Se lier d’amitié* protocol hid his inner turmoil to everyone, including Richard. His adversary continued to think they were the best of friends, brothers in arms, and that Jack was his muse of sorts, one that he could confide in and believe in for all of his support and true respect. But Jack continued to grow his hate, as his greed squeezed the purity out of his heart with cold, black hands. And they continued to walk.

“...the final conclusion to all of this, to what is the most monumental undertaking by humanity in its entire existence, Jack, is that we take our rightful place, on the thrown of time, the Universe as our palace. We have an honourable peace, one befitting our great race, a perfect end to us all. Yet with one end, new beginnings are set in motion; we are...”

Jack wiped his grin and recessed into his own mind, backwards, as they walked through the vaults, into the black that was to plot the eventual destruction of it all, and he continued to dwell on how Richard can never be allowed to claim it. Even though Richard's plan made him a lesser being than the ones he was scheduled to create, he knew the inevitable satisfaction of success would flow through his veins and that, Jack could not allow to happen.

A God to create a being greater than himself, the ultimate self-sacrifice, the absolute act of altruism and, in that act, to rest and look upon his perfection, fold his arms in the success of the majestic excellence he had a hand in creating. Jack raged at that which Richard could achieve, but he never could. His mind grew sharp and focused on taking it all away; his trickery would never allow it to happen, his greed would override the limitless beauty that Richard's future could achieve for him and all. He knew that the frontier of deception he had to cross to gain victory would be vast; he would have to be as absolutely precise with his own plan as that of Richard's, and that in itself was almost impossible.

The black thoughts of complete eradication of everything grew exponentially and swamped his mind like oil poisoning water. A spark ignited the contaminated fluid and a plan erupted from the fire. He knew in an instant he could not do it himself; he would need a vessel to do his bidding. He would have to take advantage of Richard's thoughts, his grandiose ideas, his plans on filling empty vessels with the knowledge of all time. Of this, the matter they would walk through, the creation of a super race, of Gods. He would have to take one of these beings, he would have to develop his blueprint alongside Richard's, to time his own ideas and wait.

He would have to find someone that was able to take it all away, a great person, an idol, a gigantic visionary tangled within the strings of time. One that had questions that needed

answering, one that was not satisfied and fought for their needs, one that enacted change in their time and strove with heroic might, with all their being, to become the thing they wanted most, but ended empty.

One that could be taken advantage of, and bargained with. One that had such vast and unparalleled experiences that they could formulate and plan eradication. One that could cope with an awakening, with the future, with what humanity has grown into and the eventual prospect of what he could become. Then, with twisted sort of honour and need, move on to destroy all things. Something at some point would force them into a corner that had only one way out, one absolute answer to everything they had ever experience: to take it all away and wipe clean the cratered face of the universe, purifying it of humanity; and Jack would provide the means.

A puppet to move through the sands of time, controlled with invisible strings to perform the single most tragic horror that had befallen their race, everything that had ever existed. Unchained, unrelenting, loveless, to sit at the end of time and with absolute righteousness, to know unequivocally that they are correct in the terrifying actions they must take, to weep for all things, remorseful but rigid. And Jack would sit back to watch it happen, to distract Richard. Knowing that his only solace is to kill all.

Richard continued to recite his plans, the way he had done before, each time getting more precise, getting closer to what he believed would be the way to success. He spilled all that he could think of and muster to Jack, and Jack took from it, formulating, moulding his own way to stop it.

The two, both with their burning passion: one with benevolent beliefs of creation, the

other with hateful thoughts of destruction. Then, in a moment of serendipity, the beautiful sensation and relief of realisation swept over Jack as he found his answer, as Richard stopped walking and pointed at the statue that was housed behind a translucent wall of Smartputty that they had walked up to. Jack drew himself to Richard's side and knew he had before him his saviour and his destroyer, his tool. He stood, bronzed and majestic, colossal, dominant, perfect: Germany Germany.

One of the first Greats they learnt about as they entered Negotiator school. Considerable periods of time were dedicated to study of his life, of his thoughts and movement, his essence and the path that he walked: a path that affected so much change, one that shifted the path of humanity for the better, one that took the trenched and listless life of billions and irrevocably changed them all forever. One that caused the Great Face riots, and in doing so, brought humanity out of a pit of self-adulation and ugly worship. One whose beliefs were so well documented, that they had an almost perfect record of his life in every detail. One that, through Richards plans, would inevitably be re-lived.

Jack looked down the vault hall as nubbins of Putty continued to glide passed and he wondered how many miles must be dedicated to Germany Germany. There would be streams of writing, thousands of statues, paintings and dedications of every sort. Thousands upon thousands of sterile jars containing the brains of those that knew him, touched him, had any interaction with him at all. Gigantic blocks of data from centuries past, of scholars on the subject of one of humanity's greatest beings. All preserved to allow this life, to potentially dictate the fate of others, millennia in the future.

All to help in the Negotiation process for beings that could not even contemplate the

unbridled dedication, rage, fury, passion and ambition of this individual. The passion To follow through on what he truly believed in, to find his answers at the end of everything, with no remorse or regret, bide his time and wait for the perfect instant: the moment that would allow him to achieve all of his goals in one fall swoop. The one golden instant that could not be calculated mathematically by the greatest of computers; simply a time, a clearing in the fabric of the universe that unparalleled instinct alone could recognise and find. Germany changed the course of humanity and the universe forever. They both admired him deeply.

Jack read the inscription on the plinth of the statue;

*“Finding answers is the hope,
following a path is the want,
striving for greatness is the folly,
humanity’s absolution is the achievement.”*

“This man, Jack, he and I are not so dissimilar. We both strive for the greatest of things for humanity, we both have a want and need to take our race out of the dark and push it, kicking and screaming if necessary, with casualties along the way, into something better for all. Germany Germany once told his story to the faces of all that could see, and this changed their reality, their perception, and ignited the fire within humanity once more. Now I want to tell his story again, to tell the story of all great and pertinent humans to vessels that will absorb their knowledge and steps, and out of which, they will know everything.”

“As we both know, Germany had many questions, ones that he paid the ultimate sacrifice to have answered; we know that he could not have ever found those answers. His life was one of

coincidence unparalleled before or since. He took from what he knew, from what he could see happening around him and made his own decisions to tackle the very existence of all mankind. Now I will do the same,” Richard closed his eyes and bowed his head slightly while facing the statue. Jack took a step back and smiled.

He had found his answer. he wandered to thoughts of whether the essence of Germany still existed in the universe. If, in all their knowledge, they had missed something somewhere, they had manoeuvred a degree in the wrong direction and thousands of years of history later failed to realise that something beyond the walls of reality could exist. That Germany had enacted the positioning of his statue at his point, to exist here at this exact instant in time, pushing himself in front of Jack to give himself another opportunity. To give himself one more chance. To provide him with the answers that he strove so hard for throughout his fervent life. Jack continued to smile at the ridiculousness of his excited thoughts and gripped his hands into fists as Richard stood motionless in some state of contemplation.

Jack knew he would play God now. He would use Richard’s tools to build his plan, to construct a series of events that would enact the annihilation of everything. To bring upon the universe his unbridled greed and its horror. To ensure that Richard did not become the saviour of humanity, that he in fact, saw its eventual downfall. His mind came back and became focused again.

He would bring him back; he would somehow make sure that Germany Germany would exist once more. He would pull his form and being into reality, waiting patiently until one of these vessels that Richard spoke of had experienced the life of this man. Taking him out of the process that Richard was currently formulating, he would confront him, he would show him what had

become of things, and he would manipulate him. Germany Germany would succumb to the Se lier d'amitié protocol just as many other thousands had done over the previous millennia, and he would do Jack's bidding.

Jack's mind raced as they both stood in continued silence, mankind's achievements flashing past them, held up by the Putty; he was focused and determined like never before. Philosophical ramifications created gigantic explosions of thought in his mind and he reflected on what he was going to do. Sporadic and quick, in bouncing instances of synaptic reflex, his pulsating grey matter burst with anticipation at what the future may hold. Jack squeezed his eyes tight for a split second before opening them up wide, absorbing and thinking.

“Germany Germany died; he ceased to exist at the point of which he most wanted answers. He died with one last thought, one instant shot of consideration; that he had achieved his goals. That he had followed his line, that fate had conspired with him to enact change in the ridiculous state of humanity, and he believed he had won. I however, know the truth. I know that there is no way Germany could ever have truly found out, ever fully understood what had happened after his death. The point at which sentient life ceases to exist in the human body holds no gift; this is a terrible universe of absolutes - we have come to realise this. He could not have stood over the universe itself, mighty and smiling, omnipotent and ever-existing, with giving eyes looking down at his creation and a realisation that his life had forced a pressure on reality that pushed out a vast galactic hurricane of change, one that swept across the universe.”

“Now though, I can give him this. I can conspire with my enemy; I can exploit his skill and combine it with mine, to fulfil my dreams. I can pull Germany Germany out, I can answer his questions, I can let him see that he truly achieved his goals and I can reassure him that there is so

much more to his future. I can pool all my skill of negotiation and knowledge of the protocol to get him on my side, to do my bidding. And then, with careful preparation I will bring him full circle. I have to enrage him again, I have to inject his being with the fervent might that he once had, and pull it in the direction that will see the destruction of all. He will be my puppet, he will be my saviour, he will be the progenitor of death, he will cause the absolute dissolution of everything that has ever existed. And I will have my peace. He will affect my torment.”

Richard turned around to Jack with wide eyes.

“He is inspiring, is he not?” he said, raising his arms onto Jack’s shoulders

“Without a doubt, Richard; time has taken his essence throughout time. He took humanity and pushed us into so much more. Can you predict how he would react if he ever truly found out how much he had done, how what he wanted to achieve was realised?” Jack replied with an intentional air of innocence.

“I care to think he could understand. He is one of few that was undoubtedly able to cope with all that was ever thrust upon him. The knowledge of his mission achieved, well, he would smile with humility and at once, be at peace.”

“Yes, at peace,” Jack replied, quelling his underlying thoughts, emitting an air of harmony with Richard, and all the while thinking. One thought now, one overriding participle of consideration, one that when conceived, would see their existence extinguished.

Jack thought to himself, as Richard gripped his shoulders and turned his body to walk on.

“He will come to resent that peace, he will come to hate the answers that I will give him, he will do my bidding. He will forfeit all that he achieved; he will take life from the universe.

Richard will not reign, I will find my peace.”

Chapter 3 – Richard Vortigern

“The lethargic, idle and otherwise unquestioning character of man that has come to be, promises to last for an infinite duration until without purpose or pride, extinction befalls him. We meet the struggle for change with all our righteous might, this noblest of causes with gusto and fervour. We sacrifice our bodies, the people and possessions of what is now our present, to ensure that steadily, surely, and without complaint this prolonged and complex effort will end, and through its completion, greatness will rise. On our entirely uncharted course into human betterment we will succeed in the face of lethargy and weakness.”

So Richard Vortigern began his speech, the final rally before their leap. To the 14 final Negotiators sitting around him in a semi-circular fashion he was the only hope that mankind, humanity, if you could call it that, had left; they bowed to his every whim and, without hesitation, followed his direction. They believed truly in his foresight and raw unbridled energy, which reminded them of steadfast conquerors and generals, men of duty and honour: Alexander the Great through to Napoleon and Patton. His vast intelligence was matched by the Negotiators own, but his wisdom flew beyond and above theirs like a bald eagle flying above the bobbing red robin. He was the greatest of men, and all they had left.

He stood at the podium, tightened his mouth, and pushed its corners back into his cheeks, ruffling his chin, folding the aged skin on his face and making a small, modest smile. His plinth stood before him, wide and white. Its singular stem, grown specifically for its job, was like a leg, clear and slender, and majestically held the small angled tray atop its upside-down spider-like pinnacle. His hands grabbed the clear board and squeezed, fingers smudging the underneath. The backs of his hands had age spots and he slowly realized that it was noticeable; he had let his body

grow older than usual. Their collective science allowed for him frequent body changes, so as to never give any significant indication of age. Now he was over 300 years old, but he never looked beyond the age of 18. Clearly looking in his 60's now, he eyed his body slowly and intentionally, making sure the pause in his speech was long enough for the others also to take notice of his outward appearance. Still overly handsome he had refined with age, having been blessed with a wonderfully constructed set of features, the type that only natural births could still produce. His square jaw protruded in a manner of strength and dignity, the lines on his face now seemed appropriate given the speech he was ready to weave, and his whispering grey hair with a hint of natural blonde did help to quell his almost menacing gaze, to add a humanity that made his image complete. His priestly white robes adorned his essentially perfect frame, in such a way as to give him the appearance of a marble sculpture.

Only his head and hands were visible, and veins ridged both of them, adding hints of purple and lilac to his temple area and the back of his hands. Keen and upright on his shoulders, his neck was thinning but strong, holding his head straight, firm and without fault. His hands were steady; almost scaled with age they were leathery, hard to puncture or split, yet soft to the touch. Gripping the podium strongly, he had neither weakened nor lost any of his intensity with age. His eyes fired like burning furnaces in Dante's deepest level of hell, and this, combined with his pulsating forearms hidden by his robe, his veins, erupting from his skin's surface, added to his majestic distinction. He stood proudly and, almost shouting at the small yet mesmerized crowd in the vast hall that echoed with valour, he continued his speech.

“Fellow Negotiators, I want now to talk about our history as humans, in a vain effort to finally justify what we are about to do, where we are about to go, how we got to were we are and

ultimately, why we had to take this decision. We are at the foot of frontier, a toe away from the limit, but like the most gracious of explorers we step into the unknown for the good of humanity. Not for glory or distinction, least of all for profit, but to create out of the human spirit something that has never had a chance to exist before. Through technology and planning we can bring together all of man's greatest achievements and minds, then step forth with pride in knowing we have created perfection. No human being could fail to be deeply moved by such a privilege as this. I know how moved you, my brethren, are and how frustrated you must be at the idea of having to wait so long before we get to see the fruits of our work. But trust me as you trust your hand; time bares little consequence on our minds. You should know this; now believe it.

“Humanity once spoke in terms that were deemed strange, if not frightening: of harnessing cosmic energy; of unclocking the mysteries of the human genome; of creating and manufacturing on unknown scales new synthetic materials that exist outside of nature, to further its own brilliant efforts of exploration. Of mining distant planets for the ever expanding need for raw materials; of settling on these planets that orbit around stars millions of light years away; of expanding life indefinitely through the storage of consciousness and the quick and efficient production of human bodies on vast assembly lines; and finally, of gigantic work forces of robots that would take care of our every whim. Mankind dreamed of these fantasies through stories and fiction for centuries, and in his ever bludgeoning and sometimes reckless quest for knowledge and discovery of the unknown, he ultimately achieved these unreal and epic visions.

“From the most knowledgeable of scientists, constructing the first giga-tubes, perfecting the folding of space and the vast vehicles that could transport people by their hundreds of thousands between the stars, to the wisest of philosophers, discovering how to perfectly operate a

family, each block of the mysterious universe was hammered at and, with ferocious speed and rampant passion, knocked down. Perhaps most important to the technological leaps and bounds that man flourished under were those philosophical discoveries that finally allowed man, in the light of his horrid and barbaric past, to settle and become one with himself and others. As the limitless universe was colonized planet after planet, it was soon discovered that there was, for the first time in all history, enough for everyone. No more vast land wars encompassing globes with unthinkable conflict, pain, and suffering. Armies of billions were slowly disbanded over millennia as men's divisions over land, water, air, wealth, and all the countless and ultimately dreary materialistic possessions were conquered; but not by man, philosophy or political regime, but by fulfilment, by everyone, in whichever way they wanted.

“Terrifying fictions of varying times throughout history were never played out: the robots manufactured by man were always happy enough being robots; the birth of artificial intelligence failed to rapidly and exponentially increase; robotic attitudes of contempt for man, and ideas of conquering him, remained heavily buried in the ground of fiction along with a super race of cybernetic machines becoming the dominant force in the universe. Imperialistic and angry alien races failed to rise and bring about the destruction of humanity, or even threaten the vast consumption of planets throughout the universe and galaxies. The slimy apocalyptic hell that weighed heavily on the minds of early 22nd century humanity, expanding through the greased ease of Celebrity and consumption, and ultimately reaching breaking point with the Great Face Riots, again, failed to materialize. Further wonders of fiction failed to dominate our future existence; telepathy, telekinesis and other embodiments of the mind, which were thought to be an inevitable part of our omnipotent and illustrious future, were points never reached, filtered out by

evolution, albeit given a helping hand out of human gene pool by short-sighted government policies and overconfident, misguided, psychological theory. Although, the technology we now possess, unimaginable even by these early troglodyte and uncouth generations, overcomes the restriction of confinement to this body, which is no longer any reason for concern. Typical problems from transportation to deterioration were overcome through our ability to store consciousness; the philosophical ramifications and questions happened to be explained away through time, along with all manner of previous soulful hardships such as God, the afterlife, where we go and what we become.”

His breath had grown short. Pausing, he pushed his robe sleeves up over his elbow line, exposing his old, hairless and yet solid forearms, while drawing one long deep breath before he began again, halfway through exhaling.

“Mankind, after so much pain, suffering and worry for millennia upon millennia, was finally able to bask in his achievements and accomplishments. The uncompromising success that had taken place over these millennia culminated in all persons having their three wishes granted and so much more. Dread and fear are now words of ancient language. Ultimately, and in essence, all that was to be discovered had and has been discovered, and the ultra post modernistic society which came about was seen by some as perfect. As all of mankind achieved the most peaceful state it had ever seen, the slow deterioration of government took place, and this, my comrades and friends, is where we begin to play our parts.”

Richard stood back from the podium; his bare feet stuck slightly to the floor with their own moisture making a light and barely audible ‘skin peeling away from marble’ sound. He picked up the glass of water on the tray held by the enamel white robot that stood next to him, and

patiently and tentatively sipped, without ever losing the full attention of his audience, and then stood still. The other negotiators were sitting, unflinching and serene, ready for him to continue with this most monumental of speeches. They knew what was coming, they knew their own history, what happened, where, who to, and for what reasons, but they could not and would not question Richard's intentions in recapping everything before they were to make their leap. He was the proudest of men, but would adorn his pride with the air of modesty to make that arrogance becoming and approachable. If he were reviewing their history in an effort to give a last moment for questions before they performed their inevitable task, then it would not be a first. Such a reaction was however, unthinkable; their allegiance was unmoved and their respect undiluted: they all had the same belief.

“Our place in time is no longer adorned with colossal discovery; all that mankind now knows is the lengthy and expected passage of time. Warm in their previous achievements, they have grown obese with pleasure and peace. We settled for this over the slowly fading and ever more dormant centuries, as government dwindled, and in its place came that of the Negotiator, retaining the appearance of order, resolving minor disputes that would infrequently rise, decades apart. But we - part of a special, and in some ways purpose-bred genetic line, maintained and left to watch over the terrible decay of humanity - we wanted more. Although everything that could be discovered had been, and although all knowledge had been revealed and the secrets of the universe were no longer secrets, we knew in our guts that the languid and virtually halted progression of man that exists now is *not* a polished and diamond-like end to what used to be coal, coarse and dirty. We resigned ourselves to construct the Omega computer, in our own lazy state, to create something that would do our job for us and, unknown to the remaining human

populous, we sat ourselves back. But our special nature - the reasons why we were chosen as the next breed of Negotiators as our old forefathers eventually settled for their own indolent end - it prevails and drives through.

Richard pointed up the ceiling of the great arena like structure, in which just the 16 of them sat and stood, along with a single robot. The ceiling was entirely clear: thick glass that separated the echoing, enclosed space and warmth from the vacuum and never ending Space that was outside. The loose sleeve of his robe slid right back to his shoulder, exposing the length of his arm, old, slivery skin that clung loosely to tight muscle, though the Negotiators failed to notice. Their gaze had followed his finger to the sky, eventually hitting the magical sight of the Omega Computer. Much like a gigantic, shuffling deck of playing cards, planet-like in proportion, moving almost at the speed of light, the precision, enormity and scarily powerful movement could not help but amaze even majestic humans at the pinnacle of knowledge and wisdom. Some of them reflected on why it was built and smiled inside, trying not to show their emotion as they considered what it had let them do, where it had brought them, and ultimately what it would bring about.

Richard brought his thumb to his index finger, still pointing at the sky, and clicked sharply, jolting the crowd out of their hypnotic state, and continued.

“Our want for more out of mankind and its future has brought us to this pivotal step, to take us beyond the pathetic state our civilization has come to and into a journey that now marks the beginning of another epoch in the long story of mankind. The ancient philosopher Plato once said "Only the dead have seen the end of war." We have known peace for centuries; war in all conventional meaning of the word did end, but did that also mean we died? As a race did we

become a backward sludge, downgraded and dead inside through our own triumphant efforts? I know we believe so. Our peace and this end is not deserving of all those that died to make it happen; it is unfit for a race as dignified and beautiful as ours; we need true peace through those means that remain true to us, the last 16 Negotiators: through the acquisition of all knowledge.”

The crowd sat quietly for a split second before rising to stand. They fell back into that most ancient of traditions and applauded an idea and a man that they held in the highest of regards. Slightly taken aback Richard smiled at them patiently and waited for silence again. Standing back from the podium now and moving slightly to its side he pointed again to Space, to the Omega Computer, and seemingly beyond, a stretched arm of might that forced a never ending line of sight through the universe. He stood firmly and drew breath into the pits of his lungs. Expanding his diaphragm and hollowing his throat, he re-stated in the greatest of tones,

“Through the acquisition of all knowledge!...As wise as we might be through the hundreds of years of empirical learning we have been so fortunate to have, and through the knowledge of our ancestors that was learned through those basic academic means, the devastating truth that we have come to realize is that for all the wisdom and knowledge, discoveries and explanations, we still know but a fraction of what we can. The only true way of acquiring the mighty end and the unquestionable peace that humanity deserves, is through gaining what I have come to call ‘the Absolute Tooth’. We will enter into our own invention: this Cerebral Goo that will allow us to live through all the greatest of humanity’s lives. Although the archaic idea of time travel was ultimately explained away as a false hope, our invention will essentially allow us to travel through time. We will live as all great men and women; we will see sights unknown to our peaceful eyes, the greatest of decay and the most extraordinary of dizzying highs. Through empirical means of

learning that cannot be bettered, with all knowledge backed up and buttressed with the wisdom of life, we will reach our ultimate peace; and the race that we will, in due course, come to create through the same means - they will have true sanctuary in the universe for all eternity. They will know absolute freedom from responsibility. The apathetic and indolent civilization that exists now knows little of such peace. Their decisions being made by The Omega Computer, they know not of responsibility. But this is not because of the perfect existence we will come to create, that pure existence of having all knowledge and, in turn, the peace of knowing that any decision that you would ever have to make will always be the right one.

Applause echoed throughout the arena once again, one of the Negotiators rose up and shouted, "Freedom from responsibility and the Absolute Tooth!"

Richard stepped around the podium and to the edge of the small stage on which he stood, waiting for silence. He leant slightly forward, and a smile grew across his face, his aged skin folding along his high cheekbones, and his teeth shining through. Only when he could again hear his own breath did he begin.

"You have slightly jumped the mark there my brother, but you are absolutely right. The final idea that we could think of giving to man, that has become our own doctrine, the thing that we have been preparing for now for so many centuries - we are here. Implanted in the breast of our triumphant race will be pure fidelity to our everlasting existence, dominance over time and space, and a freedom from all accountability and responsibility. For they will know they are right, they are pure and they are exact in all decision and movement.

"Yet as brilliant and wonderfully bright as our future will now be, let us not forget of the sacrifice that the existing humans will have to make, far and wide across this universe. What is left

will die for our never-ending chapter to begin; all will end so ultimately we can have our new beginning and finally create humanity's prized beings. They will die unquestioning, uncomplaining, yet without fire in their hearts - morbid shells with no need for any determination - without worn tread on their boots from exploring far and wide, without necessity and without dignity, desolate in spirit, grey in tone, without feeling or pride, happy with everything and obedient to us. They are but a slimy spasm at the end of something terrific, no room to move forward, no will to push on; they will die alone and in a whimpering silence. Commanded by the Omega Computer to cease breeding, to stop everything, their apathetic minds will obey without question, and if a decision should arise, it will be read to the computer which will quash it, give a listless paradoxical answer and ultimately bring about a painless and expected result: death.

“By the time we emerge from the Goo, to be granted our Absolute Tooth, many hundreds of thousands of years from now, they will be gone, a race no more, turned to dust through the abysmal way they have come to live. We will begin creating a new man, a new super race, not in our own eyes but in the eyes of time. They will live all the greatest of lives we have deemed should be lived and they will emerge, perfect in every way, and will have reached resolute peace through their knowledge. For the universe will be their playground and anything they chose to do within it will no longer be a choice; they will be free from the responsibility of their choices, and their knowledge will be pure and previously unheard of in the universe. Acquired through empirical means through vast spaces of time, they will be free, at peace, and we will have achieved our goal. Unlike us, they will have no birth life to be constrained by. They will be placed in the Goo a hollow shell, know nothing else but the knowledge they acquire from the great, terrible, beautiful, eternal minds that we have picked out for them to learn from. Now, my

brothers and sisters, we will take a silence for the ones that will pass, for all their flaccid lives will surely perish. We are not monsters; we are creators.”

They sat still, not knowing how long the silence was going to last, unmoving, and thinking on the lives they had lead, the journey they were about to take and the wondrous future they were about to bequeath onto humanity. One, however, began to squirm. There were no misgivings in his mind, for he was partially responsible for what was to be done, along with the other Negotiators. But there was something else, a moment of regret deep inside himself; a split second of doubt that made his eyes blink rapidly, giving himself away for an instant. He knew with almost unconditional certainty that everything was perfect, the plan, the Absolute Tooth, the race they were going to create to make humanity whole and unequivocally at peace, and with his own plans in mind, his face shifted. Their natural breeding brought about the facility for emotion, although they had largely conquered its animal and primitive like urges on their bodies until when they wanted or needed to utilise them, though, a flash of their past would on occasion push its way to the surface. It was still possible for the faintest of synaptic sparks to cause what was left of the adrenal glands to pump a minute spray of the reflex hormone into his body; and it had just happened.

Richard broke the silence with an uneasy tone. “Jack, my brother, my patron and my helper, your face betrays you. Tell me what is it that bothers you now, at this most pivotal of junctures?”

“It is nothing Richard, Alpha Negotiator and our teacher. We will take our place now in time, on our knees to its knowledge, and when we emerge we will be perfect,” Jack replied.

“So be it. Our time is here. Take up your shells now, as we enter the Goo. When we

emerge we will be entirely different. Now all ends for the good of new beginnings.”

Chapter 4 – Germany

The piercing alarm sound jerked him and everyone on the Hovertrain from their sleep. It indicated that they had passed into a new territory, and been simultaneously scanned for identification and parasites. Remaining still, he rolled his eyes without opening them, and imagined his vehicle: the floating mass of alloyed steel, housing flesh, and speeding along its magnetic tracks just below Mach one, gliding silently through the night and trying to draw as little attention as possible. He pictured a gigantic black bullet passing across the plains, emanating a blue sheen from the moon's soft glow, disturbing little and no-one as it shot past lavishly dressed citizens on stage-like station platforms at sporadic periods during its journey. One side of his mouth grinned slightly, before falling back into line.

He had no idea what time it was or how long he had left, but it was dark and warm enough so he could calm his mind and pretend to stare at corners in his imagination's eye, as his laybed compartment hummed gently in synchronization with the soft, hardly noticeable up-and-down motion of the train. He started slipping into a deep meditation, trying not to think too hard about what he had to do, why he had to do it, or what had caused him to make that decision. He spread out, star-fished in the compartment, relaxing his eyes and trying to focus his mind on the spot an inch directly in front of the bridge of his nose.

His body began to buzz. A deep sensation overcame him: heavy and light at the same time, surrounded by black and white, by large blocks and small blocks, unable to grip onto anything. In the back of his mind, he saw around him a badly lit stone room that smelled of vinegar. He was terrified, and for a millionth of a second, he thought that he was dead.

Then he thought he was back in his mother's womb, floating weightless in embryonic

fluid. This lasted only for a single flicker of a bee's wing, in that momentary instant that lies between serenity in the passage of sleep and insanity of the realization of life, that flash of absolute confusion. He wanted to stay there, in the perplexed state of absolute zero, and as his body's motor began to kick in, as electricity began to fly at the speed of light between neurons in his brain, he clung to the nothingness, trying to remain there, floating, empty and peaceful; but without a chance to start, it was already over.

Cobwebs around his mind began to clear; the warm dark space was illuminated and vented with fresh air as the computer detected an increase in heart rate usually associated with waking up. The 9 by 9 by 9 feet laybed compartment in the speeding train was empty, and glowed a calming blue, but could take on any colour. As his eyes began to flutter and muscles began to twitch, the Smartputty walls continued to radiate light, slowly rising in intensity so as not to strain his eyes. Raising a hand to his head he rubbed his eyebrows softly, pushing the hairs against the grain and straightening them back out again. Sitting up slowly, the lumps he'd shaped from the putty to aide his favourite sleeping position were gradually pulled back into the wall, becoming taught again, but ready to be drawn out at any time and mashed into another shape or tool.

He didn't want it.

He wanted the dark. He hadn't slept in what seemed like years. "The training," he thought, and gritted his teeth. Now was no different though, but at least he could calm himself just enough to escape reality for a few minutes. Now, he could clear his mind of stations and airports, seaports and spaceports and travelling to who knows where, what and when. Perhaps the whole experience wouldn't have been so bad if he had also been ignorant of why. But he never was, and the most worrying thing of all, after so many years of self-inflicted torment, of pushing forward in his arena

of shit, grabbing onto morsels of life for virtually no gain, had finally brought him to this juncture. He had almost begun to like it. But now his 'Faster' was getting to him, and it shook him to his core.

He calmed himself, with slow deep breaths, but quick-sharp thoughts. "That's right - trick the computer; it's stupid and cheap and fucked, independent from the trains central computer; it'll only continue to detect you waking up unless you act... Quick, before the putty starts to broadcast TV and that fizzy grey froth is sitting in a cup-shape in front of you. And take that swine out of your mind; he wants to be in there clawing at the watery pink flesh of your brain, driving you to do that what he wants, but you're smarter than him as well, smarter than them all. You...you...you must slow down."

And as he slowed his heart rate, lightly closed his eyes and remained motionless, the blue glow of the putty subsided again until it was pitch black. He lay back down, pulling at the putty, shaping it slowly with his forehead and cheekbone. It grew soft, and moulded to his body, curled in a foetal position in the middle of the compartment. 'No more territory borders for at least four hours,' he thought, motionless, his brain slowing, moving away from the real, into the dark.

The linchpin that held his mind to his body was hammered out by a heavy set humanoid-like shadow figure in his subconscious, and as he began to fall into a deep meditative state, he felt his brain begin to kick, thrashing in a silent fall. He fumbled with the pin, desperately trying to hold his mind to his body, trying to smash its rusted rod form into the couplings, but it was too late. He was locked inside the cell of his ravaged mind, as his brain stuttered and screamed with horror and, tearing at hair, scraping at a rickety wooden door with broken nails, nothing could be done. The deep state, like heavy clothing wrapped around a weak body in

freezing cold water, dragged him down; down into the dark and nothing could be done to help. He lay motionless but he was in pain, his eyes moving with increasing intensity beneath his eyelids, making small ridges that pulsed like trapped super-organism of insects beneath a film of skin. Inside he was wrecked and twisted. He turned to see his father moving towards him with eyes like in century-old still photographs, all red and hollow, monster-like with fury, set on a terrible task and unable to be bargained with. He was in what seemed to be a courtyard area, surrounded by large sky-scraping buildings and people in pastel-coloured clothing. He cried at them for help but they were motionless, staring with the same red eyes. His father's wicked doppelganger inched forward until he was within striking distance. He felt a hand being thrust underneath his ribcage. His skin had become elastic and stretched with the penetrating hand which knifed around the space, causing a stabbing pain that felt like a brutal attack from the inside.

Then he was awake.

A ferocious spasm that made him stand upright in a fashion that almost defied gravity snapped him out of the meditation nightmare. The lights came on rapidly this time, and he fell back almost as quickly as he has risen, landing on the soft putty. All sweat and shiver, his face bore the signature of the devil and he screamed a silent cry, because he knew no one could hear; he was inside this room and that was that, but he clenched his fists hard enough to feel his nails digging into his leathery palms. He thought to the future, quickly, and pulled back some semblance of hope.

Naked, he sat in a half contorted position on the putty, gulping in his dry throat, head rocking on a weak and floppy neck. Some of the putty went translucent and the computer displaced a set of muted video feeds, scrolling news stories and other sources of twisted

entertainment from across the planetary systems. Still shaken by the recesses of his mind, he grabbed at what strength he could as his body filled with adrenaline, forcefully and repeatedly punching the putty with his right arm and stretching it out with his left. The quick slapping sound gave him pleasure, helped him empty his mind until he had a comfortable-looking mound of putty by his side. He loosely rolled onto it, his limbs making larger slapping sounds against the putty as they fell.

There was a boy figure on the translucent screen the putty had put up in front of him. The boy was hyperactive, skinny and pale looking, an inbred socialite no doubt. His eyes were too close together - a blatant give away. The inability to determine distance accurately left him with little human soul, only to follow a blood line that had developed over the last numerous generations. One to move into the spotlight and take from it everything he could; although this boy was the product of entire generations of interbreeders who broke the rules to gain notoriety, just like every other fucker for as long as he could remember. The boy jumped around the screen, paying more attention to the camera than his interviewer and claiming that one of his great ancestors helped formulate the drug that gave birth to coloured eye-sight in the mid 20th century.

It quickly changed, flicking between channels. Hitting the history station, he could see a petite rock star with the words 'MARS' written across his chest in what looked like blood, as he moved in time with an inaudible beat, strutting across an open air festival stage, singing and flaying around in front of millions of people, all pasty faced, all scrambling to be seen. The crowd's insanity was only surpassed by the sheer brutality from the police that were desperately trying to keep a grip on the situation. Gigantic rubber boulders were being fired into the crowd that shot out smaller balls, and smaller still until they got so small that the air was thick with what

seemed to be a grey mist, but was actually microscopic balls that would perforate the lung when inhaled. He asked the screen to reduce its contrast levels, put his hands behind his head, kicked his legs forward, cross one leg over the other and began to grind his teeth. He hated all these gutless whores.

An array of information the computer had picked out as being the top content, as voted for across the galaxy through the 'social Fixx programme,' continued to be displayed. It was full of degenerative swine, continual streams of nobodies trying to become somebodies as easily and as quickly as possible. But these were the hapless ones, with little hope or possibility of ever gaining any recognition for anything, let alone of hitting that peak popularity that the chosen few gain: those few with Fasters, those few bound by some time and place that they must, for the rest of their existence, live over and over for The Benefit. He'd escaped it once, "It'll happen again," he snarled to himself and pointed at the screen.

The grey fizz he'd dreaded the arrival of appeared in front of him in a thin white cup of solidified putty, raised about a foot from the floor by a slender white stem. He grabbed the cup; it was solid. As he brought it towards him, he grabbed the stem underneath; it moved and stretched but left the grey fizz receptacle steady in his hand. The stem going loose like string, dropping in loops between his fingers, he grabbed and continued to pull, and roaring with pain he shot the liquid back and continued to pull at the thread, seeming to think he could somehow unravel the entire room, to come undone, and escape the place and time he was in; but it was pointless.

Settling himself, he slowly pulled the strings of formed putty from his arms and legs, and watched the floor suck it back inside itself. Pushing his feet into the ground and stiffening, he leant forward, placing his head in his hands, furrowing his brow, and thinking. Years of torment

and reconciliation were pushed aside by a mammoth forearm of might and determined will, which was in turn trodden on by the black boots of internal exploration and the formation of a belief system that had smashed against his brain for just too long to fall back into any 'normal' sort of routine. All he had now were his thoughts, the continual recap of events that had begun to shape him from the second of their inception: his training, and his plan, the future and where he would take it. He had to concentrate, to ball up his grey matter and focus on what was in front of him without lapse. There was nothing else; there could be nothing else.

He called for light, sat up straight, and pulled out a clump of putty from the wall with both hands until it looked enough to rest his head against. Saying "sit", he leant back, beginning to think of a time, of the very incident in his past that would fire the howitzer shell into his mountain of beliefs, and cause the avalanche of rock that would shape them further. This was the incident that would push him to do what needed to be done, establishing his system of thought that so many, particularly in this day and age, found so odd, although he preferred to call it distinct. No sooner had he begun to stare at corners, than he was there. His fists began to close in a subconscious reaction to a time and place lost forever. A bead of sweat rose from his forehead, surface tension bringing it down into the corner of his eye, causing him to wince and rub. The soft putty underneath him moulded to his torso and began to radiate a little heat. The light in the room dimmed, and he drifted into more meditation, taking him directly back to that time and place, a time and place by no means perfect, but an eternity away from here, the hell his life was now. He'd come a long way, further than most people ever would, but he had never wanted it. This was his cage, and the fight was almost up.

The fly never even made it to his skin. Caught mid air and crushed in his palm, it had no chance. Germany's father's reactions were almost of a superhuman nature, fast and cunning, sharp as cut diamond, and experienced in life beyond that of normal people. Germany respected him and loved him in equal measures, listening attentively to each word that glided out of his mouth; he could almost see them carried by sprite-like figures marching along to a silent beat.

“Now, Germany, tell me what it was that Washington Irving said; what were his thoughts about Americans, all those centuries ago, that so adequately predicted the future?”

A young man of sixteen, Germany was eager to answer, and searched his brain for the exact words. He rubbed the temples of his head, which was ridged, as if carved out of wood. He was masculine beyond his years, handsome and rugged even with his young skin, and only a thin film of fluffy facial hair gave any true indication of his age; he could have played a fresh faced 25 year old with ease. As he moved his hands up and through his jet black hair, he clenched his teeth in an attempt to show, physically, the intense thought he was putting into answering the question. No room for error, even though his father would have forgiven it, and wouldn't even have been particularly angry, if he hadn't remembered it at all. But it was his nature to get it absolutely perfect, right on the dot, first time around.

“He said that Americans want something to rally round; some brilliant light to allure them from afar. . . . They want something to attract and concentrate their affections. . . .”

“Outstanding, young man,” replied his father, with a quick flick of the wrist and a snappy clap of the hands. “And you see the evolution of that: how this concept, borne so true throughout the decades and centuries thereafter, has brought about the terrible pit of human waste that exists across the globe now. How these infectious ideals eroded a lust for all that is life, and all that is to

achieve, to learn and to love, and turned it into a hunched half-breed of perpetual nothingness, a lust for something that doesn't actually exist outside of concept tanks lead by transhuman Fasters. Granted, relative peace has been achieved between East and West - the unprecedented collapse of the major religions saw to that - and as faith was swapped for selfish lust, for undeserved notoriety, our lives changed, the world changed, ultimately becoming something weaker, disembowelled. That is the reason why we moved to Micronesia, why this last outpost of sanity in a world rampant with self-obsessed madness, with this idea of Celebrity, is now our home.”

Of course Germany knew this. He knew the reason why they had moved, the reason behind their simple life in the Federated States of Micronesia, away from what his father, Mandrake Germany, continually called the ‘bastard state’, which near enough meant the rest of the world and its eight billion inhabitants.

“Scholarly virtue, righteous honour, majestic duty, uncommented dignity and nobility, all were sold into the gutter for greasy self worth, the admiration of fools, weak profit and sycophantic approval, Germany. It tears me inside to think of the great things this mighty race could have achieved if it were not for the rapid plague-like expansion of Celebrity.”

Germany's father, dressed in simple khaki shorts and a plain, purple t-shirt stood at the doorway of the small white shed, hands in pockets. With his back to him, he watched the wind pass slowly through the tall grass, and tried to flick a small stone out of his flip-flop that had been digging into his sole. His hardened skin on his bare forearms and calves looked tanned; the jet-black yet thinning hair on his powerful legs always gave the impression of a tan, but now, in the summer, he had actually caught some sun. He turned to Germany and smiled, leaning forward,

further still, up on his tiptoes and almost losing balance, as if to provoke some sort of reaction, to which Germany gladly obliged.

“Individual self determination and actualization were keynote themes that, in a by-gone age, brought about the rapid expansion of humanity’s moral and technological advances.”

“Excellent Germany,” his father applauded, leaning back on the heels of his feet and bowing his head slightly.

“As these faded - dying and being absorbed into the grey - an incessant need for self worth came about, but for all the wrong reasons. Once an inventor, now a wannabe personality in a minefield of gutless whores. Once a budding rock star prodigy musician, now an image, a tattoo or t-shirt bearer who wants, with jaded passion, to be known, admired and praised, with no merit or worth, lazy and dull - freaks without a cause.”

Germany lent back on to the two hind legs of the wooden chair he was sitting in, smiling with arrogance only a teenager can have, as if he had summed up all of the world’s problems and ills in a few sentences, and threw his pen into his mouth crunching down on the clear Bic plastic. His father walked calmly over to him and patted him on his back. The small building shook with a sudden wisp of wind that flew in through the open door and open windows with a howl, whipped up the dust on the floor and pushed the few scattered papers off their tables.

“Some interesting points there, Germany; let us explore your ideas of self-actualization some other time...I think cross referencing your thoughts with religious connotations would be fruitful, and on how the East Was Won: how it wasn’t on the battlefield, but through pipes of optical wiring, through media data, countless terabytes of images, video, sounds and stories...”

His father spoke in a slow and thoughtful voice, creaking one word at a time and not wanting to

give the game away entirely, not wanting to let Germany know just how proud of him he actually was. Moving out of the doorway hands clasped behind his back, watching the world drift - he turned around, creaking the rickety floorboards with the flip and flop of his foot attire. Germany watched him as he walked forwards and, stepping slightly to his right, circled around. Once within reaching distance, he rubbed Germany's shoulders with his flattened out heavy hands, and dropped something with feigned clumsiness. He stood there silent, half waiting for Germany to react, and he smiled, realizing his son respected him too much, ignoring the falling object to save his father's embarrassment. Within seconds the moment was over though as he quietly whispered, "...Take these. Have some fun."

The keys to the small Piper PA-39 Twin Comanche light aircraft had landed half on the desk in front of him, and slowly crept their way off, falling into his lap with a rattle, soft clunk and quick slide across his synthetic fabric shorts, onto the wooden floor. Germany leant forward to grab them off the ground. Catching the old wood with his nails, he clenched the set of noisy metals and felt a shiver run up his spine. His hairs stood on end and the anticipation and adrenaline made him jolt and his buttocks clench hard as he felt his stomach quickly kick, pushing a little bit of vomit up to catch the back of his throat. Unparalleled excitement rushed through his body to all his extremities, the likes of which he'd only experienced once before, at the climax of a marathon romp with his casual lover. In an instant he was gone, running out of the open doorway of the shed, screaming with glee. He had wanted to fly on his own for so long he could hardly even remember, and now was his time.

"Germany!" his father shouted in a tone that tried to mimic his son's excitement. "Just remember everything I taught you. You'll be fine; stay relaxed. I'm going for a swim in the bay

with your mother - come give us a flyby!”

Germany turned, slowing slightly to run backwards, shouting, “YOU KNOW I WILL!”

And just as quick he was facing forward, scrambling through their land, rich with fruits and vegetables, wheat and rice, animals for meats and dairy. Although they could potentially be surrounded by technology that would take care of all of their dietary and sanitary needs, they were very much self-sufficient on the island - his father liked it that way. Germany continued to run, jumping over shadows cast by branches of the short trees he was pacing underneath, thinking over the last few years: the lessons, the ‘training’, all of which his father had given him. He had never given any other reason for moving to Micronesia, starting their own farm, and living their lives out in relative peace, other than one fact: that he hated what the world had become. He was tormented by the lack of pride humans had, how their mighty past they had fought so hard for over so many centuries had turned into a flaccid future, like a severed cows tongue, once pure muscle, powerful and always moving, now a heavy piece of flesh flopping around, rough to touch, sickly to taste, with uses, but who wants them? So they moved, out to the Federated States of Micronesia, a set of islands in the North Pacific Ocean, about three-quarters of the way from Hawaii to Indonesia, fairly stormy but good for farming. Remote and ambiguous, under the control of America, the official language was English, and its inhabitants were pretty much left alone by everyone; no natural resources or outstanding natural beauty meant no bother from prospectors or tourists.

Germany’s father realized this and moved them there, to teach Germany the old ways, to remove him from the continual chase for popularity in a world of skull-fucked morons with little education and even less pride, and Germany loved it. Their old friends thought of this as some

sort of new age romanticism, trying to grip onto something that was nice but was gone, largely forgotten by a planet obsessed with something else: with being seen, rather than being successful, where being seen was being successful and where the masses, that great unwashed, would go about getting in front of the eyes of as many people as they could through any means necessary. Although, Germany thought the world's system did seem to be working. A different sort of evolution, yes, but it did have its merits, which he often thought his father would intentionally skim over, with that sort of 'bad is bad' mentality, and there's no two ways about it.

Germany thought back to the first time he'd asked about the move, to the quick, succinct and entirely perfect answer.

"Son, I can fly every day, read, exercise, become the best person I can possibly be without treading on too many toes. I have no lust for popularity, Celebrity or riches like the majority of the rest of the world, I just want to secure knowledge, have some fun, take pleasure from where I can and run the farm. I'd make myself useful on the mainland, but what would be the point? What's being achieved by that which is taking place across the globe right now? We, as a race, are dying a slow, slow death, Germany; I'm doing my part to prevent that"

Germany had never really found any fault with that, or at least any decent hole to argue against it, and giving a quick shrug of his shoulders as he pushed through some particularly deep undergrowth he snapped back to where he was, feeling the keys clenched in his fist, balled flesh around metal, and thought about the plane waiting for him up ahead. He loved flying, in their Piper PA that was decades old, but his father kept it in working order and ticking over, running on recycled vegetable oil, just like his old man had done before him, though at that time back on the ranch in northern America. Germany's father never really spoke too much about his

upbringing, but he knew he flew with his father when he was young and wanted to instil the discipline and skill that it takes to fly a plane in him, just as Germany hoped to do with his own son some day.

He broke through the thickest of the undergrowth, having chosen to run as the crow flies, through whatever it took, to get there in the fastest possible time, rather than taking the more conventional, but much slower, route laid out by dust and stones, the small path he'd rolled out himself around the farm as a young boy when they'd first arrived. The exposed skin on his forearms and shins was bloody and scuffed. He had run just over a mile over rough ground, in a little over six minutes, and he was panting for breath. The adrenaline had taken him this far, but now he bent over, hands on thighs, desperately trying to catch his breath. He began to smell the vegetable oil-soaked surroundings of the small runway strip his father had created as he stumbled through the final bit of brush, a smell that gave the impression that the entire area had been deep fried; the oil cooked the vegetation through the heat of the mid-day sun leaving the soft ground charred and brown, and the grass runway was patched with auburn rings where gallons of oil had accidentally fallen while previously trying to fuel the plane.

“Steadily Germany...in through the nose...out through the mouth...slow the heart...take control...composure is the key,” he said out loud to himself, in between gulping breaths, sweat dripping from his brow and glistening in the sun. He raised his nose to the sky, feeling the hot sun quickly drying his sweaty forehead, creating that natural cooling effect that's never quite enough. A smile ran over his face and he brushed back his black hair, gripping it as if to ring out the sweat.

He brought his head back down to look at the plane, sitting there covered with a blue

tarpaulin; it needed unsheathing before it could go anywhere. Having caught as much breath as he felt was necessary, he began walking over, finally opening his clenched hand, revealing the keys that shimmered in the sun as the coat of palm sweat quickly dissipated. Moving in and undoing the ground ties, he smiled and continued to calm his heart rate, thinking and trying to replay his lessons over in his head, from the simplest of 'how to', to the most complex 'do not's'. He moved around to the front, grabbed a handful of tarpaulin, turned his back to the plane and pulled it taught over his shoulder while beginning to lean forward and pull, with one mighty effort, to take it all off at once. He'd never managed it before, always requiring too much exertion in the past to do in one go. This time was different; as his face went red, eyes squeezed tightly shut, teeth grinding and his legs stamping like a rabid set of fleshy pistons, he screamed a gargled primordial growl with bulging veins in his neck, and finally it gave. He fell forward, onto his knees and slowly down onto his face, burying it in the folded grass. His breath was heavy; normally a picture of health he was almost wheezing by this point and wished he had some possible way to scoop out what felt like two white hot coals resting at the bottom of his lungs, he rolled over onto his front, pushing the tarp, that had come billowing down on him, below his torso but not completely off him, like it was some sort of giant plastic duvet. He lay there, panting, sweating, exhausted but feverish with excitement. He only had one possible cure, and there she was in front of him, The Golden Thought, shining in the midday light the way only buffed chrome can, fueled and ready to go; she was perfect. A smile grew from ear to ear, and if his friends had asked him, he would have been truthful in his reply that he was ever so slightly sexually aroused, trying to control the slight bulge in his pants that could have quickly gotten out of control.

Jumping up with a sense of urgency and military-like precision, straight onto two feet from

having been completely laid out and jelly-like on the floor, he could feel his heart wanting to escape from his chest, pumping hard. His fingers had swollen with blood, and he licked the salty sweat from his top lip, slightly quenching his dry throat. He quickly went about the steps to prep the plane: jogging around, crouching where necessary, and lightly kicking the tires to check their pressure was 'about right'. He had a scan of the wings, and noticed his father had obviously planned Germany's solo trip as he had pre-fuelled the light aircraft, leaving a note on the fuel cap that simply read 'fuelled and ready to go. Enjoy, Pops'. Having caught his breath he tried to wipe his forehead on his forearm before realizing it was just as wet, and with a soft thud planted his brow against the aircraft and began to wipe across the hull with a squeak of taut skin on painted metal that left a slightly mucky smear across a shiny three inch patch. Whipping his head around and grinning, he opened the small door. As his black hair bobbed over his head, mopping his brow once again with sweat, he jumped up and inside and clambered into the front, which hosted an esoteric array of gauges, switches and knobs. Sharp, with an almost mean look across his face, the prelude began. Thoughts were running away with him; not wanting to miss anything, he began to collect his breath again, repeatedly wiped his moist palms on his shorts, and sat in the warm, cracked leather of the pilot's seat.

Everything was in its necessary place: his belt buckled, fuel fuelled, switches switched and gauges ready to gauge. Right down to the last detail, he had gone through it all, and was ready. Leaning forward slightly, he felt the shoulder straps of his belt squeeze against his collar bone, and he pressed the 'on' switch. In their typical fashion, the engines on either side of him kicked into action, spinning the blades on both sides in one complete rotation, before stalling for a split second and finally kicking into life. It was as if the small aircraft didn't want to give too much

away too soon, but once running, its vibrating hull made it necessary for Germany quickly to get to work and take off hastily; no time to absorb the feeling of the machine coming alive around him. He gripped the controls, adjusted the rudder pedals and began to taxi on to their self made runway. His jaw tightened mandible muscle pulsating, bringing slight dips to his temples. It was just the right time of day, facing away from the sun; he was surrounded by light but retained a totally clear field of vision. The sky lay bare of clouds, and he brought the throttle up slowly, about to enter it, about to be absorbed by the sky in front of him, inside the thin metal of the plane, mind tight with thought, body pumping with adrenaline, but as a being, as an entity, a symbiote inside the plane, as one, a connection between flesh and metal. He remained in control, overcome with ecstasy he knew everything that was needed of him. Slow breathing; sweat tickling down from beneath his chin over his Adams Apple and onto his chest; his small hairs stood on end and nipples pumped with blood, becoming hard - he could feel them chafe against his t-shirt. More heavy breathing; squinting and intense; the skin on his knuckles white with the tension brought about by the determined grip around the control stick, steady, in control, authoritative.

The rumble of the aircraft reaching its optimum take-off speed sent shivering pulses up his spine, and as he pulled back on the rudder, sending him into the air, he thrust forward in the pilot seat, feeling his genitals rub coarsely against the inside of his jean shorts. He let out a mighty groan and shuddered, bringing his tongue out of his mouth and curling it upwards almost touching his nose, with fierce emotion, raging inside the machine. They were as one, harmonious, yet he knew he was in control, as did the aircraft. It zipped over the small tree line at the end of the runway, disturbing the few cows chomping happily on the grass, higher and higher. It levelled out at a few hundred feet, calm and at ease in the hands of its master. "Good girl", he whispered, and

sat back into the seat, tingling with sensation, smiling deeply inside.

The aircraft was a classic by design. With a maximum speed of about 200mph, it was the sports car of its class yet highly fuel efficient; even on the recycled vegetable oil fuel it had been modified to run on, it could achieve a range of about 700 miles without a splutter. So Germany took her round the island. Low lying and with no other air traffic, there was little to manoeuvre around, and Germany needed only to weave through the air, through time itself, absorbing the sights and the exhilarating feeling of being up there alone, at one with the machine. Leaving his thoughts of his father's teachings, of the cluttered and jaded world that stretched out before him, he relaxed back into the warm leather and comfortable, yet imperial like, cushion of the pilot seat. Veering right and left at his own whim, Germany remembered how his father had requested a fly over by the bay where they would be swimming. Blanking the fact that he seemed to be breathing out much more air than he was breathing in, he checked his gauges, gave her some gas, increased speed slightly, brought her round to the right heading and began over to the shoreline, towards the shallow yet long bay that he had spent so much time paddling in during his youth, and frolicking in with his causal lover during his teenage years; happy thoughts. He blinked rapidly to clear the mist from his eyes, rhythmically beat the ceiling of the aircraft with the fist of his right hand, brought the heading round directly towards the bay, and lowered his altitude.

He was in awe of his father since he could remember, and he loved his mother dearly. He couldn't think of anything better than giving them this perfect spectacle: their son, in charge, perfectly in control, utilizing the skill and instructions his father had so rigorously instilled in him, shooting over them at maximum speed and minimum altitude, kicking up a slight mist with the waters below, shoving them into a split second of fear before rising up again and speeding away,

leaving them proud and happy. He could see the bay coming up over the horizon and he began a slow decent, from the 1000ft altitude he had been cruising at down to about 300ft as he steadily approached, wanting to bring her down even further as the time arrived - a real fly-by, something that would wipe the smile off their faces for just long enough to be filled with terror, to be surrounded by nothing but water and fear, and then to jump into the exact polar opposite of emotion an instant later, an invigorating feeling, making them feel alive. Everything was right; he squinted and saw them in the distance, bobbing playfully in the water. He checked his gauges once again and began a slow decent, foot by foot. He regulated his breathing; anticipation of the event was overwhelming him, adrenaline pumped and his heart rate rose again, he felt the connection with the plane that he had felt when taking off.

But something was different, and in an instant the horror came. The revolting effect of absolute terror made him kick and scream, involuntarily convulsing with a sickening spasm. The control stick was jammed solid. As he began to smash wildly with the butt of his fist, he cut himself deeply, and blood squirmed across the windscreen. He went limp.

The inside of the cabin was motionless, vibrating lightly, blood slowly sliding down glass but otherwise totally without movement. The gauges all read 'zero,' the rudder pedals and control stick were ridged, digital displays were all grey, as the aircraft slowly crept towards the bay, sinking lower and lower. Germany regained his form quickly. Unbridled force and the prospect of what may happen in the next 20 or 30 seconds brought about an animal reaction, primordial in nature, that was untameable, unrepeatable; one time, one place, all or nothing; an absolute all-absorbing rage that was pulled from the deepest, darkest recesses of his instinctual mind. Fists clenched like balls of wrought iron, muscles clenched into ridged plastic, eyes pulsating, all he

could see was grey; the mist had overcome him. All other systems had shut down: reason, logic, morals, all gone; one goal, one focus, to move the plane off its current course or lose everything. So he smashed and grabbed, he pulled and kicked and pushed, bit down on and heaved with every last breath, every possible calorie of energy, turning his body into a unit designed for tearing the inside of planes apart. But it was entirely useless; nothing could be done. The plane felt like it was being kept rigid by a force beyond the realms of reality, beyond anything he could possibly think of, and as the split seconds of wrath and twisted fury took their toll on his smashing and battling limbs, the cabin grew clouded with flying blood, sweat, skin, nails and spit. With one last effort, he kicked at the windscreen, forcing it clear of the aircraft and down into the bay below. Roaring, he reached out of the opening, and slapped his bloodied hands down on the bonnet of the aircraft. The shards of glass in his palms provided some traction on the slippery metal surface. He rose out of the cabin, out onto the front of the plane in a quick, almost in-human, motion that snapped his collar bone under the pressure. He could see them in front of him, screaming and waving; they clearly knew something was wrong, but they were relatively stationary, jumping and shouting. Both his and their cries were muffled by the sounds of the engine.

With a final burst of energy he raised himself to his feet and jumped, raising his knees to his chest, and with all the force he could muster, brought them back down onto the bonnet, with every last effort in his being trying to adjust, even by a fraction, the angle of the aircraft, to bring it down just shy of his screaming parents. But, with his final effort he only brought the trajectory of the plane directly in line with them, and as the kinetic energy of his feet crashing into the springy aluminium hull of the light aircraft repelled him, he shot off into the air like a dart, above and behind it, diving backwards into the water below.

His chest felt heavy and his lungs were burning, the movement was difficult and he couldn't find the floor, but he wasn't falling. He brought the tips of each digit onto the surface of his thumb as a precautionary measure to check they were all there; one, two, three, four...all there, but there was something missing, they were fleshy and without nails...With a spasm that almost cracked his back, he was awake again; he was underwater, and quickly began scrambling for the surface. He could still see sunlight though the normally clear sea but it was mistier than usual with sand; his splashdown in the shallow bay waters had obviously kicked up some sediment which seemed to be tinted with a red that he'd never seen in the sea before. But he was conscious, and heading to the surface, to air. He quickly thought and judged by the lay of the sand in the water that he must have been out for no longer than a second or two. As he rose, another spasm; this time his mind kicked as if to split his brain in two, trying to escape from his skull, attempting to create a hole in the greasy white shell in which it was housed and get away, anywhere, but not connected to the rest of his body. His body was physically ravaged, torn with glass and metal; he was losing a lot of blood but there was something else, something more important. He broke the surface of the water and sucked down air and sea water with a shriek that under any normal circumstances would have made him reel in horror, but it just brought the vital air his brain needed to connect the nodes, to crack at and smash the inside of his skull even further.

He began to tread water as best he could, and then he remembered, and he saw with stinging eyes the smoke rising from the water, the tail of his Piper PA bobbing almost playfully no more than a hundred yards away. Blood and water, and chunks of flesh and bone, had been kicked up into the air by the impact, the aircraft smashing down into his scrambling parents, chopping and dicing them up, throwing their soft tissue into the air, and now it was pitter-pattering back

down onto the shockingly still water.

He vomited violently all over the cabin, coating it with the grey fizz he had shot down before trying to fall asleep. Awake now, alert, and always at exactly the same point; the breach of the water, the unbridled terror, the smell of burnt flesh and vegetable oil in the air, the metallic taste of blood in his mouth, the soft nail-less endings of his fingers. It's all he'd seen, night after night after the incident, just over a decade ago. It's all he'd been allowed to see; it was his contribution, his part in The Benefit and why he had a Faster. He was one of the fortunate few, at least this is what they continually tried to drill into him, to brainwash him with. He noticed how the cabin had absorbed the mess he'd shot out of his mouth across its surfaces; in an undulating manner every part he wasn't sat on went liquid like and turned itself inside out.

“Those swine,” he muttered to himself, “They'll pay...I'll change it...I'll change it all ...almost time, Germany...you're almost there... just concentrate...I'll make it right...just use the grit you know you have...you've gotten this far...no need to combat fear when you are fear itself...you are their Demon...you are rage...you are fire...prevail Germany...prevail...every man has to die...”

He was kneeling upright in the room, facing the translucent screen that had become active again, displaying the horror that was his reality and that he knew only too well; his head was bowed but the sounds gave it away. His forearms were facing away from him, knuckles facing the floor, both arms parallel with his torso. He slowly raised his clenched fists while raising his head, and opened his hands, looking at the scars from the shards of glass that had been removed all those years ago. He guessed that it would be another hour, or hour and a half, before he'd be at

his destination, before he'd be able to kick start his plan. And he would do so with the might and speed of a Meteor, and with the same destructive capabilities, as if an actual lump of rock, ice and gas had hit the surface of the earth with unparalleled destructive force, devastating life and raising a cloud of death up and above the remains below. He would follow it through with every last modicum of strength and energy and effort he had left in his being, which by this point was about to erupt with the explosive force he needed.

“I...I...guess it is an incredible s-s-s-s-shi-story...” A voice stammered from the walls. Germany parted his fingers, looked through the gaps and refocused onto the screen only to see the camera panning onto the exaggerated face of a Presenter. posthuman his smile was abnormally wide, almost reaching to his pointy ears on either side of his long and thin face. He was able to talk at speed and with precision on a wave and tone that made his voice almost hypnotic. He was like a moth, an overstated body that, while not obese or malformed, looked awkward and was hard to pass off with any finesse. He seemed to concentrate with one goal, like the moth chasing the light, always with purpose but never getting anywhere, entirely convincing, distracting and pointless at the same time. Germany tilted his head, quickly shifted off his knees into a more comfortable position and began to relax into the show, ‘The Benefit’, which transfixed the globe, kept the people quiet and dumb. The right corner of Germany’s top lip twitched. The camera shifted from the Presenter onto the Vessel, the 'special' person with a story, with something to tell – just like himself, he thought with another twitch. He’d met this Vessel once, very quickly at one of the GigaStudios on the European continent, but this poor bastard had been totally absorbed by his Faster, without communication with anyone else, other than a Presenter when they arrived at the studios. It was hard not to give into their whim, to believe the Faster, to become a companion,

believe in the cause, in The Benefit, to stop questioning, to be like everyone else; and this man had, unequivocally. Germany could see it in his empty eyes as they passed each other for a split second. He'd gone away; he was Vessel, a story, a tool.

He started thinking to himself again, over his father's teachings, over his own thoughts, over his plan. His head was clear now, removed from the dark pit of terror that often crept in when he shut his eyes. He was awake, concentrating in the light and staring at corners again, on the area about a foot in front of his nose. He could feel his frontal lobes begin to buzz, and he began his internal dialogue, his final preparation, about to reassure himself why everything is what it is, and why he must change it. His lips began moving without sound, as if getting a run up, and he began to speak.

“We once knew a time when being part of, or party to, a high ranking and renowned profession gave way to Celebrity, gave birth to a ‘Star’, and opened a metaphorical door that set you on the path to the admiration of thousands, millions, of entire races and religions. High ranking individuals, couplets or groups in either the civilian, military or criminal world, as long as their skill was high enough in the given field, gained notoriety which could in turn lead to fame or infamy. Granted, others took advantage and would gain notoriety without skill, with thought manipulation like a supposed Guru, or inherit it through no fault of their own. However, the scale of this was dignified, allowed its users and believers their life, while leaving others to remain, to keep a grip on the cold reality of day.

Moving forward, branding and franchising of the person rather than the product became an increasing phenomenon of the 21st century; corporate fat cats and business minds bought into a person, providing them with money, not to sponsor products, but to be a product which would provide vast wealth through their own self.

In 1905 the “American Magazine,” predicted the future of its own people, country, and indeed the glut of the planet with quite horrifying precision in stating that, “The old standards are passing. The

old Gods are dying in the world of greedy finance.” But who was to know how low the standards would go, how deeply things would change?

Selfless public virtue had become a foreign concept by 2050, and by 2100 the world was a different place. Personality alone became a means to distinguish Individuals from the mass rather than being combined with skill and talent, and as talent fell, as skill slowly poured away into the abyss, personality died in place of the effortlessly manipulated, moronic, empty headed fools. Celebrity had won, finally and with ease, over almost all common ground.

This staggering machine of desire, to be known and loved... but not any more for brilliant and shining achievements, no longer Stars in their own right shining above any other through the normal space occupied by the common man. They are delusional freaks, more like dimmed torches and faded lights; they are black holes that absorb all light around them with a sense of self worth. As Celebrity treads on the war-torn hands of heroism, the bravest and most fervent of humans slowly sell their souls into movies and book deals.

The media’s soul developed and evolved from a beautiful and steadfast colossus of freedom into a dirty slime, covered with the filth of greed, getting fat on the milk of Celebrity, and forgetting about the virtues by which it once stood. Powerful and dirty minds of men collaborated, and as more money fed this filth, keeping the publics lust for more Celebrity and gossip constantly unabated, political struggles dwindled. Men took hold of more power without anyone even noticing, as people were too preoccupied with their own self-worth in comparison to the undignified morons the national press and international super-sites constantly covered in a 24 hour-a-day fashion. Its quintessential beginnings reigned in the mecca of stardom, Hollywood, and as the American economy floundered in the 1930s recession, political struggle and economic hardship were quelled ever-so-slightly by the 80 million people a week attending picture shows across the country, far and wide. It was just the beginning.

Instead of the political masterminds of the century using communication mediums previously unseen in the history of man for gainful purposes, to acquire followers and believers, to push forward politics for the general development of man, they grew greedy with the power they could achieve through unscrupulous means. Politicians had always been likened to rats; now they were quickly becoming rats,

crawling around, feeding on meagreness and the turned backs of the masses to survive, and as a sewer rat grows massive and powerful on the filth of man, politicians did the same.

The disgusting truth of it all is what the French sociologist Jean Baudrillard characterized as a culture dominated by “simulacra.” This came to a pure reality. Cultural icons were made not through substance but through strong visuals; they were fakes; no one and nothing was real. And tricky minds working behind the scenes for untold wealth and lashings of power grew few, as the pace sped up; the ones with the power were becoming more powerful than ever.

The culture of Celebrity numbing the minds of the masses and grounding itself in the terra firma of time, brought about one of the most fascist and dictatorial states of all time. Relative peace throughout the globe was achieved and maintained; but at what cost? Freedom, actual freedom, was a lost concept; the people were given the impression they could do as they wished, but their fascination with self was overpowering; the need and want for Celebrity was unbridled; nothing, absolutely nothing, could compare with the frenzy that overtook, spreading like a virus throughout humanity. Armies of life coaches, lifestyle gurus, professional Celebrity advisers, parenting coaches, super-nannies, makeover experts, healers, facilitators, mentors and guides, picked apart common sensibility, reducing almost everyone to unflinching gunk.

Man never wants any power taken away from him; no man with power is ever willing to relinquish that power through conventional means; the day of philosophers becoming Kings never happened. So when Celebrity and Guru parasites began taking over every aspect of people’s lives, the quick thinking, hare-like politicians that were left didn’t collude with these people, but instead continued to exist in the background, unnoticed, trying to keep things ticking. And then they took them over, with tactical precision; they had the technology behind them that gave access to mind control techniques; they turned the very people the masses trusted into their own tools, and once they had these people on their side they had unreal power. The once Guru or councillor became known as a Faster, for the speed at which they could take a person and manipulate them into doing what they wanted was unreal. They were given posthuman modifications by the government, tasks that they must complete, and they were set into the wild. There were different levels, from the most powerful ‘A list Fasters’ that went around the globe

finding the people with actual content - sieving through the endless shit of lost souls desperately clinging to the belief that they will one day be known, make it to a Gigastudio to be in front of the masses, top rated on the Universal Mixx system and loved - through to the 'Town hall Fasters' that stood in new halls, like priests at an old time church, handing out 'life knowledge,' yet all the while making sure that everyone stayed obsessed with the pointless, with the façade that had been put up around them, making sure the people in power remained there, and could do as they wished. It was a perfect, effortless system: release the Fasters into the wild, keep broadcasting endless streams of pointless content, keep the populous working but in constant hope of fame, of Celebrity, of being 'someone,' keep the impression of a better life for those who were famous but in actual fact be in total control of it. And in the mean time, in the unnoticed shadows of actual power, the government can do anything it wants, to anyone, anywhere, just as long as it maintains that level of preoccupied, apathetic, motionless, lifeless, gutless, false and ultimately disillusioned want for something that doesn't even exist, it can remain at the top of the pile for as long as it lasts. A people who believe they are free, allowed to praise and kneel down in front of what and who they want, and ultimately believe they can also achieve the dizzying heights of the Gigastudio and The Benefit, but are all the time being precisely fed what the government wants. Now that's a fucked people, a fucked race.

And now here I am, with my own FASTER, one of the most powerful I've ever come across. But of course, I have a story - the Top Story according to many - so they have to keep me under control, sedated and willing to explain everything. It doesn't matter that some parts are negative against The Benefit, just that it keeps people occupied. The witless millions won't think of my story and contemplate rebellion, just that they to one day get to the Gigastudio if they're existence is possibly as messy as my own. My life: away from the 'normal world,' away from The Benefit, onto Micronesia. And then how it was lost: the accident, the horror, my time spent recovering, a shell of a human, recovering. And now here, for you, 'my dear audience.' They thought I would be easy pickings; they think I'm compliant; they believe I'm working for them. But they only know what I want them to know. The beauty of Micronesia was that there were no Fasters, there were no tools of government to pry; that's why my father could teach me. And they don't know that - they don't know what he was teaching me. Just that I was in a harmless pocket that

proved insignificant to their global regime. A criss-cross of deception and manipulation, they think they have me covered; they think I'm a good Vessel, being carted around the globe inside this 9 by 9 by 9 foot room, drinking their grey fizz and telling my story at the Gigastudios. They don't know what I discovered when I was recovering over those five years, what switch clicked when I was in hospital, giving me meaning where I thought I had none. From a broken individual on the inside and outside, to just a wrecked body, but with a mind that kept me striving, that gave me the want and the facility to repair myself, and with true purpose. They think they discovered me before anything like that could have happened, but they were wrong. I know they are my enemy, I know why I am here, and why what happened to me happened; it could not have happened any other way - it was Fate. It all makes perfect sense, why I was where I was with the people I was with, in this time and at that place, and why what took place did, and without compromise from any parties involved. There was no other way. The only way in was for me to become a Vessel. My father must have known; he wanted change and he knew I did, or at least would; he didn't want me to grow old in the environment by which he was bound, and he was willing to lay down himself and my mother, turn me into a twisted wreck of a human. That stuck stick, the fear of the rigid. He knew I was his son, how I would fight with every breath to battle everything around and to bring forth a new future, to strive against the manipulation, to strive forward and to change things, to change everything, to spark the fire that was necessary, that *is* necessary to bring about change. So fate gave me this incredible story; my cards had been dealt, and this allows me to carry on with my loss. I know it was for a reason now, for the ultimate reason, for the only reason, that is, to bring about change. Circumstances make me think it's already too late, that the tides turned in favour of 'the man' and his new system many years ago, but I have no choice: I must try and I must succeed.

The train came to an abrupt halt and Germany jumped up with speed, as if to attention. He'd resisted their heavier techniques, the broader, deeper penetrating power of their posthuman minds, but the little things always crept in: standing up when expecting the Presenter or when he enters a room, difficulty with speaking unless having been asked a question or given permission, the ability

to piss or shit on order. He smiled, took deep breaths and nodded his head over and over, enjoying the sensation of his fringe faintly stroking his forehead. The Smartputty he had pulled out for a cushion underneath him was absorbed back into the wall and the screen that had been hovering in front of him, pushing the latest showing of 'The Benefit' out, was quickly slurped into the wall with a faint pop.

He continued to nod, and a feeling rose in his belly that he'd not felt in a long time. He was having trouble placing it and, upon realization, it sent a second wave of adrenaline pumping through his body. It surged through all the manipulations, all the changes needed, all the add-ons, corrections and fixtures from when he was recovering, but despite all of these, it was still his body. His fingers swelled with blood, making them feel tight in his hands, and the veins on his forearms bulged, readying himself. A quick spark of grey matter put him back in front of The Golden Thought, back on Micronesia, sweating and bulging. The entire room went translucent. He was facing what you could call forward, towards the platform in front of him. He looked quickly to his right and saw about 20 carriages along the platform, all translucent, all housing a single human. He turned left towards the front of the Hovertrain and saw the engine carriage; in what was typical fashion for the last few months, he was at the front of the train. He had worked his way from the back carriage of this caravan of the damned, of the best Vessels in the world, one by one, by giving the impression that he was obeying, by doing exactly what he needed to when it was necessary. Yet all with the afterthought of what he was going to achieve, what he had to achieve. He rose his head a little, and saw the towering height of the Gigastudio about a mile away. Entirely black, they were all the same, light absorbing entities. Germany always thought it seemed fit how the blackness seemed to drain the life from its surroundings, in the same way the

events inside sucked clean the rationalized thinking, moral aptitude and emotional intelligence of its entrants.

A shiver. He was there.

“Hello Germany Germany. I trust you are ready,” said the Faster, voice fading in and out, perfectly in pitch, tonally hypnotic.

“I certainly am; I'm eager to tell my story as always Faster, for The Benefit.”

“Good Germany, you have quite the story to tell; that's why you are here. Come, follow me.”

Germany stepped hesitantly off the Hovertrain and onto the platform, through the translucent putty which clothed him appropriately as he moved through it. His feet clicked on the buffed marble platform with a satisfying snap brought about by well tailored patent shoes. He stood eye to eye with the Faster and counted his digits; one...two...three...four...

Chapter 5 – Germany

“Are you ready, Germany?” asked the Faster with his wide mouth that, when it came to it, pronounced O’s with particular exaggeration. Germany gave a slight nod and quickly fluttered his eyelids as they moved along the platform toward the Gigastudio, the clicking of his shoes beating out a sharp rhythm on the black marble. His posture was impeccable: back straight and chest puffed with pride and presence, suited in a fashion typical to the time; pronounced and eccentric, exaggerated and piercing to the eye, almost literally, as the lapels on his suit, made of some peculiar metal alloy, could cut the skin at their points. Almost indestructible yet completely malleable, light and airy, his suit was high on protective capabilities and functionality, low on maintenance and weight, perfect in the circumstance that Germany might have to flee an assassination attempt: it would protect him from bullets, knives; even explosions or the impact of falling masonry would be fended off by translucent Smartputty hood that almost noticeably coated his head.

He followed the Faster about three steps behind, toward the Gigastudio. It was a cold morning and he had little idea where he was, even on a global scale; they could be in Europe or North America for all he knew, and the details of the world around him were giving away nothing to signify this at all. As always the Studio was remote, placed out of the way, not a 'secret location' - as the show needed to have a capacity live audience in the millions every single time - but they were never easy to get to either; unless, of course, you had access to the Hovertrain system. Purpose built for transporting Vessels and their Fasters, it was quick, reliable and almost invulnerable to attack. Its magnetic tracks creating the friction free, super fast travel that led across the globe, over mountains and under oceans; the worldwide network was vast, not only

allowing for the Fasters to transport their Vessels globally in protected comfort, but for them to get around by themselves, from town to city to megacity and more, for preaching and manipulation, a rare but absolute necessity. Occasionally graced with a Presenter, when they were reassigned from one Gigastudio to another, the mounted cars were a Smartputty cloak of protection that travelled at around Mach 4, and even though the supersonic speed made it more or less impossible to see, stages were raised around the track so people could watch it shoot past as best they could, stand out with banners, waving and screaming for the split second that it would fly past, in their vain and useless effort to somehow get noticed. Timetables of when they would go passed were released, so that they could be as close to their idol as they possible could, even if it were just for a blink.

The Faster strode with a confidence and exaggerated charm. Tall and slender, Fasters all looked similar to a degree but all had particular idiosyncrasies and looks that made sure you could always tell them apart, as well as always tell exactly what they were. Germany's was tall and thin, wearing a light grey suit with purple pin-stripes. His hair was an explosion of blonde, his skin fair and easy on the eye, tightly wrapped around a face that was instantly recognizable as inhuman, as modified, accentuated features that the government gave to the posthumans to make them stand out. In a world where narcissism was an admirable trait, and beauty on camera was perfection, they were as close as you could possibly get. High cheekbones that poked out of their faces, complete symmetry, straight lines, not a single blemish and a sheen that radiated beauty, their looks were intimidating to most and helped facilitate the hypnotic, persuasion techniques they often had to employ with their Vessels and sometimes with the general public. The Fasters' personalities were just as exaggerated: functional magnetic resonance imaging allowed the

government to tweak their brains over time, to give them further built-in conveniences of manipulation and to give off an extremely pleasurable, awe-inspiring and irresistible socio-outlook on life and the world. Germany had grown quite fond of his, but wasn't sure whether this was just the brainwashing and hypnosis techniques he had clearly been under the influence of for some time, or a trickle of his own mind and personality that enjoyed the stories he was told.

They would capture him and his imagination, take his mind off what was around him and what he had to do – both for himself and for The Benefit - and entrance him into other worldly state of mind. Elaborate to the point of ridiculousness and clearly lies, the Faster streamed steaming fountains of bullshit - like stories of the time he had gone Dragon hunting for three weeks and caught nothing, or how his father was the man that put bends in rivers - but his casual charm and seemingly genuine belief that they were real would make Germany feel great, warm inside at the cosiness of it all. They would perk-up him up, but most importantly they would make him more complaint, softer. And he hated the afterthought, the feeling of having been manipulated, as much as he enjoyed the original anecdote, which was a lot.

He looked to his left and right again as they approached the Studio. Expanding out into the dessert for miles either side, the structure was epic in scale. He grabbed at quick thoughts on how it stood, gargantuan like, in the desert, dominating nature, and his breath escaped from his chest into the cold air. He could just make out the sloping sides of the building, and he stopped walking to look up, leaning back on his heels to get the whole of the building in, carefully balancing himself. He remembered how he'd once seen one from a distance during a brief period when the Hovertrain had broken down and his cell walls had gone translucent. Almost beyond the breadth of his imagination, it was difficult to understand how it could have been built. Like a

fresh-eyed innocent, millennia ago, being brought in front of the Great Pyramids of Giza for the first time, awe and fear both took their grip.

It stood with two monolithic trapezoid structures, at their base miles from side to side, about a mile from front to back, and raising up thousands of feet into the air, coming almost to a point, but falling short and levelling off. An epic and solid black cylindrical tube separated them by a few miles and penetrated both, protruding out of the other side, the side which Germany was now walking towards. It was motionless now but he knew how, in a matter of hours, the vast cylinder would be spinning slowly, and what would take place inside.

Closer and closer, Germany and his Faster moved away from the platform but remained on the same black marble path, cutting its way through the hard desert like a flattened black snake. They were absorbed by the dark as the sun rose on the opposite side of the epic structure in front of them, and soft lights implanted in the floor began to glow providing them with direction. The path eventually bringing them to the structure's outer wall, almost entirely surrounded by shining black, it was hard to judge depth and just how far he was from walking into it, until the Faster stopped abruptly. A pane, about five feet directly in front of them, shifted open vertically, creating a portal that was even darker; a never-ending horizontal abyss. Germany thought about how, once he stepped through, it would be the beginning of his final steps, towards the change he had longed for and strived for. But he also knew that remembering, that remaining himself and gripping onto his being would be increasingly difficult as the structure and his Faster both slipped their greasy fingers of manipulation around his mind. His Faster took one of his elongated and well tailored legs high off the ground, bending his knee, pointing his toe slightly and penetrating the dark. He began to step through until he was half in, half out, entirely invisible on one side, shrouded by the

pitch black of the portal and barely visible on the other, protruding from the structure. Reaching out his hand and leaning to his side he smiled a wide smile, his teeth seeming to radiate light, still shining through the darkness.

“Come, Germany; we’ve got some entertaining to do.” Each pronunciation of the O in each word over-done, almost comical, his face was hypnotizing, and Germany naturally followed, both with thoughts on his mission, what he had to do, and at the same time compliant and thinking over his story, preparing himself for the broadcast that part of his mind knew would never take place.

Stepping through the portal-like doorway, he was both completely at ease and tingling with excitement. He could feel the base of his spine beginning to twitch. A quick shot of adrenaline sent the soft hairs on the back of his neck standing to attention; he lent his head back and scratched them flat with the collar of his suit while scrunching his eyes and ruffling the skin on his nose, inanely grinning at the inexplicably pleasurable feeling. Once through, he was fully inside one of the base trapezoids of the Studio. He grabbed his hands together, with linking fingers turning his wrists and pushing outwards; a series of cracks shot from his knuckles - pockets of gas popping. He turned to an official-looking Government figure standing to his right, and winked.

“Time for the security protocols and checks I guess,” he thought out loud. He'd be here for another hour or so, for repetitive but painless confirmations that Germany was actually Germany, not some copy or illegitimate representation quickly swapped during the flutter of an eye. How this would ever have happened Germany really had no idea; the Fasters' posthuman 'upgrades' meant they were unnaturally sharp in the reaction stakes. Easily outshining a natural human in cognitive and physical ability, they made just as good bodyguards as they did

agenda-setting babysitters. But there were unscrupulous types out there; ones that had gone past the 'Eventual Natural,' restrictions on body enhancements, which the Government had put in place in order to create as even a playing field as possible in the quest for the fallacy of fame.

Black market upgrades were available for the desperate and those suffering from normality, those without any redeemable feature or embellished trait; and they often sent the recipient into delusional states of mind. Performed on, chopped up, stapled back together and re-worked by bad surgeons in side-street squalor, they did more harm than good, more often than not setting the recipient on some sort of vengeful path to seek and take out Vessels, destroy their idea of perfect, because they could never reach those dizzying heights. Although as far as Germany knew, no Vessel had ever been successfully assassinated.

His mind shifted again and focused on the tests: 'look here,' 'spit into this,' 'grip on this as hard as you can for 268 seconds.' Germany was never more sure that what he had to do was the right thing than when he was just coming into the Studio and going through these tests in the base trapezoid, soaking up what was around him, the sheer, epic, almost God-like scale of his surroundings. But he had to maintain coherent, he must remain himself; he crunched his own thoughts into the front of his mind and preserved a continual line of concentration on them as he was led onwards, about 100 yards, by his Faster, calmly walking three or four paces in front, into an archway that was around 15 feet tall at its peak, and a few feet deep. They were no sooner going in one side before they came out of the other, emerging in what was a room stadium structure about 270 feet long by 240 wide but without a wall at the far end. That lack of feature, combined with the rectangular shape, gave the impression that he was moving from the back to the front. He scanned the depth of the room as best he could, even reaching up on his tip-toes and

stretching out his neck, and saw that, throughout, there were a plethora of Smartputty monitors oscillating out of the ground, held in the air by thin white strands. Speedy thoughts of getting tangled in the Hovertrain, hours earlier, shot into his mind. He smirked, while beginning to count the Government-looking officials and scientists, all standing at their computer screens, shining brightly in their white coats awash with the halogen bright spot lights shining down from above, all with the intention to get their hands on Germany, just for a minute, in order to perform their test and make sure he was actually the right person.

The space was open top and surrounded by tiered seats. Everything was a show, but this show was only allowed to be seen by the highest ranking Government officials. The tests had begun, and Germany loosened his grip on the object he'd been told to hold, to turn to his right, facing dead on to the ten or so thousand bodies sitting in front of him. He never knew there were so many different shades of grey in the spectrum of light. He raised a grin out of the right side of his mouth, pushing some air quickly out of his nose in a semblance of laughter as they sat motionless and observing. Gripping his fists, he looked up and above them, closing his eyes as his head motioned upwards, bringing his face pointing toward the sky, and he listened for the hum.

A sound, the like of which he'd never heard before the first time he had entered a Gigastudio, it was unearthly and almost terrifying, a grandiose taunting to the ears. It was massive on the body, yet so faint to the ear it was almost inaudible. He concentrated, trying to block out the sounds of rushing feet and slightly high-pitched voices around him. He forced a dry gulp and felt his heart beat in his chest, moving away from everything and everyone; he wanted the rush of that very singular sound, and that sound alone. Scraping at the air around him for just the right wave travelling through it, he cleared his mind and then there it was. He breathed out slowly,

lowering his larynx and tightening its muscles, pursing his lips and bringing his own hum almost in line with the faint sound that he had missed so much. The sounds of millions of people filling the Studio, all marching, screaming, shouting, to the best of their pathetic ability performing for those around them, all filling into the Studio for the greatest show on earth: him. He felt the sound in his chest and his breath quickened; a spark of adrenaline. He opened his eyes and looked around at the inside of the stadium prelude he was standing in, slowly spinning on the spot, his arms raised to the sky to balance him and welcome the vastness. He looked up further, almost tilting his line of sight upside down, and saw the enormous beams of translucent blue light shooting up to the gigantic black cylinder as they transported thousands of people at a time in enormous lifts, to fill the viewing area. The brushed metal walls in the distance gave off gigantic dulled reflections. He stopped spinning and brought his head down and forward, elongating his neck, clawing his fingers like a Wolverine. He bit at the air, snapping his teeth together with sharp clicks and, rubbing his tongue on the roof of his mouth, he could taste metal particles. His mastoid-process at the back of his jaw and the bottom of his ear tingled with excitement and flavour, and he thought how all this could be used, how this technology, this ability, could be taken and pushed forward, rather than holding back. And he raised the grin on the other side of his mouth, before he felt the bony grip of his Faster's hand on his upper arm, and he turned around.

“Germany, not too much; these aren't your audience after all, not the ones you help so very much,” he said in a calming tone, words flowing into a smile that brought Germany back around to the next testing machine.

They continued on for another 30 minutes or so, before coming to the end of the indoors, open air, stadium structure he'd quickly toured while the testing took place. Turning to take a

bow in front of the tens of thousands that occupied the arena, he gritted his teeth and strained against it; the bow was just as much a habit as any of the other bullshit menial tasks he had to perform, when commanded, totally at the will of his Faster. He grimaced and gritted even harder as he thought about what was coming next: The Preparation. A chat, a monologue, a fatiguing brain struggle, that would attempt, through a mixture of lighting, oxygen levels in the air, sound and physical action, to bring Germany in-line, to prepare him completely for going 'Live,' which would follow almost immediately afterwards. It was all necessary to make sure that there was no chance of anything other than a 100% perfect show, one that would remain entirely believable to the unknowing public, seemingly giving them what they want, but at the same time taking away what they need through a completely manipulated and clearly planned routine of deception.

They both turned and began walking slowly. In the distance, he could just about make out a metal bump in the landscape, and he cast his thoughts back. He needed to regain his self-perception, the ethereal third person overview of his body, almost dreamlike and in the light he needed to be: the person that was necessary, not the flopping whimper of a man that the Faster was trying to bring him to. His concentration built, and the grind of enamel on enamel grew softer. The realization of what he was going to do, and how the opportunity he had been waiting for all this time was edging ever closer, came to fruition, and moved to the forefront of his mind and thoughts. He slowly opened his jaw a centimetre or so, pushing his lower mandible forward, bringing his lower teeth under and in front of those above and he growled a deep, almost inaudible, pit-of-the-stomach growl aimed at his Faster, as always a few feet ahead, bouncing with his casual stroll.

Leading the way in the cavernous space of the GigaStudio's trapezoid arm, impaled into

the desert landscape like a gargantuan interloper, the Faster maintained his speed with familiar precision. They moved further still, along a smooth and immaculately kept velvety red-carpet, stretching out in front of them and to their sides, like a sea of red for hundreds of feet; it was difficult to see its end. Germany could see the metallic bump in the distance, growing all the time, and he continued to try and shake himself loose of all that was trying to grab on to him. He took a few steps at a time with his eyes shut, listening for the hum continuously, and reminding himself what needed to be done, where he was going, what he was about to do, how he had to do it, the consequences... 'keep thinking, don't let him in'. He balled his hands into fists and squeezed them tightly, forcing his nails into his sweaty palms, and tried to speak to himself out-loud; all he needed was a whisper, just to hear his own voice faintly, for a few words, just to remind him of the circumstance. He didn't want his brain telling him things, not his internal monologue that with each step grew ever closer to being in control of the Faster.

“Concentrate, take your time; you have a few minutes before we reach the Box,” he said inside his head, in a lost voice that was quickly becoming property of the Faster.

He had heard his own voice so rarely since he came under the influence of the Faster, that he often found it hard to remember what he sounded like. Talking at The Benefit, when asked questions by a Presenter, was the only opportunity he really had to speak out loud, and even then it wasn't voluntary; forced, manipulated words that were no longer tied to any emotion; a story he had held so close that no longer felt like his. It used to be him, to encompass and explain any leftovers he had of a soul or explainable inner being; it was his crust, his essence; but it had changed, darkened by those that influenced him so heavily – so much so that its use, its purpose, to keep him set on his path and to help him justify what he needed to do was almost totally

eroded, now down to a smooth stump that was barely recognizable in comparison to what it used to be, and it sat dark and shapeless. But that stump was the strongest part, the foundation, now fortified within its own diminutive size; it was harder to break, to smash down, to erode further. It enabled him to claw at the last part of himself, especially in times like this, when he was moving towards The Benefit, on the path to perform. The manipulation techniques grew incredibly strong, but he continued to fight. He had struggled to remain himself for so long, to maintain a grip on his story and what had happened to him - to exist outside of the manipulated whore the Faster wanted him to be, for The Benefit - and now it was nearly over.

He strained hard and noticed his faint shadow moving in front of him, almost completely translucent; the light all around him meant that no one source really took precedence when it came to casting shadows, but the faint outline was all he needed to help him break his mind free, to momentarily remind himself. His eyes quickly opened to twice their natural size and gallons of the metallic tasting air shot down his throat into his lungs, his spine straightened, lowering his head into his chest and, trying not to raise more than a whisper, he spoke.

“I know they are my enemy. I know why I am here, and why what happened to me took place. It could not have happened any other way, it was Fate, my fate. Things will change from here, this time, this place.”

“I am Germany Germany, I am Germany Germany.” The last words crept out with a tremble that made him wince, brain pulsating, an inexplicable pain that made his forearms feel like there were small metal ball bearings being pushed down from his elbow joint, along the bone and out from underneath his fingernails. It was a hypnosis-induced reaction to talking out of line, but he could bare the pain; he knew it was all in his mind, he knew it wouldn't do any physical

damage and most importantly of all he knew who he was, why he was here; he had what he needed and he was sure of himself. He picked his head up to see his Faster stopped in front of him. Had he heard him? No chance; not even with his posthuman ears.

“Did you...did you say something, Germany?” he said, back facing him, his hands in the side pockets of his suit jacket, thumbs twitching out of the top.

Germany strained again, this time to stop himself from talking, to stop the automatically genuine response. He could not tell him the truth and he clenched inside, every part of his body that wasn't visible to the naked eye; anything that was draped in any sort of attire was bulging and pulsating with strain, muscles taught and skin breaking sweat, almost pushing salt-water out of his pours.

“No, Faster, I did not,” he answered in the compliant tone he had grown so used to hearing. But he had had his moment; he still had his own voice that the Faster could not take away - it was still there, and as he grinned lightly to give the impression of compliance, he knew inside himself it was Germany Germany smiling and no one or nothing else.

They continued to walk, and moved towards the bump that Germany had noticed earlier, now a large brushed-metal box that looked as if it had been turned upside down and was quickly getting closer. He took notice of how it seemed as if the lid had been laid out flat when it was turned upside down, protruding at the sides where its walls met the floor; and with no surroundings for hundreds of feet it looked smaller than it probably was. About 20 feet tall and 20 feet wide, it was dwarfed in the gigantic space and sea of red carpet, an insignificant ridge in the vast silver metal-alloy and red landscape. Edging closer, Germany could feel the hum of the crowd more than ever; the Gigastudio was reaching capacity and there would soon be two million

people occupying the vast cylinder above. He didn't want to muster the energy to look up and see it, but he knew it was there. He knew that, as they came ever closer to the Box, it became ever harder to dictate his own actions, to resist. He needed to save every bit of his being from here on in for his end goal, and it was getting increasingly difficult with every step.

“I know they are my enemy. I know why I am here, and why what happened to me took place,” he said inside himself and shivered with anticipation as one side of the Box turned translucent and they walked through.

Stepping inside, his clothes began to change again as the translucent Smartputty washed over him. This time they became a particularly exaggerated suit, with large lapels and shoulder-pads. It didn't have a specific colour; the black that made up the whole was continually shifting and almost holographic, colours fluctuating and bouncing off it as light hit it from all angles. Like a trap, the Smartputty wall behind them instantly turned back to a solid looking snow-white colour, and Germany shivered again at what was about to take place. Entirely secure in the Smartputty Box, they had ten minutes or so before they would be live in front of 2 million people in the stadium alone, and billions planet-wide, and the numbers rose almost exponentially as colonial planetary systems were taken into account with all their inhabitants. Almost every sentient living entity in the known galaxy would be watching him, thinking they could one day be there, thinking more about their presence and outward appearance, inane and lacklustre abilities and thoughts. Thinking about how they could become a Vessel, and forgetting about everything else; not caring or even realizing how trapped they actually are, just remaining preoccupied with the incessant need and want to achieve something that was in their reality, but is a complete fallacy.

Germany pulled at the wall, bringing out a slab of Smartputty, and told it to sit while simultaneously turning to place himself on it. Sitting up straight he placed his hands flat on his thighs and felt an exaggerated and unnatural smile begin to sweep across his face, his cheek muscles contorting, taking the sides of his mouth closer and closer to his ears; the change had started.

While the material of the suit he was wearing gave the impression of a smooth surface, he could feel it was coarse to touch, and he created a wave of faint pats with his fingers, trying with all his might to keep some semblance of control over his body. His Faster walked into the exact middle of the room, called for, "Ambient lighting, Oxygen setting 40," and faced Germany dead on, placing his hands flat against his side, feet shoulder width apart. Quickening his breath, he almost looked as if he was preparing himself to pounce, to strike at Germany, and in a way this was not far from the truth. His rapid bombardment of the Government's ideals, perfectly delivered, would bring Germany into the obeying, hypnotic state that would, for all intents and purposes, look completely normal to anyone, especially the half-wit audience that wanted him so much. He raised his head from the slight bow position it had worked itself into as he took up his stance, and looked at Germany. The piercing eyes, the rigid and beautiful looks, almost radiated an awe-inducing wave of power that was precisely aimed at Germany, with the sole intention to overpower him, to take out any rebellion, any thought of anything other than complying, performing, for The Benefit. His mouth dropped open, separating his lips with a faint pop, preparing himself to talk, quick breaths in and out. Germany could almost picture the air shifting up and down, building up the oxygen in his bloodstream, readying himself for the auditory bombardment that was about to take place.

“The Great Theories on Post Modernism...Germany,” he began, his voice higher and faster than usual, but still his mouth reaching around the O's while he talked. The Smartputty glowed directly behind him, producing an otherworldly, ethereal look, casting a silhouette figure with Transhumanist prowess and dynamism.

“The circularity of man and how he will eventually recess into himself as science finally outweighs the soul, but ultimately collapses, as bounds are unset. As we reach out towards ourselves, our own reflection in spirals of time, we claw at our backs, forever trying to catch up, always a step behind; and then back into ourselves to reset, to let go and start again.” The first wave. Germany had heard it before: the quick words, on a plane between total logic and absolute stupidity. Each word latched on with pincers to his inner ear and scraped at its walls, tearing away at him, moulding him, kicking, stamping and kneading his stump into the exact shape they wanted him to be. He tried to imagine himself gigantic, ripped with muscle, naked and a thousand feet tall, with colossal chains wrapped around his hands, attached to his brain and pulled taught, reigning himself in, pulling with all his might.

“You and I know that our science is moving more rapidly now than ever in the history of man. The Benefit allows for the peace that was always necessary to reap the true advantages of pure science. With unlimited resource, we're achieving a beautiful future, and...and...” The Faster intentionally stumbled, bringing his right arm up to his chin and lightly brushing its underside, breathing quicker than ever.

“...and contrary to what the bulk believe - what they want to believe and what we provide so well for them to follow: to admire as they choose - to what those people out there across the globe and known universe continually reach out for and claw at with every bit of strength in their

bodies, we are here for a long time, as a race, as the masters of everything we lay our eyes on, and this longevity is the key. Like an Escher, we're chock full of infinity; it can't possibly end because there was no beginning - we never found it. Found what? Well you know as well as I do, Germany." He lent forward, feet remaining firmly fixed in position; his torso moved closer to Germany in an almost uncontrolled movement. The Faster firing a smile at him, Germany was almost knocked off the chair by the juggernaut facial expression.

"Universal theories of everything determined that our existence has always been and will always remain. Few know - even less want to know - but you do, and more importantly you need to, so you can do what you do, willingly. You are willing aren't you Germany? Because if we don't do what we do, we're set on a direction, terrible and hellish, forcing humanity into an existence that is a continual spiral of pain, spinning out of control until the peace that we know now is such a lost concept that it doesn't even exist in imagination- only pain and suffering, the darkest side of man, of us, forever. We need to control what is happening, what takes place; only to a degree mind you, so we, as a violent and untameable fleshy collection of matter, don't take our existence into a living hell. We cannot let that happen; no, no, no." He shifted his head from side to side, moving his right hand, placing it out straight, balled into a fist. His thumb was facing forward and a single, slender finger protruded from the fist, (a fist that, shifting at the wrist, could have drawn a perfect 45 degree arch in the air with his finger) before slowly curling back, his arm moving back to his side, palm opening and sliding against his upper thigh again.

"We cannot let the continual spiral into an unimaginable pit of horror take place and remain until it reaches the back of time, having reduced ourselves to primordial soup, and letting it start over again. Our way keeps everything at peace, the peace we need to enjoy our existence,

so that every sentient being that cares to exist on any level can live out its life without fear - of harm or persecution, hatred, imprisonment, pain or suffering - until at our pinnacle we go back into ourselves, into the soup, like beautiful volunteers, taking ourselves on a quest to eternity, starting all over again to make sure that this reality that we occupy shall exist for ever.” He took his right foot and twisted it round until it faced the complete opposite direction so it was a backward mirror image of his left. Placing it on the floor, a swift untwisting motion brought the rest of his body round until he had his back turned to Germany.

“Germany, exceptional circumstance over the last number of decades has given us this gift. It allows the people to do as they please, to challenge each other and strive for something, to better themselves and heighten their pleasure while providing security for the greater good. Germany, Celebrity is the first step in our continual and peaceful existence on the circular plane of time in which we exist. And the only way we can go through, to continue, is...with....the...peace....You.....knooooooooowww..... thhhhhiiiiissssss.....”

The Faster couldn't quite understand why his speech was slowing down until it was too late, and he heard this one coming. A wind-rush of compacted air was being pushed forward by a flat and accelerating surface, a fist, and then a came a second mighty crash into the temple opposite to where the first one had landed, colliding with his head before the kinetic wave of energy from the previous blow had fully escaped. The terminal force shot a rebound shock-wave of strength back in the opposite direction through his skull. Not quite knowing what to do and ravaged by instantaneous brute force, his cranium seemed to collapse, spine compressing; his feet and legs shot clean out in front of him, sending him to the ground at speed, and squeezing his brain, compressing his eye socket and making one of them shoot clear out of his skull.

An avalanche of new sensation overcame him and made his body spasm at lightning speed, almost buckling his back in the process. He saw his own eye shoot a couple of feet across the room as gravity seemed to pull him towards the floor with an ugly passion for his body. The fleshy crunch of bone splintering and piercing was a new sound, like nothing he had ever heard before, and in the milliseconds that had passed from the powerful knuckles embedding themselves deeply in the side of his skull, to the fast slapping of the side of his face against the Smartputty floor, his eye splatting softly against the white wall and his legs from his knees down collapsing and splaying themselves out in a floppy mess in front of him, he had had a whole range of impossible thoughts about what was actually taking place. Another few dots of time, another split second, and he heard a squelching sound followed almost instantly by what seemed to be hundreds of further tiny crunches. His head failed to move off its side, and as he stared at his right eye lying in front of him, he knew a great amount of weight had come down with pin-point precision on his legs the second they had liquefied into fleshy jelly at the end of his body. A single second had passed and his modified body began to induce its survival based fight responses; adrenaline was beginning to quickly flow, but the barrage and intensity of attacks that was taking place outshone even his finely tuned posthuman body, reactions and skill. His training and natural ability were lost in a mist of blood that was pitter-pattering down on his head and the Smartputty floor stretching out from the side of his head.

“Was Germany dead already? All impossible. How could this be happening? How had they been attacked? The face of the world, time, time was circular, what. Who was doing this....” His thoughts remained quick but began to falter quickly, his brain misfiring, shooting words and thoughts in where they weren’t meant to be. Before any more confusion could spring from his

consciousness, he heard a voice.

“I know what you're thinking,” it spat in a sound that was familiar but had a different forcefulness about it, the likes of which he had never heard before; thoroughly terrifying. He could only think of it as a determined ferocity that a primordial man may have had.

“And no, we've not been attacked; I'm fine,” it said, still out of view.

His face was grabbed with a single hand, wrapped around his nose and clenching his protruding cheekbones, and turned upright with some force, crunching his spine in the process, and revealing his attacker. One knee on the ground, the other leg up at a right angle, the attacker lent forward onto his thigh with his forearm, a steady position that allowed him to come in very close without losing any balance and to maintain the strong grip on his face.

“You see....I AM.....I AMMMMMMMM GERMANY GERMANY!!!!!!!!!!” Germany raged with the full force of his gut and lungs and body and being, lent over screaming into the Fasters battered face, spit, slime and bile flinging its way out of his mouth, landing and mixing quickly with the thin blood that was gushing out of his eye socket.

“...and your kind is wrong!” he said, this time breathing in, trembling with power and fear. He slowly released his hand from its facial grip, and taking two fingers he smudged the bloody bodily fluid mix on the Fasters face with disgust and contempt. He stood slowly, straightening out his back, keeping his eyes fixed on the Faster's face, and raised his foot off the ground before bringing it down slowly on his throat. He could feel the windpipe beginning to collapse instantly; the Faster opened his mouth as if to speak but only involuntary and echoey popping sounds escaped as the rings of muscle in his throat caved-in under the pressure of the foot. Open mouthed, wide eyed, losing colour all the time as his blood poured relentlessly out of his empty

eye socket and mashed legs, he was almost fluid with spasms as his inner brain sent his diaphragm crazy with a lust for air. Germany watched the peculiar neck under foot, the elongated body, refined by its sharp corners, shifting across the floor involuntarily, the jellied legs flapping around in a bloodied and boney mess. Stillness. He was dead. Germany's inane smile had gone.

He slowly brought his foot off the Faster's throat and placed it back onto the Smartputty with a soft pat which rippled the puddle of blood that had collected underneath him. He told the floor to remain solid, making sure both body and blood would remain on show, and not be absorbed. His breathing was heavy, as heavy as it had ever been, but he was unhurt, at least he seemed to be. He quickly scanned his body; it was red and dripping but it wasn't his blood; his knuckles seemed to be swelling already but that mattered little. Standing at the side of the motionless Faster, legs shoulder width apart, he shifted his gaze from his knuckles and up around the room. White and glowing, one wall had a small splatter of blood no bigger than a fist and a trickle that lead to the floor, but the rest were unstained and looked out of shape, empty and purposeless without the Faster standing in the middle, where he was meant to be, chanting his mantra-like speech about their cause, why it was necessary and why it was for the greater good.

Germany tilted his head back and closed his eyes; his throat felt like it was full of shifting grit and he realized he was still growling with some intensity and speed. He slowed himself, clearing his mind of the anger that had just overwhelmed him, that had taken control of every part of his being and allowed him to, within a matter of seconds, grind an upright 6 foot 7" modified hulk of flesh and bone into a cold, lumpy soup at his feet. He began to regain himself; an orgasmic endorphins-fuelled wave of ecstasy moving over his face and down his body made his buttocks clench, thrusting him forward. He fell to his knees and brought his hands up, slapping down his

palms on his eyes and scratching at his forehead with his fingers. He began to laugh.

He continued to laugh and to control his breathing, bringing his heart rate down. The mist finally began to clear from his mind, the rage was subsiding, the beast within began to step back, away from his extremities and into the cage he otherwise kept it so successfully inside. He stood to his feet again and took the very deepest of breaths he could muster, holding it in for a second and letting it escape gradually under the force of his ribcage retracting to normal size.

As the hum hit his ears, goosebumps swept up his covered arms and brought his hairs to attention, cascading up his back and over his neck. He didn't even have to concentrate for it now - it was there; the Box had been shifting all this time and he was about to step out in front of the universe, to complete his self-designed mission: to gather up this reality into a ball, compress it with exaggerated force and smash it against anything that could take the impact.

He turned and walked to the position he would have taken up if his Faster was still alive, if everything was moving the way it was supposed to be, if what had just happened had never taken place, and he stood, fixed in position, fists clenched, ready in body and mind. He had done what was necessary; just one last task. His eyes remained closed as he let the growing intensity of sound crash over his body; he could feel it in his chest, his ribcage vibrating with the dispersed energy of millions of people, all within the cylinder. He was free inside his mind; the Fasters control had washed away the second he had died, and Germany felt himself again. His story was back in its rightful place, enveloping his mind, providing purpose to why he was there, what he had done and what was finally about to take place.

The entire box turned translucent, a hovering cube in the middle of the gigantic rotating cylinder. Each of its two million occupants, viewers, and patrons were strapped into translucent

rings that were attached to the inner wall of the cylinder, each making sure the gaze of the rider was permanently fixed on Germany by rotating in the opposite direction to the cylinder, as they span around him allowing the eventual view from every angle. The intensity of the cheering roar almost brought Germany to tears; fearful for what was to come but strong with the knowledge of the future, he was immersed in sound and admiration, enveloped in the frenzied elated emotion of two million people all on the verge of hysteria. Until they realized.

The spinning, restrained orgy of mass euphoria was almost instantly silenced when the light of reality forced its way through their optical nerve and into their brains. There was the translucent glowing cube, floating in the middle of a rotating cylinder of two million people, broadcasted live in front of the known universe, holding a single occupant, standing tall and drenched in blood, his Faster companion laying, at his feet, in a pool of his own blood.

It was an unreality, an impossibility, a non-act that could not exist, a trick of the mind, of light, something that could not be. It slammed their faces with an untold and unknown image and breached their minds with a hideous challenge to everything that they knew. Germany took another deep breath; his head bowed, a tear dropped from his right cheek, making a shallow splash of blood at his feet. He raised himself to face those who were slowly and silently rotating, passing in front of him. He could barely see them, the only light source in the epic arena softly glowing from his surroundings; but he knew they were there, he knew they were all there, every last single one of them, reaching out to the back corners of the universe; and he knew what he had done.

“I, ladies and gentlemen, am Germany Germany, and THIS is now my story,” he said in a calm voice, the like of which he had lost for years, through manipulation and rage; all he had had

was his anger and grit filtered sounds following through a ravaged mind for so long. The sound echoed through the vast chamber and he let an arm swing gently in front of him, motioning to the dead Faster on the ground. He smiled as the cube began to shake. He had no idea how it would come but he knew in every part of his being that it would, and that it must, for what he needed to achieve, and for his fate to be complete.

He noticed a faint trail of smoke in the distance before the impact. His torso disintegrating outwards, sending his head almost clean into the air, two feet directly up before it bounced off the inside of the floating cube and landed on the floor, splashing in the pool of blood next to his Faster. There was the last flicker of electricity, the nanosecond of receptor action that his mind had as the rail-gun round penetrated his chest at the speed of light, discharging so much energy his body vaporized. And in that instant of time, he knew that he had won; he had done what he had needed to do, and it was all about to change.

6 – Direction and Opposition

Foreign. An object in a place where it does not belong. He had the immediate sense that he was not in his allocated slot in time and space. Nothing else; just the innate perception that wherever and whenever he was, there and then, he was not in the right place. He was out of sync.

Beyond his conceptual capabilities, the place that he must be in, where he must have gone, after he saw that plume of smoke, after he had completed his most important of goals, he did not want to think or know. Terror consumed him. He realized that he had eyes and that they were closed, staring into black; he wasn't blind or in a dark room, just had closed eyes, and he wanted them to stay that way, at least for the immediate future. He could feel his body beginning to twitch as the horror began to set in, as he went through a birth of sorts, into the open air, out of nothing but into something that didn't want him. Into a space that already somehow seemed occupied; his presence was not welcome. The magnitude of what was playing out before him grew exponentially. His senses and body came to, absorbing and manifesting all terror he had ever known or recognized, seen or thought of.

He felt sensation running over his body, an organic start-up mode crept slowly into each corner, from the ends of his fingers to his feet, like he was slipping on a full body suit, and he continued to lie. Each instant passed with a breath, light and slow; he could smell it creeping up his nose, twitching receptors as his head lay on its side and his mouth gaped open, pulling and pushing at the air, keeping him alive; the exact opposite of what he wanted. Surrounded by confusion, terror kept seeping in; what was his reality now?

The body he had felt his collective essence slowly wriggle and fit themselves into was

finally on; he was inside, he was made, and basic motor-functions were coming under his control. The pressure did not subside. He was contained by the body, but the body was a reject in a harsh place, a sub-par off-chute that was entirely unwelcome where he was, wherever he was. The fear gathered, materializing itself in his gut. He gulped, twisted his wrists so his palms faced outwards and pushed at the air, an outward bodily reaction trying to shunt his presence away from the life-form that was collecting itself together. He raised himself onto all fours, slowly, and concentrated on his loose-jawed open mouth, his ears zoning in on his breath, the only sound. There was nothing else; just his breath, panting, in and out, rhythmically. He felt the solid and dry floor underneath his fingers, pressed against his knees. The fear continued to ball-up and collected in his gut. He felt exposed. His nakedness caused a rush of blood to his skin; he could feel the all-consuming bodily preparation taking place, readying itself with that subconscious, unparalleled, and absolutely terrifying prediction of imminent pain. The fear was almost uncontrollable. He felt the light coat of down across his body raise on end. The minute changes in air pressure, normally associated with another presence in a confined space, were received by some part of his brain, and he slowly opened his eyes, fortifying his position on the ground, bracing himself for some sort of impact. He waited. It never came.

Lowering his head and touching his chin against his chest, he peered down and backwards at his underneath, and saw his genitals dangling in the air. Their familiar shape was comforting, and confirmed he was back in his own body; he was Germany Germany. He was back, but he was alone.

He quickly switched focus behind and beyond his genitalia and saw a glowing orange wall which should have felt hotter than it was, given its distance and fierce colour. His terror was

quickly replaced with curiosity, and as rapidly again, back to fear as his head shot forward. An arch that stretched the skin and muscles on the front of his neck, enough to make it feel as if it was ripping as it went taut, stopped his head from spinning off backwards and snapping his neck. The sharp clicking of his high-vertebra popped throughout the room, before the silence again consumed his surroundings. He screamed, blurring the air with piercing waves of horror caused by the unknown. His entire being collecting itself in an effort to attract attention of anything that was willing to listen; the penetrating terror of a newborn upon exit of the womb, but in adult form, strong, unrelenting and terrified.

There was nothing, all he could see facing forward was the same fierce orange he had seen behind him, and his scream sank into empty silence. He regained a handle on his breath, remaining in control and listening for it, an anchor in the violent sea he was waking to. He shifted his head from side-to-side, quickly scanning the room for another presence, for something else. It was entirely orange and fierce, making him squint with intensity, but it was empty. And he breathed.

Slowly he stood, bones clicking. The terror was still there. Balled-up inside his body, he fought with the all consuming feeling he was experiencing, induced, he could only surmise, by his surroundings, by where he was, what had happened to him and that innate feeling of being unwelcome.

He was sentient, he knew he was there, he could picture his body in third-person; he knew he was alive. Was that even the right word? Was he alive, or trapped incoherently in some other terrible level of existence that somehow placed itself in no square bracket. Either way, he knew that his existence was not acceptable, and that bred the fear. He looked around, torso spinning as feet remained stationary and loose arms flopped from side to side.

He noticed a trapdoor in the ground to his right. White and completely flat, apart from a hollowed out cup housing its handle, it was the only break from orange in the room, though it quite effectively reflected the fierce orange around him in a way that, he thought, must have stopped him noticing it when at a lower angle. Now, as he stood, its white easily shone out, and its handle, made of a polished brown metal, drew his attention even closer. It looked heavy and solid, refined brass attached to the trapdoor, housed perfectly in its own indent that not only hinted at the door's depth, but that it must also be able to be opened. He side-stepped carefully towards it with thoughts of escape, and he looked down on it, scraping the clouding fear away from his senses, reaching forward with his mind to try and focus.

“Germany Germany, open me and step through,” he read out loud to himself from the inscription that, when positioned in front of the trapdoor, so predisposed by the angle of the handle, stood out clearly, engraved into the white enamel-looking material that made up the trapdoor.

The spinning ball of fear in his gut, the barbed sphere of metal that tore at his insides, spun even faster. Questions flooded his mind with speed and a newly found tangibility. Gravity had been turned onto ‘high’, pulling the mist of fear in front of his eyes, that he had been clawing at, to the ground, giving him clarity to look forward, but revealing only more terrifying realities.

“Who knows I am here? Who knows who I am? Have the Government put me back together? Have they re-created me in some sort of effort to cover up what I did? What I achieved? Have they remade me to take away what happened, to destroy what I had struggled for? I need the answer!” His voice reached at intensity but fell short, like the breaking vocal cords of a teenage boy, nervous and ambiguous. Outshone by the fiercely coloured room his questions

received no answer, and he fell to his knees with a tepid thud of indifference, as if he had given up caring before the sparks of concern had even been able to catch fire. He breathed, and leaning forward, he placed his left hand flat on the surface of the trapdoor, gripping with his finger tips and simultaneously raising his right arm at the elbow, like a retracting pneumatic piston, absorbing energy; he could feel his body surge but did not know where it was coming from. His arm shot down, the taught coil of muscle releasing its energy without warning, and he punched the ground with a level and powerful fist. His chest drew in air, deeply and slowly, as if with meaning, preparing himself for something he had yet to discover. He continued to bring his fist down on the door, level and intensifying with each blow, but confused and automatic. The ball of fear in his chest began to speed up, spinning faster and faster, but a metamorphosis was taking place as his fist continued to pummel the trapdoor in front of him. A change into something different; it was all encompassing and it began to solidify. The sphere's barbed spikes were retracting, and a smooth surface, hardened and impregnable, emerged and began spinning efficiently - a powerhouse fuelling him, that brought clarity. He knew what it was, he knew what was happening. His body had kicked at its own weakness in some sort of twisted life-preserving mechanism and he could feel the rush; he could feel his anger coming back.

His vicious and solid grip on his surroundings, like that he had held so well in his previous incarnation, was re-emerging. His mouth produced a gritted smile, ruffling his nose, furrowing his brow, and he continued punching, each blow on the floor making him more secure in his being. He was pushing out of what he had emerged into, forming outside the instant, quivering, newborn-like being he had woken up as, and into something more, into something better, into what he was meant to be: into Germany Germany.

His skin finally split, and shot a rapid flick of blood across the floor about a foot in front of him, and he stopped, bringing his knuckles down slowly and touching the floor one final time. He was himself again: the man he had grown into and knew so well. No longer a whimper, a confused fleshy by-product of a time he thought he had got rid of, a time he thought he had escaped; he was a warrior. Raising himself to his feet, he began to think out loud again, standing naked on the spot, tiny droplets of blood falling from his right hand's most prominent knuckle. He no longer felt exposed.

“Am I dead?!” he shouted at the wall in front of him, knowing there would be no answer. He raised his still clenched fist to his mouth and sucked, tasting the metallic blood on the back of his tongue. He swallowed quickly, and he thought of one thing: recognition of his own voice. It was back again, it was sharp, and he needed to hear more; he needed to let his conscious flow in a way that he hadn't had chance to do in a very long time. It needed to happen now and for as long as was necessary, to continue to find himself, to recharge and to discover, in this place, in this fierce glow. But he was no longer shadowed by it. He dominated it; he controlled it. He needed to discover where he was, metaphysically, on a higher level of thought, even if it were for no other purpose than to know how to destroy it, how to un-make everything around him.

“Did I complete my life? My fate? Where will this trapdoor take me? Moreover, where should it take me? Am I now about to stand before my Master? My Maker? The Omnipotent higher being that had set out my path? Am I to be accepted in some sort of infinite bosom of benevolence and pleasure for my time in completing my only one inevitable path? Or am I to finally disappear into my personal singularity: my time, behaviour, being, soul, existence, entity, mind, thoughts, actions, movements, sights, philosophies, my entirety, my complete manifestation,

I. Will I get my answer? Will I become everything and nothing at the same time? What monsters lie behind this trapdoor? What never-ending confusion and pain, what suffering could exist that was beyond what I endured when I was elsewhere, and if that is all I am to be greeted by, what sort of monster can possibly justify it?" He could feel blood surging, the ball of fear in his chest truly manifesting itself into the hyper-efficient engine that powered the light-speed flicks of electricity between his synapses in his mind, and he continued.

"What about me, what about my being, what about my freedom, what about my choice, what about my will? What about the choices, the decisions, the actions that I performed and took, when were they mine? When were they taken away and performed by someone or something else? My life, my existence, my person, my tests, my trials, my tribulations; they are mine? They were mine? But were they? When were they? When weren't they? Were they ever mine?! Were. They. Ever. Truly. Mine?! What am I, what is my being, what am I the product of, what is my product, what's going on here?!" He raised his hands onto his head, clenching onto small handfuls of hair, and tugged slightly, making him feel again. His breath had been stolen away from him with confusion, with the waking-apnea brought about by the bombardment of the ridiculous: the situation he was in; what he was beginning to question; his beliefs and thoughts; his entire reason for existing being brought forward for debate in a realm that he refused to call an afterlife, but had no other explanation for. He needed a moment, before his mind took off again.

"I knew an instance, a period and a place, where my forward passage through time and the consequential reactions to my own personal matter, both solid and grey, were a subsequent result of my own personal decisions. Dictated by my person. Complete control of what I did and where I was. A savage and unrelenting grip on what I did through a control of my body, my mind and

thus my presence. There was nothing given, or predetermined; nothing could have been taken away. I was. I existed through a manifestation of cells and electrical impulses that I had complete control over through an unparalleled self belief and almost unrecognisable form of self-hypnosis. There was nothing beyond that, beyond the electricity that sparked in my mind, the chemicals that mixed in my body and the knowledge that I acquired through academic or empirical means. There was no greater or lesser; there was fact: what I had and what everyone else had. The only difference was how well another could control it. Frequently, almost always, in the time and environment where I was, the realization of that was, 'pathetically'. They had the facility, but not the will, the passion or fire to want to control it. They were malleable in a way that I wasn't; I was fortified in my own mind; I was the driver, the decision maker, the instructor; I was in control ”

“But then coincidence, the crash, the spiralling tornado of shit that continued to sweep over the world, the disgusting and successful grab at absolute power by a Government and select few that didn't deserve it, and a twisted lethargy, apathy and disbelief by a people that had other ideals and ambitions. A set of cowardly whores that unknowingly accepted what was happening around them; and my personal position, my situation, me, falling into the slot that would allow me to change it all.”

“How was that my choice? How was that my decision - how did I decide for that to happen!? Did it all change then; was that my fate all along? Had I simply not realized it beforehand? Had every single one of my actions been an elaborate manoeuvre towards that single point, and then onwards further to change? A subconscious set of decisions that another part of my inward self had taken on behalf of the established and outward me? Or was it set out by someone or something else, and then finally revealed to me in the most horrific of incidents?” His

voice began to quiver. Questions he had never had the chance to ask himself before were exploding across his mind. After the crash, after he was whipped away from the hospital by the Faster and taken away for brief periods of ‘training’... before he was set out in front of the world, with his story, to distract, to keep all those people pre-occupied, focused on one thing, distracted and apathetic, at least to how they were being governed, how they were being controlled; had it all been predestined? He liked the feeling beginning to flow; he felt alive, with thought and passion and concentration and apprehension. Swimming in a pool of emotion, he felt tension in his fingers that caused them to claw slightly and shake; he drew more air.

“But what I did, I did with absolute power, and resolve. How could my decisions be run along a set path? What am I? How did I move; how did I continue moving forward, making my decisions, but at the same time along my path, the one laid out before me? I physically, mentally and emotionally gave my absolute best to everything I ever did, to make sure I achieved what I thought was necessary to achieve - my own wants and goals - but knowing each step could not have happened any other way. I am resolute, I am, I am free. I am paralysed, I am not, I bare no responsibility. I am neither. My entirety has been a contradiction, an impossible set of terms, a hyper-loop of paradox; I am everything but nothing at the same time.” The squares took over his mind, those of his dreams, some three dimensional, some flat, some hovering, some stationary, some black, some white. They leapt in and out of his conscious, on a back board of buzzing black and white, tearing apart down the middle - absolute confusion brought about by a clarifying process he had never had chance to explore. A process he had once struggled for but never reached.

“But here, right here, right now, I have been given the choice, but which way do I chose to

follow? Do I take my actions, my being, my stomping through time and space, on this plane of existence, to be a product of my own being, a circular constant in which I have caused action in my surroundings, which in turn effect me, which again affects my decision? I am a product of my own decisions and actions and everything I do, chose to do, have done and ever did? Is this my own responsibility and does it lie solely on my own square shoulders?"

"Or am I the product of the path; a singular and almost insignificant, but needed, part of a mechanism that dictates how everyone works, moves, lives, exists, and dies? Am I nothing more than a product of a higher plan, of some power that is undeserving and terrible for the pain and suffering that it puts everyone through, but with one point of solace: that I am not responsible for my own actions? The awful decisions, actions and products of those decisions and actions, however terrible and hurtful; they were not mine. I was a puppet, to perform in the grandest of plays, I have absolute freedom from responsibility, but no choice in what I do."

"I am neither; I am both; I took my path, I took my cards; I tore at them, unflinching, and moved onward, and upward. I decide to make decisions that are already predetermined. My path had been set out; I had no choice but to follow it, but there was always hope, there was always a belief, a speck of doubt about it all, that made me, me. I am torn. How can I know that while I pushed forward with avalanching power, that that was still me, and not 'part of the plan'?" His mind's eye had calmed; he was beginning to come to terms with the unknown: his past as it had been before the crash, his being, his absolute self belief, and how he was a product of his own decisions which he was free to make as he chose. And after the crash, his coping mechanism that gave the whole thing purpose and clarity. There was a reason behind his pain. He was on a path and he would strive along that path to kill everything he hated; it had been decided for him. He

was moving forward for the first time, with piece-meal steps of confusion that brought about an understanding, a realisation that he, with his own capacity for understanding, could not answer the questions he was posing to himself.

"But why does it matter, why do I need to know? I am here now, in this orange box of horror, stooped deeply in a theological and philosophical debate, with myself, about myself, about my entire existence, and why? What question am I trying to answer here; what is the reason behind this? More questions, more terrible questions. Perhaps more importantly, I should be asking what I want. Perhaps my decision here and now will affect what happens when I pass through the trap door, when I slide through into the unknown. But even that is a paradox; how can I make a decision about my life, about my entirety, that will ultimately effect the end result, if, like I have done for so long, I believe that all my actions have been dictated - if I believe I am the product of a line that has been set out ahead of me and my being? Am I willing to suppose, to accept, that if I give my being completely over to that belief, that I will benefit from finding out that that is exactly the case? And when I do, am I willing to accept that I actually do not exist? I am nothing; a collection of preordained actions and manoeuvres that I had and have no control over. Can I roll over and find that there is no Germany Germany; just a plan, by a higher being?! Do I mean nothing in this universe? Was all my pain, my suffering, the exquisite raptures and the pitiful lows of everything I experienced, was it all for nothing, at least in my regard - it was all for some other being that I have no care for?" His mind was getting away from him and he knew it; he was becoming more and more embroiled in an argument, in a debate, in an exploration that he could not win or complete.

"What do I want? What do I want it all to mean?" His head tipped and he drew more

breath. He noticed blood on his feet beginning to dry. He took a swift glance at his knuckle and noticed how it had begun to scab over; so he was still human at least, he thought, and drew more air. Ready to stomp on the walls of his mind, of his argument, of his existence and what it all meant, he was fully-charged and equipped to smash at all around him.

"I want my freedom! I want my choice! I want to know that I am more than a product of some vicious being that has no care or regard for the meaningless process he decides to put us through! I want more! I want to know that my decisions were my decisions! I want it to be me!" The sentence trailed off into a primordial growl; his breathing had become erratic and his eyes bulged. He was trapped in a circle, in a paradox without end. His mind twitched and contorted and he was without direction, but set on tracks that would always lead somewhere, just to the other side of the circle.

"I want fate! I want preordained! I want to know that it was for a purpose! I want to know it wasn't me! I want the actions of these hands not to be that of my own, but of a greater force that has meaning and point, a purposeful ending! Removing me of responsibility!" He continued to laugh in between breaths, not entirely sure what to do with himself, and then he remembered the trap door. "Now I stand here at this trap door," he said, swinging his arm, open palmed, as if to motion to someone that it actually existed. "Maybe it's a trapdoor for the very reason that I receive no answer on the other side; the whole thing is a trap, to send my mind, this mind, wondering; maybe this is the final test. He who may stand before me may not be benevolent enough to tell me the answer: to say that he gave me permission and the ability to be decide my own fate, or that I was part of his plan. He may not be there at all. I have to go through. I have no other choice. Whatever is there, it better have answers. I am Germany Germany and I want my

being, my purpose, my existence and that of all people and time and space that surrounds me, I want it all explained.”

7 – Jack Rawstone

"What the fuck is this, where am I now, what's all this light?" The intensity caused Germany to break the promise he had made to himself: 'Keep your eyes open at all times; do not let anything pass you by'. But within seconds of jumping into the pitch black of the trapdoor, he'd already broken the pledge. He was still alone, and it seemed that he had simply transferred from one room to another. He didn't remember landing on anything though; there was no discernible impact, no faint breeze of air over his skin and hair to signify movement. Only the transition from complete dark to absolute light, in an instant, from 0 to 1 - "how did that happen?" he thought.

Stretching an eye open for a second, he didn't seem to be standing on anything - just white, all around. There was certainly no tactile feedback that he could gauge the parameters of his surroundings, of his environment, against. He was motionless, floating completely still in nothing but light, a vacuum of some sort that had no clear definitions. He tingled, helpless, but free from pain, free from the rips in his mind, a tremor of excitement rippled through his body while he experienced a spinal shudder, and he smiled. He felt a wave of ecstasy move over him, a wondrous and extraordinarily powerful feeling, as if he had been reborn, but this time accepted. The manic crazies he had just been experiencing were gone, and he relaxed. He could remember the powerful argument he had within himself, but it did not seem to matter as much now. Engulfed with warm light, he could almost hear it, a high frequency wave of sound shooting directly into his mind. He was alone, and perfect. Maybe this was his answer, he thought. Maybe it was as easy as that, the act of jumping into the trapdoor; that leap of faith in itself has cured him of all his ills, his wants, his desire to be answered, or his wish to destroy.

Something flickered, in his mind, like the scratched distortion of a TV signal getting

through for a thousandth of a second in the midst of the black, between an inoperable nothing. And again, this time for a thousandth of a second longer, and accompanied by sound, the electrical pulse of white noise. Something was beginning to happen, and happen fast. He had no time to think, just to watch, and to react too late to what was taking place. He hadn't opened his eyes; "this is happening inside me," he thought. A flicker again, followed by another; more sound, more speed. He went rigid inside himself. Still floating in nothing, his body was limp, but his mind's eye was focused and searching, scouring the infinite black that greets you when staring at the back of your eyelids. He tested, but it was still too bright to open his eyes. Wanting to double check his limbs, he brought his hands together with speed, as if to clap; no sound came. "Peculiar," he thought, and he smiled.

There was no offset, nothing around him that he could possibly use to help him measure the passage of time. His thoughts came swimming in; as always he knew what he was going to think about before his internal monologue could say it out loud to his mind. But how long he had been here doing that, just thinking, he wondered; and he had no answer. The flickering built, and against his will he tried to measure the moments, as each one passed. He tried to avoid reinventing time and giving what was happening to him some sort of structure. He just looked for the next scratch in his own surface, of everything around him, waiting patiently until the undisturbed became chaos, until black became white, until nothing became all. He craved it, craved the experience, the bolt of energy that passed through him; he wanted it. Faster and faster, snaps of time began to fill his mind, pulse throughout his entire body, with increasing intensity: crunching in, popping, exploding his senses and leaving him, instantly.

The instants continued, until they stretched his mind beyond all control and reasonable

capacity to function on any understood level of anything he had ever experienced before. He wanted everything, he wanted it now, he wanted to know the next; he wanted to see, to realise, to understand. The overwhelming might with which the flickers of time, sound, image, feeling, all consuming rush of power and light were coming in began to tear him apart. He could feel himself coming away from what he knew to be real. All colours, all sounds, all feelings.

An instant.

He could smell the tobacco and ale on the old man's breath. "HA, you're in for it now!" he shouted in a coarse voice, as if he gargled lumps of coal before he went to bed at night. Germany looked up and saw a hulk of a man stomping towards him. He had a fake hand made out of what looked like granite, carved into a fist and attached at the elbow joint. He looked around and saw that he was in an environment like an old English pub, from around the 18th century. Low ceilings caused him to hunch his back and smoke filled the air. He could see out of the small leaded window: he was close to a port, miserable and grey, with ships made out of black iron and wood. He turned to the giant, stone fisted man. 'BUT... but I'm not meant to be here!' Germany shouted.

"Ha! Lucky for you, you won't be much longer!" screamed the old man, spitting ale all over him as Germany watched the stone fist accelerate towards him and smash his skull.

An instant.

“Wow,” he thought, “she's beautiful.” He could smell her from the other side of the room: a minimalist studio apartment with giant tinted windows, high up and in view of a huge metropolis of some sort. He looked down and realised he was naked, housed in an overly hairy and slightly muscular body, nothing like that which he was used to recognising when he looked down. He quickly looked up again and bit his lip while staring at the beauty that sat opposite. She moved her head up from the book she was reading, gave him a soft smile while releasing her pitch black hair from a knot, and stood as it washed over her shoulders. She placed the book down and started walking over to him. "Wait a minute; what the fuck!?"

"Shhh, Bruce, just kiss me," she said, finally reaching him, pulling his body close to hers. He felt her warm lips against his, and the bow of her right foot slide up the inside of his naked right leg. Wow, he thought again, she tastes like gingerbread.

An instant.

“That cloud doesn't look very promising,” he thought, looking upward, refocusing his eyes and seeing the bars, the iron bars. Still looking upward he quickly scanned his surroundings and realised he was in a cage of some sort. He continued staring at the sky, at the huge, black and ominous cloud that was gathering over head.

"Don't worry about that; you're going to enjoy this one," he heard thousands of clumsy voices all say in unison, pattering out in an echoing fashion.

He looked down and saw them: thousands of Basset Hounds, spread out in the barren and gray landscape, as far as the eye could see, reaching into the distance, put into perspective by

gigantic black mountains in the distance. "WAIT... WAIT... WAIT JUST ONE SECO.."

They began singing in unison, a song that he'd never heard before but seemed quite fitting for what he was experiencing. It began, 'Always look on the bright side of life,' and after a couple of repetitions they began whistling the tune. His scream was silenced by the whistling hounds and he ran towards the barred cage as fast as he could. His head down in a charging stance, he smashed his skull as best he could on the bars of his cage.

An instant, and in the blink of an eye, an entire life, absorbed whole, gulped down, swallowed up, full consumption. Again and again, ripping through what seemed like everything anyone had ever done in the history of the human race. Instant after instant, the fear, the unknown, the apprehension - it left him, and the craving returned, for each instant, for each impact, of each life. The dreams, the emotion, his brain, his being, their being, all being, all existence, all on so many levels.

An instant. Crawling through a conduit, a tube of metal, to reach the perfect scenario: a place of such peace and tranquillity, entirely empty, the perfect temperature. The buzz of his body, steady breathing, an entranced euphoric state of nothingness. Soft synthesised bells all around him, the sound of trickling water in the air, a naked body, alive.

An instant. Hairs standing on end, soft leaves under foot, walking, the breeze catching his lips. Soft life, incredible presence, the high pitched but quiet laugh of a young girl in the distance, the smell of toast, and butter. An auburn street in fall, wonderful relaxing scents, total silence.

On an epic scale, unimaginable things rushing into his brain, all at once, unrelenting, killing, taking and giving, stretching, pulling, fists gripped tight. Grab after grab, more and more, the want to be raped, to have his mind and body overcome by life after life, all experience. Over

and over again, full, overpowering, unflinching, unrelenting, unbridled rape; he changed each time, but was always left with more. Different memories surging in, no longer himself, someone else, then someone else, hundreds of people, all consuming. All leaving their mark, all forcing themselves inside him with penetrating force: memories, sights, sounds and smells. Then leaving without fully removing themselves, always a part of them in there. Pulling out, but leaving barbed memories of each life; they're never all gone, there's something there, something he can't explain; he doesn't want to explain it. It feels like them, it feels like experience, their lives, their knowledge, their being, their time.

The entire consumption of a human life, as all throughout time, in ages from the past that he'd never seen apart from brief teachings by his father back on Micronesia. Then worlds and shapes and figures, the likes of which he never thought imaginable. Different worlds, different people, all around, spinning, everywhere, everything, all his to own. Experience after experience tearing his mind and body and making him more, continually more. Celebration, pain, suffering, wonderful pleasure, readings, teachings, life. It was all his.

Shooting through galaxies and worlds, such speed, and with seemingly no direction. People's faces, all watching, staring, cheering, fists in the air, over different planets. Epic stadium structures housing millions of people all watching screens, screens showing all black apart from a hovering cube. A cube entirely white, stationary in the middle with a slight wavering motion but hardly moving at all, and a figure inside it. That's me, he thought, in an instant. Germany Germany in the hovering cube, in the cylinder of the Gigastudio, in front of the millions of people.

Moving faster and faster, but still able to absorb. Curiosity, intrigue, fear, excitement, all pummeling his entirety, as he tried to focus on the unknown. Still flying, through the stars, now

he could see her, moving closer and closer all the time: mother earth, beautiful and peaceful, shooting towards him. And then the atmospheric breach, speeding towards land; he could see North America, and a Gigastudio structure. He was speeding towards it with refreshed intensity, through the air of Earth, back to where he had seemingly just left. Swooping up and hovering just outside. Pausing to see the Gigastudio from thousands of feet, and then shooting inside, penetrating its thick black exterior, passing through its occupants attached to the inner walls, slowly spinning, and seeing himself, standing there, bloodied and still. Squared jaw with pulsating temples, millions all around; absorbed, silent. The Faster, in front of his other self, the one in the cube, jellied and dead. Hovering around the cube, rotating around his other body, the doppelganger that stood before him, dripping with blood. What was all this: all the lives he had just come through, and now to his own? Was that the nature of the universe: past lives, lived throughout time, then to your own, to see your own death? But what was it all leading up to? Where was it going? What was its point, and how could they be past lives? - he saw visions that were clearly in the future, beyond the technology he had ever seen developed in his life time.

"I, ladies and gentlemen, am Germany Germany, and now THIS is my story," he heard his doppelganger say inside the cube. "This is it," he thought, "the pinnacle of my existence; the very reason I did what I did and led my life the way I did. Does all this mean I can see if it worked, if humanity clawed back at what was happening around them in some way and everything changed, if I was successful in my endeavour?"

He was still floating, about 100 feet away from the visage he had in front of him, looking at himself with a sort of pride, forgetting for a split second the bizarre, ridiculous, unfathomable, set of instances, collection of events, that had just taken place around him and to him. He stared

with wide eyes at himself, at the ultimate point in his life, gulping, almost with excitement at what was about to happen.

He saw the thin plume of smoke that had signalled his double's impending doom and as he watched it shoot across the epic arena. Reality around him began to come undone. Light seemed to loosen; its taut elasticity was starting to become slack, like unwinding strings on a guitar, sagging. Gaps began to appear, filled with black, between the lines of reality that still existed. A thunderous bass sound began to accompany the contorting lines of light, as all that was around him continued to disintegrate and melt into nothing. Between the dipping lines he saw the moment of his death, from the third person angle this time. He watched himself die.

For the first time since all this madness, since all the exploratory movements of insanity and unreality had begun happening to him, he had no questions. He had nothing; he was no more, as he slipped between the lines of sagging light.

His world unravelled, like tissue paper reams, falling through the air; the lines that carried reality and time, like string, literally fell apart around him. Life in rewind began to repeat: everything he had just seen, screeching past him with such intense ferocity that he could almost feel his emotions get the better of his rage. He was beginning to fall apart, as had reality around him. Unparalleled speed was taking him over, beyond anything that was even thinkable by human intelligence or reasoning. Roaring, raw sight, all colours, all light. All sound, the action of death, realisation, spinning, spiralling, complete acceptance. He was falling, through what he didn't know; he was falling to the end and he began releasing his grip. He was still Germany Germany, as far as he could possibly try to be, while all reality unravelled around him. He clawed, trying to find his event, the actualisation of his existence, inside nothing. Fighting the spin, the unravelling

nature of everything that is happening around him; controlling the force, the force against his body. Pushing and focusing, doing the only thing he knew how to do, hands clenched, no fear, no life, nothing. "What's next," he thought?

An instant.

"This is beginning to get out of hand," he said out loud, without seeming to think, running on some sort of autopilot, and finding his head on its side against a cold floor. Naked, again, he opened his eyes, quickly this time. No time for fear, for spasmodic and dysfunctional re-birth into something he didn't want; enough time and confusion had passed. "Back in the orange room," he thought, seeing the glow emanating from the wall in front of him. "To my feet...this is enough!" he coughed, as he sprang upwards, as if his body had been picked up on marionette strings, floppy, but up, erect.

Panting at the wall, arched in an animal-like fashion, his lower mandible jutting forward, he resumed his growling. What could he destroy first, he thought, before the sound of his creaking chest and deep breath was interrupted. The clacking sound of a well-made shoe on marble floor snapped in his ear, the sharp sound shooting in from behind him. One and then another, 'clack...clack'. He composed himself. Almost as full of fear as excitement, he span 180 degrees.

"Germany Germany, you can call me Jack Rawstone. Come on now, straighten up. Don't you want to see what happened next?" Jack said in a well spoken voice of English origin. He stood there with his wide smile, the points of his parted black moustache seeming to indicate direction, but to what, Germany couldn't quite figure out. Germany held out a finger and poked

his chest.

"I can assure you, Germany, I'm quite real - more real than you in fact. I am reality; you are but a weird incarnation of that reality, my friend." He leaned forward, bringing up a hand cloaked in a black leather glove, pointing outwards a finger that looked stubby in the thick cow-hide, and poked Germany back in his chest. "You though, are part of something greater than you can ever imagine, something that I am going to take my time explaining to you, and something that you will enjoy." He let out a soft laugh. "Why, normally I'd watch droid scrape you up off the ground around about now!" His laugh grew. "Not after Germany's life though! Oh no! I knew I'd made the right choice...! Right, now come on, these things I have to explain, they're not going to be easy." His voice trailed slightly as he turned and began walking to the one white wall of the room, different than before: without perspective, and indicating a route to somewhere.

Germany stood there, still naked. He had straightened himself upright like he had been asked to and was furrowing his brow relentlessly, aiming the power of his stare at this man in front of him, at Jack Rawstone. Who the fuck was this man? He could touch him, that was for sure, but that was a momentary lapse of ill-planned reconnaissance. He shouldn't have done anything; he should have left him to keep explaining before he had given away any sign of coherence; or should he? No time to question himself he thought, "just be firm, try not to die, and get your questions answered. Better to listen, at least for a bit. Don't kill him just yet; he might have something useful to say."

"I need some clothes Jack, and are you going to tell me what's going on. I'm going to find out, either way; I'm going to get my answers," Germany said in a calm voice, still furrowing his

brow intensely.

"Of course! Now, you're clothed" Jack replied, turning to see Germany Germany there, in the suit he had worn just before he had died. There he was, the answer to all his problems, all his woe. Everything that needed solving, Germany had the answer to. He was beginning to get his way, to set into motion what needed to be done; he had acquired his first asset in thi...

"Hey, stop it, stop thinking! Do not say anything to yourself, do not have an internal monologue, do not think without doing it out loud. I want to hear everything you have to say, even if it is, at this point, only relative to you. I do not want anything left out from here on in! Do you understand!? Do you know what I've just been through?!" Germany's voice was full of anger; his fist was out in front of him, steady as a rock, pointed directly at this peculiar man in front of him. The man was dressed in what seemed to be some sort of mid-19th century formal dress suit: black wool poplin, what had to be a custom tailored jacket, a shawl collar, one button, vent-less back, tapered pants with plain hems, a top hat and cane. A particularly bizarre arrangement, given the situation they both seemed to be in.

"I understand completely what you've been involved in Germany; I'm one of the reasons it's been taking place - everything that's been happening, literally everything. And do not worry, I have all the answers you're looking for, and more. Like I said, it's just going to take time; it's all rather complicated, but I know you can deal with it. You are better equipped than any person that has ever existed in the history of everything, to deal with what I am about to explain to you." He looked around, moving his head from side to side, scanning his surroundings. They had both moved completely out of the orange room, through the wall of white, into more. "More white again," Germany thought while intensifying his ridged forehead and turning to face Jack. "Ha!

don't worry, we'll be started in no time," Jack said, bringing up his right arm, above his head, reaching out his leather clad fingers and bringing them quickly in again, while pulling down, as if he had gripped onto a string, to pull away a sheath of material from a tall object.

Instantly, they were standing on the thin ledge of some sort of God-like structure. Germany leaned back slightly at the waist, scanning while his face remained taut. Strong shoulders swivelled keenly and the ridge of his brow continued to protrude more than normal. Their new surroundings reminded him of the inside of a Gigastudio, but echoed so much more; more depth, more undertaking, more power, more energy. If he could zoom out he imagined it would take minutes, at extremely high speed, to even begin to see the edges of the structure they were held on, by their two foot wide ledge. Gigantic shafts of grey, shiftless metal twinkled in the dark black of the background that was pitter-pattered with the specs of what could have been stars. Beyond God-like the structure had no top and no bottom. It just scaled away; its only enemy seemed to be perspective, not allowing the structure to show its magnitude, its planet engulfing size. It incited his deepest emotions, none of which he had time for; it belittled him, enthralled him, but he needed to shake it off. He could not let anything get in his way, even the vastly impressive structure of his God, of this man, of this being, so oddly dressed, standing at his side, breathing patiently, as if to let him take a grip on something that he knew would astonish. "Concentrate... Listen to every single word he has to say," he thought.

"Now, Germany, are you ready? Well, then I'll begin." He reached up again as if to pull down another shroud from over them both, and watched Germany's hands pulsate. Even with all his power he knew he could not let that man out of his sight. Not for a second. He knew what Germany could do.

"Here we are, Germany; this is the answer to one of your first questions, one of the simpler ones that we're likely to tackle over the course of this conversation," Jack said, motioning his eyes downwards with a very slight nod, as if to motion Germany to also look down.

The epic structure they were just engulfed by had disappeared. They were apparently now standing on a glass sheet, maybe a thousand or so feet directly above a large city. Germany recognised it as Paris, from his time; he could make out the Eiffel Tower below them, And they were moving slowly towards it, progressing downwards and eventually settling on the observation tower. It was a beautiful spring day, clear; he could see for miles. But he couldn't feel the crisp flow of spring air into his chest, or any indication of atmosphere at all. No sound, no feeling, just the view. Overlooking the Champ de Mars and the streaming city beyond, he could see the large preaching church that had been erected at the end of the gardens - the main one for the city, where multiple Fasters at a time would gather to brainwash and 'educate' the citizens, for The Benefit. He relaxed his focus and saw that it was surrounded by people. In fact, the entire garden complex in front of him was overrun with people, an unusually large crowd, shifting with intense movement and colour.

"What is this, Jack? What are all these people doing here? If this is my time, then why are they crowded like this? The Benefit wouldn't have allowed it." Germany gave a stern point at the ground that indicated authority while retaining a clear child like buzz of anticipation.

"This, Germany, is your doing. What you see before you are the very beginnings of the Great Face Riots," Jack replied, tilting his head forward, raising his right eyebrow and grinning out of the same side of his mouth.

"Your death is the cause of this. It is also the cause of many more deaths, but it is the

cause of change. You achieved the very thing you wanted, exactly what you wanted in fact. You see, although you were never entirely sure how it would happen, by which method the change would manifest itself, you were certain your death would make it happen. That belief you held so tight, well, it was to become fact, and this is how it happened. Here in Paris, it's the mid 22nd century and the Great Face Riots are just beginning, the riots that would take over the world and the colonised universe, and bring a revolution. You see." Jack paused. Placing his right elbow in the cup of his left hand and pointing his right forearm skyward, he rested his chin on the flat of his fist. He walked through the barrier of the observation deck, into the air, as if it never existed. He turned to face Germany and brought his arms out, palms open pointing towards the ground, towards the savage crowds below.

"When you killed that Faster, you were broadcast across all television, across the entire universe; billions witnessed, first hand, what you had done, the impossible and unimaginable feat you had achieved. And you instantly created the greatest story of all time. But what you did, it could not be allowed; it shook the very core of the benevolent dictators that were The Benefit, the rulers of the world and colonies through their system of Fasters. The Benefit's operation relied heavily on the power of the Fasters, more so than you may have been aware. The Fasters were the essential tool, the link in the chain of manipulation, with their posthuman, purpose-bred brains and biotechnology. The Benefit used them to acquire people like you, in order to keep the populous occupied with the Stories, the likes of which you, and so many others had... The world's Celebrities, Ha! You Germany, You, were a tool of their regime! But you fought back; somehow, through all the manipulation, you remained you, while convincing them you were something else. You had your fate and you knew what you had to do." Jack took a quick breath, walking around

in circles on nothing, hundreds of feet above the madding crowd. There was still no sound, only Germany's regular breathing and Jack, talking, looking down below him, revealing everything that happened.

"When you appeared there, in the hovering cube of the Gigastudio, bloodied and still... when you created that moment, it captured the minds of all humanity. They instantly became more obsessed than ever with trying to achieve Celebrity status, and less concerned than ever with the political regime controlling them. But The Benefit worked it all wrong. They took you off the air; they tried to quell the story. They believed that the death of that Faster, witnessed by so many, would cause further killings, and they tried to cover you up. Bad move for them Germany; good for your dream. The people rose up, right here, right now - this is the beginning, the Great Face Riots - they started right here." He pointed sharply to the people below. "They wanted you, they wanted your story, they wanted it 24/7/365; and then, when The Benefit denied them it, they started rioting. Their sole aim: to get you back on the air; they wanted repeats, they wanted your face, you! And as they fought, they started something they never realised they had the capacity to do; they didn't even realise it was happening." He took off a glove and seemed to pick some food from in between the teeth on the right side of his mouth, before replacing the glove, tonguing his teeth and continuing.

"As the riots formed into underground groups to show your image, as they in turn formed into resistance groups against The Benefit, leading tactical guerrilla attacks and other pockets of violence, things quickly began to fall. There were sporadic massacres of Fasters and Presenters, across the globe. With each step they took, they removed more and more the binds by which they were restrained. The manipulation of the Fasters, the obsession with 'Celebrity,' of being adored,

of being the simple whore, worshipped by the people, to keep their minds off how they were being ruled; it all began to crumble. And as one part of the system began to collapse, so did others. The people began to fight; they were no longer awash with a desire to be recognised for the meaningless; they found point to their actions, they found true meaning, they found war." Jack motioned downwards again with his eyes. Germany, transfixed, blinked and looked down to see a different Paris. Scorched, broken and littered with the dead, the city had obviously been ravaged by fighting.

"As the people rose up, as the resistance grew and multiplied, they got clever. That keen mind of humanity, it had never really left, it had just been effectively quelled by the gutless want for a non-existent dream called Celebrity. So, as they regained their cunning, they raided weapons stores of centuries gone by. They took up arms and began to fight; they gritted their teeth and began pushing for more. The Benefit was totally unprepared. They had had such a tight grip; they thought they had such a perfect system - they had their Fasters, and that was all they needed. They tried equipping the small pockets of Fasters that were left, but they were too few and could not be bred quickly enough. The people had changed: they had broken their apathy; they had another meaning again. They had honour, they had pride, and they wanted more: more than just being on the universal television system; more than just floating in that translucent cube in the Gigastudio being interviewed by a Presenter. And out of the ashes arose a new society, one that looked to push humanity to its very limits in all aspects, from the acquisition of knowledge to the physical presence. They looked back at what had been, and wept at the lost years, the souls that had been lost to the century and half of nothing, of ill-directed obsession; and they vowed for it never to happen again. You see Germany, your death gave birth to the second Might of

humanity."

Germany was, for the first time since he had been neatly vaporised in the hovering cube of the Gigastudio, completely silent. His death, his fate, his life had had purpose. The death of his parents - their murder, by him - his life, all the pain; it had actually meant something. But what now... where was he, why was this man, Jack, explaining it to him? He now had one answer, but this only led to more questions. There was still so much more to be broached. "Continue, do not let him stop, do not give anything away. Keep on. It's not over yet."

"I believe you Jack. You know I could choose not to - I'm assuming you know. I could stand here and refuse to believe this story you have just woven before me. But I chose to believe you. Although, that in itself raises more questions now, doesn't it?" Germany clasped his hands together, rubbing them relentlessly and raising his shoulders up, and smiled a toothy smile.

"You see, Jack, I need to know more. So my death, it caused all this? The birth of a new age of man, a stronger and more wilful one? But when did this end? What time are we in now? Where are we now? And that's just the..."

"Ah, don't worry Germany, I wasn't going to stop there," Jack interrupted, but before he could gain any rhythm Germany pulled the conversation back.

"...start, as well as needing to know where we are now, what this place and time is, I need to know about choice. What am I part of here? What is choice? You know Jack, the big questions..." Germany pinched a small piece of air in front of his face with this right hand, as if to pull at the very fabric of the universe, and screwed his face up, staring into the back of Jack's mind.

"Well, Germany, I'll march onward." Jack replied, brushing some imaginary dust off his

tuxedo shoulder. "Right, now this is where it might get difficult, but I know you can handle it; it's the very reason I chose you..."

"Chose me for what?!" Germany shot in.

"Chose you for a great task, Germany. Let me continue. You see, we're not at this point in time," he said, motioning to the war-ravaged city below them. "This is all just a simulation, a demonstration by me to try to explain things to you, in an effort for my own gain, Germany. To start, after this new age of man rose out of the dust of the Great Face Riots, and the war that ensued, there were millennia of great achievement. Man went on to explain everything about the universe - to solve it, Germany, to literally know everything. It was so perfect Germany, but perfection never lasts. Man grew apathetic again, with the realisation he had achieved everything there could possibly be to achieve in the universe. He lay back and has continued, over further millennia, to degrade, into nothing. Into a spastic jellied wobble of the magnificent conqueror of worlds he once was. And this is where I come in Germany, this is where you begin to get some more answers." Jack reached to the air again and pulled at the invisible shroud. They were back on their original ledge, surrounded by the epic structure, by the steel shafts that had engulfed them previously.

"Germany, this is where you must believe me; focus on me. As man resolved all mystery of the universe, the obvious need for Government, for a ruling class, dwindled. This gave birth to the Negotiator system, of which I am a part. I am one of the final 16 Negotiators. Our purpose in the universe was to resolve minor disputes as they arose, often decades apart, and to maintain absolute tranquillity. But we still wanted more Germany; we're from millennia of special breeding, the finest minds in the universe, and we could not help ourselves. We saw the degraded mass that

had accumulated across the universe over the recent centuries, and were sickened by it. When we thought of the past achievements, of the death and turmoil of so many, we could not let this be the end. Our leader, Richard Vortigern, he gave us the idea of the Absolute Tooth. This gift, Germany, was to be for us Negotiators, and a new super race we would create. We walked into a Cerebral Goo that would allow us to live through every, so deemed, 'important' life, in the history of humanity. While we 16 Negotiators were in this Goo, living all the lives of man, acquiring this absolute knowledge, a collected knowledge of all man, the pale and apathetic race that had grown on the outside died out, with the dripping of time, melting into a pitiful nothing. We Negotiators emerged, with the Absolute Tooth, to become the first Graduates, and with the plan to create the ultimate race. We would purpose-breed 'Shells', which we would enter into this bath of knowledge, in order that they could know everything. And unlike ourselves, they would never be constrained by our original life line, our original blood and the imperfections that come with it." Jack dipped his head slightly, walking along the ledge a few more steps before turning to see Germany, plain faced and ghost-looking. He had to be able to cope; he had to have the power to tackle what had just been said and make sense of it.

"You see Germany, the reason why you felt so unwelcome when you woke up in the Change Chamber, was because you are not actually Germany Germany, you are in fact, a reproduction of him. You are a shell grown in a tube, that has been entered into the Cerebral Goo for the primary purpose of living every important life ever, in order to acquire their knowledge through empirical means, and to eventually acquire the Absolute Tooth. To know everything. You have to realise Germany, this is a gift; this will make you everything." Jack raised his hands onto the silent Germany's shoulders and looked him in the eye.

"But what does this mean for me!?" Germany raged eventually, exhaling and raising his trembling hands in between Jack's arms and in front of his face. "What am I?! Why am I here then?! Why are you explaining this to me?! What about my fate, my path, my freedom?!"

"Germany, you shall be my saviour, and for being my saviour, I am going to give you so much more than you even think is possible, even now after what I have explained." Jack released his grip on Germany's shoulders and turned again to walk.

"Germany, you do not exist, you are not Germany Germany, you are a product of the Goo. The visions you had before - that was the Rebirth; that was you leaving the Goo as Germany Germany and being penetrated with all the lives you have previously lived through. You should have been picked up by a droid, had your memory cleaned, and dropped straight back into the Goo, to live your next life, and so on and so on until you would leave the Goo. Having experienced your final Rebirth you will be left with the accumulated memory and knowledge of all the previous lives you had lived, thousands of them, tens of thousands, throughout all points in time. I, however, interrupted your process. I too have lived the life of Germany Germany; I know what he achieved, I know what you are thinking right now, I know how you feel and what you want. Because I know all this, I also know that you're the only one who can help me." Jack stopped again and strained his face.

"This is where it gets really interesting Germany. Although you are not Germany Germany, you are a recreation of the man that was; you are an exact replica. Because I woke you up at this point in your acquisition of the Absolute Tooth, you are bound by Germany and his traits. To put it simply, you are the closest anyone will ever again get to the great man that was Germany Germany. I know you have this burning within, this torment, the questions; I know

because I had them. I watched you before; with great shame I watched you almost tear yourself apart with your questions." He pointed at the floor and they saw Germany in the orange Rebirth room, and Jack allowed for sporadic speech bites to come through: "I want my freedom! I want my choice! I want fate! I want preordained!"

"I know you want all of these things; this is the reason that I pulled you out of the Goo now. We have millions of others all going through the acquisition as we speak, but you are the first to have experienced Germany Germany, and I need your help now. I am going to tell you what I can do, what will bring you to want to help me, and what will put out the torment in your being. I can give you both. I can give you everything you ever wanted. I know you want freedom of choice without the moral responsibility for your actions, and I can provide you with that gift Germany; me, Jack Rawstone." Jack pointed at himself with an honest look.

"I can give you freedom from responsibility while retaining a recognised choice of action; I can bequeath that on you. I can give you this through the Absolute Tooth. You can have both, Germany Germany; you can be at peace. As you acquire all the greatest knowledge of all time, you can know both at the same time. You can be perfect. Your actions will be your choice - you will be responsible for them - but you will know absolutely, without any possible doubt in your perfect mind, that you could have made no other choice, because you will know everything. This is what I can give to you." Jack stood there silent.

Germany got it; he understood. It was a string of bizarre riddles, all tied together, that when stretched out, when pulled taut, were able to form a clear line that he could look along, and see an end to. He realised what he was, and he realised that his actions, the ones that he had just 'lived', were that of this greater purpose. He could not have performed them in any other way. He

was living out the life of the man that was Germany Germany, and as much as he believed that he was that man, he knew in the pit of his stomach he was something else. He was free from responsibility, which answered his question; he knew what he was - he was the product of a higher being. But not a God; a human, at the pinnacle of existence; a mere man, flesh and bone. A powerful feeling of ecstasy surged through his body. And now he had been offered this gift. This Absolute Tooth that would solve all of his questions, answer him absolutely, and perhaps finally quell his rage. Maybe this point here and now was his fate, and the culmination of all that he could experience would answer everything. There is nothing else; he is the product of his own actions, but those actions are perfect, because he owns all knowledge, and in turn, he is free from responsibility.

"What do you want me to do, Jack? What do I have to do to acquire the Absolute Tooth?" Germany finally spoke, straight faced.

Jack saw that the glassy eyed Germany had gone; there was another being there now, something even more impregnable and forceful than before. He was everything Jack needed.

"I need you to kill me Germany. I need you to end me. Although I have the Absolute Tooth, I am still bound by my original life, that of Jack Rawstone, I am still he. I can never be as perfect as you Germany, because I still have my original life, and shall forever be constrained by that. I have a burning greed inside me, an original trait of my ancestors, a genetic predisposition of millennia of breeding and then selective gene therapy, and it curses me. I still have want, Germany; I still have a need for more. I am perfect. But all I see with perfection are boundaries. This Absolute Tooth - while it can cure you of your ills, it will never cure me. And as I continue to exist, to walk along the halls of eternity, I am afraid of what I might do. I need you to end me

Germany, as I cannot." Jack bowed his head, and took off his top hat, almost as a mark of respect to Germany.

"I can do that Jack, if it will end my torment, if this is the way I must go to acquire the Absolute Tooth; I can kill you. You need to tell me what I need to do," Germany replied with a solemn voice.

"You have saved me, Germany Germany. You have saved everything," said Jack, raising his head, flipping his hat back on and brushing his moustache. "I am going to give you a further gift; a reward for your compassion and understanding, Germany. You will be entered back into the Goo, to continue your acquisition of the Absolute Tooth, but you will understand your experience. You will know what is happening to you. You will file along the line that is the life you will be living, you will follow that person's path, but you will know what is taking place; you will be able to enjoy the experience of each of the lives that you have left to experience. You will remain as Germany Germany in the very fabric of your being, but you will not be able to make any decisions outside of the life by which you are bound, by their path. Yet you will know you are Germany Germany; you will know you are growing to become the perfect being; and you will know you have a task to perform when the time is right, in order to complete your acquisition. You will be able to enjoy experiencing all of humanity, and then embrace it at its pinnacle."

"I agree," replied Germany.

The natural light crept back in through the slits in the curtains. The dust had long since settled. Mars leaned forward, reaching over the table with the carefully placed ornaments and John-Face's torn up sprinkled notes.

"Remain awake, fucker!" He slapped him with an open palm, leaving a neat row of four fingerprints and a thumb-print across John-Face's face. The young journalist reacted badly; his muscles clenched with shocking speed. His legs kicked forward, crashing against the table separating him from Mars and pushed the chair he was sitting on up on its hind legs. Balancing perfectly for a split second, the journalist's eyes were wide and fearful, arms stretched out to his side, drawing invisible circles in the air, desperately trying to balance himself. He didn't have the stamina for it though, and his weak arms couldn't pull his body back forward. He let out a deep groan as he fell backwards, cracking his head on the marble floor as the chair smashed to the ground.

"Ha! See boy! I told you your eyes would probably explode in your head!"

8 – Devils hand

He stood from his ornately decorated chair, leaving the young journalist unconscious on the floor opposite him. He'll wake up soon enough, he thought, let the poor bastard have his rest; he's going to need it.

Hours had come and gone in the majestic room. The curtains remained ajar and the slits of fine light continued to cut the air. He felt his gut kick; it was clearly time for more booze - a dozen or so hours had passed since the journalist had tip-toed in, quiet and nervous. And what of him now? What of them both? Mars had danced around the room, moving from a powerful leader, to a fervent teenager, through to a quivering wreck and on still to a powerful maniac on the brink of collapse. Kicking at the walls and smashing ornaments, he had punched the air as a rigid man-beast and torn at the veil of reality itself as a crazed and rabid husk. Now they were both left here, one unconscious, probably never to wake again, and the other, well that was hardly worth the terrifying thought. Still, he considered, he had told the majority of his story, most of what was important. But there was still more: possibly the most important part. He knew he had to keep going, for it all to make sense to himself, again; a story within a story. A plan within a plan.

Now he was in another time, another reality altogether; but he had reformed his thoughts - on the whole situation, on everything around him. After the lives he had lead over and over, more streaming through him and onto him, now things had changed. He, Germany Germany, was more than just the collection of his own thoughts and actions, now he was becoming the collection of all thoughts and actions that had ever taken place. And the last one, the one with Lucy Tower, that one brought forward something he had never experienced before and it made him grow. He

felt that life more than the others; it penetrated him and it left him with more than he could have ever imagined, more than any of the other lives he had lead, after this gift had been so graciously bestowed upon him. And now he knew, he knew truly, that it had backfired on Jack; he knew that there was so much more to contemplate now, other than just living out the remaining lives, killing Jack, gaining the Absolute Tooth and becoming a Graduate...a universal master of everything.

He had begun to collate his ideas, his ideals, everything that had ever meant anything to him, and push his thoughts forwards as best he could. He was still Germany Germany, he was still bound by his amazing faculties, he still had his anger and strength. The lives he had been leading had paled into comparisons with his own, and this almost made him stronger; he was still, at his root, Germany. Just as Jack had told him he would be. He was indeed bound by him, by himself, all the while leading the lives of others, going along their fateful lines. Just as what was left of humanity was now also doing, in the Cerebral Goo, stepping in and out of shells, moving towards becoming Graduates, creating that super-race. And now, as he had explained to the journalist before the boy had gone unconscious, he had a very serious decision to make.

He walked around the room with an upside down smile on his face. Not happy or sad, just indifferent and thinking. He would find what he was looking for somewhere in this mess, he thought. He continued to shuffle in a daze around the room, correcting toppled statues, rectifying fallen paintings and brushing to the side smashed glass and ceramics with the outside of his booted foot. He squinted, his old bones creaked, and he felt Mars' passion run though him. He felt this small man with such fire and fight, who had led this extraordinary life of hedonism, of rock and roll, of insanity; he felt him and breathed him. He let his cloud take over him briefly.

He remembered the Fort Festival of Berlin where his show had seen so many perish as the

violent police fired their gigantic rubber boulders into the berserk and frenzied crowd of hundreds of thousands. And he remembered the epic orgies; piles of flesh, all ripe for the picking, all laid out before him, and the powerful drugs that turned him into a God amongst men, occupying and penetrating, sometimes hundreds of women in a single sitting, over numbers of days and over and over again.

He quickly snapped back to Germany, at the forefront of his mind, while still following the path that Mars naturally would have led. Directed by some sort of auto-guiding mechanism, he could see what was going on, he could almost feel control, but it was always just out of reach. Mars was the pilot, Germany was merely along for the ride.

He failed to find his ancient terracotta leg, probably smashed at some point during the weapons-grade spasm of life he had been through over the last dozen or so hours. He found a tumbler glass on its side, spat in it and wiped out the dust and glass fragments with a scrunched up bit of his black velvet top, and held it up to the light for inspection.

How could he still be telling this story? He had no idea. How could he keep going through all of this? It was, by all logic, completely impossible. Mars Trednme had once existed, true, in the lifeline of humanity, buried deep in the 21st century, almost on the brink of the 22nd. But Germany, with what he knew now, still had no way of controlling this body, this being within the Cerebral Goo. He could not manoeuvre or manipulate it; this was not a lucid dream, like he had suspected. He was on a fixed path - that of Mars - and now he was telling this story, the entire story of the future.

He walked over to the smashed up bar area, leaned over the cracked mirror surface and rummaged around behind it, looking at the mirror behind the bar to direct his hand to the nearest

bottle. Finding some navy rum, he quickly filled the tumbler and downed the entire glass in one.

The only explanation, he thought, was that Mars was completely insane; so far gone that, through some unimaginable coincidence on an unprecedented scale, he has guessed the future. This man, Mars Trednme, had somehow lost control of his mind so wildly that he had leapt inanely through a myriad of thoughts, and had somehow brought everything together.

He had had this fit, this atom-powered cramp of thought, insanely thinking and imagining the future as some peculiar dystopia where the want for Celebrity by its occupants also led to their subjugation. A future he could clearly have played a part in manufacturing. Then more flowing thoughts, right through to the demise of that reality and back again to a triumphant re-affirmation of man as the leading manifestation of matter in the universe. And further still to him ultimately being possessed by a man called Germany Germany. A man who had been tasked with living out the lives of all important men, and then ultimately becoming a perfect super being. Just how the fuck had this happened? Was any of this actually real? Was the entire thing simply a figment of this drug-fuelled insaniac, mental bastard? Germany felt his presence inside the figure, the being of Mars, buzz momentarily as if he had been slightly set out of tune with everything for just a second. No, he thought, that simply cannot be the case.

Perhaps this is why Mars' life was so important, Germany continued, desperately trying to make logic out of what was going on while the rum shot down his throat like a mighty fist, punching its way into Mars' shallow stomach. Perhaps this is the reason this life had been deemed as a 'life worth living,' and a necessary part of the Cerebral experience, an extra scale in the armour of the Absolute Tooth. It's the sharp feeling of absolute insanity, the peculiar focus it brings. That's it; that's why he's been moving forward along Mars' path. He had wondered why

this body had been chosen, why this terrible man had made it onto the list. His life experiences were not dissimilar to other great men and women, standing in front of thousands, commanding them - the hedonism, the dizzying highs, the unrelenting lows - but now Germany had clarification, a mind within a mind; it was insanity. It was this point in Mars' entire life, what he was living through now; this is the culmination of his life's work.

Germany was pulled sharply away from his own thoughts, as he had been many times before, while thinking inside the mind of his host. He, Mars, turned around quickly, away from his black, clouded reflection in the mirrored bar, to face the young journalist who was beginning to wake up. Murmurs rumbled from the other side of the room and he walked over kicking up the floored dust, glass in one hand, bottle of rum in the other, Cuban heeled boots clacking on the floor. His coarse breath pushed the shafts of dusted light away from his face in spirals.

He looked down at John-Face, the boy's face as uncomfortable-looking as ever: sagging and stretched, lines of age running over it, each grabbing at youth, wishing it wasn't there. Squatting, Germany's knees clicked and jutted out in front of him. Relaxing the bottle and letting it swing in between his legs, he placed the glass on the ground and with the same hand brought his stinking, stubby fingers down, lightly, over the journalists face.

“Come on you meek fucker; this is just where it gets interesting. Wake up. No time for sleep.”

“Get the fuck away from me you shitting crazy bastard!” John-Face shrieked, shifting across the marbled floor towards the wall behind him. He moved quickly backwards, trying to dig his heels and the palms of his hands into the floor, flicking up flecks of smash glass around him.

“You're fucked in the head Mars, completely beyond the pale. To begin with you could

have possibly passed this thing off as some sort of schizophrenic episode in one way or another, but no way...after all this, no chance. Seriously, for someone suffering from such a severe head fucking as you already are, there's no going back.” He stared at Mars, his face contorted and shivering, his eyes widened with fear, his words not really making much sense. “There's nothing left of you; you're a delusional head case, screwed beyond all belief. Ha! If you think I'm ever going to write up anything close to what happened here today you've got another thing coming...What...what the fuck is this??” His voice trembled with adrenaline and a craziness of its own while he waved his hand out in front of him motioning to the chaos of the room. “Some sort of weird publicity stunt? You think some bat-shit insane story will get you recognition again? You're past it Mars! You had it once; now you're fucked!”

“That may be, young man, but look now, if there isn't some fight left in you yet,” Mars replied with a smile, bouncing the third full bottle of rum lightly off the floor with a ding of glass against marble.

The journalist noticed more than ever now, even more than when he had first entered the room, the twin sound Mars seemed to carry in his voice; oscillating between two waves, between sanity and insanity no doubt, he thought, quickly while trying to compose himself.

“You...y-y-you fuckhead. Let me the fuck out of here,” The journalist scrambled to his feet, pushing himself up against the wall.

“No chance, boy...” Mars pushed him back down with ease, turned, walked a few paces, shifted some debris, found the journalist's laptop and threw it down on him in one quick move.

“Listen up,” he said. “Like I've been saying, this is where it gets interesting. You've proved you're made of tough stuff, tougher than I had imagined. Hey! You're all right, hahaha, yup, all

right in my book, son.” Mars tried to change tack, realising he was losing this blighted boy; he needed to keep him on side. Mars’ thoughts ran quickly - no Germany, just the hedonistic madman. Even if this story would never be published, he needed to tell it; he needed to get it out, he had things that he must clarify.

Then Germany was awake again, sitting inside Mars, thinking he had cracked it. Thinking he could sit here and know how and why, in the Cerebral experience, he was living a life that hadn't existed for millennia, and for it to be answering questions of his own life. His thoughts were his own - yet slotted in line with that of Mars Trednme - thinking on what he needed to do, how he needed to tell this one last part of the story, to consolidate everything. To bring it all together, and for him to know, after all this experience, what he must do. There was no time for questions of insanity; he could not think about giving in to a plain reality, thinking that this whole thing was in fact some schizophrenic episode like the journalist had said. He had to believe; he had to know he was Germany Germany. And who knew what this body might do next, where it may go, and after this life the likelihood of him being able to speak out loud the situation that was evolving was absolute zero. If there was another life. He licked the dry corners of his mouth and refused to accept insanity. There was no single chance in the pattern of everything that this will happen again, when he hits his next life. Things will be clearer in the next one. And he spoke up.

“You see John-Face, as you know I've been given this gift. I'm on route to becoming a supreme super-being, by means of the empirical process. I shall live all of mankind's most important lives, over millennia, and I shall exist with the Absolute Tooth, being free from responsibility while retaining freedom of choice. I was chosen as a man called Germany Germany, who you have some knowledge of now through my story. I've been chosen to kill Jack Rawstone,

and in return, I've been permitted to see the lives I live while I move along their path in the Cerebral Goo.” He waved his arms around him to try and signify that their reality was in fact the Goo. “I am the body and mind of Mars Trednme, but I am everything of Germany Germany...I can feel him, in my head, gnawing away, confused, in pain...and the anger - I've never felt anything like it, it's been there my entire life, but now it's as maddening and as powerful as it's ever been. And then there are all the other lives, the ones I've been living, their thoughts, feelings and knowledge.” Mars walked around in circles, almost hunched over, stabbing his index finger into his temples and grinding his teeth.

“I get all this you mental bastard,” John-Face said, head bowed as he moved across the room, lifting up his chair into its original position, brushing off the debris and sitting back down. “But what do you mean you have more to say? What else could there be; what else could possibly be left?”

“A-ha, you see John-Face, we've had it all haven't we?” Mars suddenly stopped, straightened his back and looked over the room, through the dust and into the back of the journalists pitted eyes. He could hear real fear in his voice now. “You clearly think like I did once, that only pain and anger exists in this world, and nothing else, just black. My acceptance of Jack Rawstone's proposition was an easy one to make, because it would take away my pain, make me perfect, allow me to have both. Freedom from responsibility,” he slowly placed forward one open palm. “And freedom of choice. But there is another side John, there is another thing out there. It brings about all of existence's greatest things; it manifests itself and drops in your lap unbridled pleasure. It's called Love. And it changes everything.”

9 – Lucy Tower

He woke into immediate panic; twitching thumbs and blacked out thoughts of sin and bad crazies were all he had. His eyes flickered open, trying the best they could to rinse the layer of filth that had accumulated on them, the consequence of drunkenly falling asleep with them open. Used to it, he picked himself from the floor with the sort of carefulness normally reserved for the elderly. Still blinking rapidly, he walked over to the full length mirror hanging at the side of the door in the eight berth hostel room, on Amsterdam Street in uptown New York. Those thoughts that had woken him with such immediacy began to manifest themselves, to gather, fortify and grow. He didn't want it.

The mirror brought more clues, tell tale signs helping clear the mist of last night and bring more force to some of the awfulness that was quickly sneaking in. He brought his right hand up and, between his forefinger and thumb, he rubbed his smooth, slightly dimpled chin and quivered at the memories: the gutless feeling of sordid confessions to absolute strangers, talking out of place and out of sync; frightening the frail, amusing the stupid, disgusting the clever, pacifying the arrogant. It was all there, the moments that brought embarrassment on his name, the moments that dampened the souls of the meek; all these moments, they all made him feel bad. Like a bad person. He wanted some good in his circumstance, in the reality that was now. He knew that he was a good person, but he just couldn't see it at this point in time; he was clouded by his own, self-induced horror. He stared into the pits of his eyes, and then ran his line of sight over the rest of his face. His refined features were bloated and whiter than usual. Naturally pouted lips were scarlet red, giving the impression that he was wearing lipstick. His clothes were marked with splashes of whiskey and beer; all tell tale signs that debauchery and disgusting play that had taken

place. His glasses sat on his face in their usual fashion and were blotched with crystallised solution - what it in fact was, he didn't want to know. Their thick black frames rested straight but gave the impression they were slightly off-kilter because of his high right eyebrow.

It was as if he had gone off, kept frozen for his careful life, and this one night came along and he fell out, onto the floor. He had been left to rot in the dirty humid city. He knew that wasn't true though. He knew he always had the beast; he just did his best not to let it escape, though on occasion the walls crumbled and there was no choice but to embrace him. To take the greasy swine by its gigantic horns and hope that life, normality, would prevail, and the good would slay what horror lay inside him.

He turned away from himself. He needed to move and find some good in the mess of his thoughts, those nodes of horror that were creeping in and terrorising the back of his retinas, forcing themselves onto the blind spot in his mind dedicated for imaging those experiences that had already taken place. That spot where his imagination rested and currently, where a sulphuric pit of hell bubbled away and showed him horrors he wanted to block out. He knew that good existed, somewhere; he just couldn't remember where at this point; only the black of shattered and lost morals was present. He refused to believe that his beast had gotten the better of him. There was always hope - there had to be good. But this very instance had no lust for good, only the emotional comedown of powerful endorphins, for paranoia and dread, embarrassment and loathing.

He began to gather his things, grabbing at what was available, and noticed that the room stank of death and was cloaked in silence. Normally crowded and bustling with a wonderful mixture of nationalities, it was still, dull, shrouded with the smelly and still air. He squinted at the

back of his mind again, trying to think, trying to picture what potentially could have happened in this room to give it such a personality. He failed to find anything inside himself, nothing instantly recognisable. The only flickers of hope and good came from remembering inane chat with the young Japanese travellers that had accompanied him in the room, the previous evening. They were all gone now, no trace. But if he'd woken on the floor by the door, how had they got out? The overly polite nature of their ethnic ties probably stopped them from even moving him. If he was sleeping with his eyes open they could have even thought he was dead. They probably left through the window and down fire escape. He winced; he hadn't meant to have been such a remorseless fucker, but he knew that that wasn't the half of it. Just a fleck in a night of insanity and fierce decadence.

He'd collected a small bag of essentials he was able to quickly gather from around the room: a small container of alcohol solution for sterilising his hands and a spectacle lens cleaning cloth for smudging the grime around his glasses. He glanced out of the room's tall window upon his exit. The glance was all he needed; his smudge ridden eyes took a snap-shot of the situation and, in the turn between that window and grabbing the knobbed handle of the door, he instantly knew he wouldn't fit in there.

The patio area below housed generic souls while they sat around talking of 'the sights'. Its youthful population, a bunch of pathetic dullards, small knits of wasted flesh, took up his air, squandering it on futility and the small time. He coughed violently at the sense of his beast, almost a reaction of expulsion, to push it out of his body. He thought that he had sobered, thought it had gone back inside its own dark corner, but obviously not. He shook his head; he couldn't continue to think like him, to react to his surroundings like that beast. Still motioning his hand toward the

door, he noticed one girl in the picture that his mind had taken. Wearing all black on a day that looked so hot, she seemed to lack any posture of the norm - no part of her resonated with those around, and she sat alone. No time for her now though; his beast still seemed to be awake and, as he took hold of the door and pushed it open, he knew that it was important that he re-hydrate, to ease the pressure on his dried brain, to piece together the night's actions, to evaluate and regroup in any way he could.

He exited the hostel quickly, moving briskly through those around with a semi-drunken precision that he had acquired over numerous years of practice. His beast was shouting tourette-like obscenities in his mind. Uncontrollable and instant, he didn't know where they came from, he couldn't resist them, and he hated everything about them. 'FAGGOT' at a small, skinny hipster kid in tight black jeans. 'FATTY, LAY OF THE FUCKING CAKES' at the slightly rotund girl struggling with putting her rucksack in one of the hostels lockers. 'CHINA MAN, LEARN HOW TO FUCKING WHISPER' to an East Asian-looking reception clerk. He shook his head; it wasn't him - not the conscious part of his mind, not the sentient being that was so easily able to succeed in Western society; to make friends, produce bonds, to alleviate the pain of others in time of need and create wonderful streams of smiles when given the chance to shine. He wasn't this horror. All he could think of was the need to cage him again, and not let the swine out while he exited, shaking his clenched fist and flashing his teeth at a petite Latino girl. No, he must be caged.

He stood outside the hostel, facing a small delicatessen across the four lane street. He was motionless, and the sun shone down, beating against his pale skin and red lips, drying him out even more. He couldn't move; just watched the yellow cabs shoot by in both directions,

occasionally broken by the colour of an SUV. He was consumed by regret - why had he done what he had done? He wasn't a brute; he had long thought his heart had removed the majority of its pain; he thought he had grown strong and, if not killed, at least trapped its beasts. He was a happy successful young man, he fit in, he liked his friends, and they liked him. He had a reciprocal relationship with close platonic life companions that saw that joy was in no short supply; it surrounded them. But somewhere, something had gone wrong, and he didn't know what to blame. A cross firing synaptic response in his muddled brain? A deeply buried raw emotion of particular intensity that manifested itself in his demon-like alter ego? He had nowhere to turn. Right now, all he could do was walk straight, hoping each step would pull him further out of his self-induced pit of loathing, of regret, of hate and paranoia.

The delicatessen was as crass as the rest of them; blue tiled floors ridged with years of dirt, packs of cake like bread, a wall of fridges that housed a liquid of every colour imaginable.

“Just these two waters please,” he said to the shopkeeper, trying at the same time to concentrate on the task at hand, not to let the beast inside judge this man, not to think about this person's life too hard. It was no use; the alcohol-based catalyst pulsed in his blood, his body shuddered, and his mind quickly shouted at itself, 'pay attention to me you fuck, I am your customer, I am giving you the facility to exist by purchasing your goods. Pay attention to me, you fuck.'

“Here, five dollars, just keep the change... no, it's fine, I don't want the coins, seriously,” he guiltily bickered with the shopkeeper as he pulled the five dollar bill from his back pocket, at the same time noticing that it was full of paper too thick to be money. Hurrying out of the shop his mind kicked again, 'he didn't deserve the extra, the fuck'. He was embarrassed to be himself,

this person, a fine looking young man with no clear traits of the devil. He was disguised, cloaked in mediocrity that failed to make him stand out, but got him noticed enough so that he was never ignored. He shook his head, lowering his brow, pushing his glasses up and rubbed his eyes with his forefinger and thumb. The inside of his eyes pictured last night's horrors, and the regret hit him again.

He noticed the temperature now, the thick summer heat that close cities bring, mixed with pollution, bad breath and worse body odour - it was all around him. They stank, the people that strode past as he stood stationary again, at the side of the deli, trying to remain in the short length of shadow cast by its tarpaulin. Gulping at his first bottle of water, he could feel its cold body move down his throat and into his empty stomach, chilling his insides. He released a sigh as he brought the bottle down and reached round to his back pocket for the paper that he'd noticed moments before, prying one out between the multiple sheets, trying not to make the whole bunch come out. It was thick, a torn cigarette packet with something written in small delicate writing on the inside. He read it;

'..ohnny Stillechoing, I cannot define what I found in you last night. I will see you at ..2, the only condition, you remember where we agreed, you are not a bad person. ..ou're wonderful, Lucy Tower'

His little finger twitched and shot out at a right angle, a tell tale sign that his emotional stakes had received hard information. Ecstatic now and overrun with thought, but not the negative, disturbing, ugly type he had been getting used to since he had woken up. Nothing like what the

beast pushed on him and his fragile, hungover, stretched out body. He had found the good that he had been looking for; he knew he wasn't an animal, he knew there was more to him, as he had expected; he knew he was inherently a good person. And even though the beast was there, his sentient self, the real person he was, could fight through and, when he met beauty, would shine as he had always thought he would, even in the most difficult of circumstances. He dropped his water, the bottle hitting the concrete on its bottom side with a quiet thud, the kinetic energy forcing out a petite jet of water against his jeans. He leant over, smiling with wide eyes. The world was noticeably brighter, and he rubbed in the water with wild thoughts rushing around his shrivelled, dehydrated mind.

Who was Lucy? Where had they met and under what extraordinary circumstances? What has led her to writing such a note? He found it impossible to think, too much bearing down on his sore head and racing heart. He prodded his skull, looking for her, for what she looked like, who she was and where they would meet. He was overcome; the endorphins quickly rushed back into his body. Bubbling up from his gut to his head, his deep breaths, one at a time, all brought untold pleasure. He needed to calm. But the shift from a wretched demon consumed with the horror of his being, of his capabilities, to redemption, in one quick motion, was extraordinary. One amazing swoop brought him to something he could believe in, something and someone that proved he wasn't a soulless beast. He needed to do everything he could do find their meeting place. He looked at his watch and noticed that he had two hours. 'Come on Johnny, , get it together, think man, think,' he pipped quietly to himself, over and over. Remembering the other papers in his back pocket, he grabbed at them clumsily, pulling them out and onto the floor at the same time. They scattered, and he dropped to his knees grabbing at the scribbled-on sheets.

'You growl at the fragile tonight'

'You force yourself on the weak tonight'

'You are the enemy of man tonight'

They were all in his handwriting. The sun was bearing down, and pollution was quickly crawling up his nose and catching the back of his throat. It was still in the city even though he was surrounded by movement. Fear consumed him as quickly as it had dissipated moments before, a roasting fist of a morbid flavour forcing itself down his throat and into his gut, instantly steaming the water he had just consumed. What had he done, what had his beast made him do? The shroud of contempt and regret fell like a lead curtain over his kneeling and shaking body, in the middle of the street, holding onto tears of paper and soft packet card. He was visibly shaking, his self loathing was all consuming. No longer was he simply possessed by regret with traces of paranoia and contempt; he was wrapped in an inescapable netted fabric. Piercing and sharp, blasted sand and grit, his heart sank, ready to give up. The best of the beast was in front of him, in his own handwriting; some of it fit, some of it didn't, with the horrible memories he had of the night before - a defining moment in his life, one that would alter his mindset and perceptions on everything. That night of sinking further in his own moral-less pit, running wild with creatures of the night, all clawing at him and his soul, working with the ill-conceived premonition that tomorrow would never come.

A cinder of hope fell beside him though, flapping lightly in the stench-ridden street breeze, pushed along by the awful upright parasites. His tunnelled vision brought on by panic and fast breathing had focused; while his eyes welled up, his throat lumped and his brain throbbed in his skull, the moment had a speck of white. Lucy's note, the source of good, the fountain of beauty that had momentarily brought him to an ecstatic whirlpool of pleasure, had fallen beside him, face up with its inscription showing. A note highlighting that he was not the devils son, that his mother had raised him well, that he was at his base a kind human with heart and passion. He was not an ogre. He could fight with his beast, he could combat its horror. He knew how; it rested in her. With her he could achieve anything; someone who must understand him so perfectly to write that note; she was the key. And he needed to find her.

“Right, fuck this,” he said out loud, standing up sharply, narrowly avoiding butting the underneath chin of a passer by with the top of his head. Sniffing, he rubbed the corners of his eyes free of any tears and tried his best to compose himself. Although trying all the time to quell his fire, it still existed, the bubbling pit of acid trying desperately to melt any good that he had left. But he maintained dominance; he quickly grabbed the bits of paper left on the floor, all the while making sure he never let go of the one from Lucy. He was formulating a plan, taking what he had in front of him and trying to work around it, using his generally fast thoughts to pull him through to what he wanted to find.

All of these notes - some on labelled napkins, some on match books, some on parts of beer mats and flyers - they all held their own horror and their own clues. As much as it pained him to look at them, to study them, he needed their information. If he was going to remember more than horror and feel more than regret, he knew he must trace his steps, he must use everything he had

left inside to find her, to find Lucy, to gain redemption, to experience solace with her heart.

Hailing a cab, he scanned his watch as his right arm flung into the air and a sharp whistle shot out of his mouth. He knew that he had two hours to try and retrace his steps, as best he could, to follow the beast and what he had done around the city. The trail of destruction, the horribly rendered patchy memories of intensity and terror; walk through them again, on his road to find her. Right now she meant everything; there was no other person in the world that mattered, only her and perhaps any person that could tell him more about where he may meet her.

He jumped into the back of the yellow cab, flinging the notes onto its leather back seat. He was familiar with the cab's layout - no need for precision; this back area is like an hermetically sealed cylinder of filth, with nowhere to lose anything. He looked at the driver, his mind kicking the word 'cunt' out, and he gave him all the money he could find in his pockets.

“I'll need you for the next two hours; you will take me, as best you can, in the directions that I will sporadically shout, as fast as you can. There should be well over a hundred dollars there - I won't need any of it back. I just need to know you're on my side; does that make sense?” His chat was fast and panic stricken, his wide eyes stared at the scratched clear plastic partition.

“No problem boss,” said a deep and calm Indian sounding voice.

Good he thought, a martial race of some sort, warrior-like, natural predatory instincts, loyal, he can get the job done. Straining again he forced the walls of his mind back open, propping locked arms against the closing and reducing partitions. *Don't let the beast win, not now.* He grabbed at the notes he'd thrown into the cab upon entering and, the still car's engine humming, he picked one up.

“hostis humani generis”

The words were scrawled in maniac-like handwriting. 'The enemy of all mankind,' he thought to himself with fear in his heart. Turning it over, its corner was inscribed with a location;

Hortishoon

90 W Houston St

New York, NY 10012

The cabby was fast, like his beast mind had predicted; he was ready for the challenge and moved with speed and accuracy through the streets and avenues to the Soho area of the city. He jumped out to greet his first destination, recognising the large white lettering that adorned its outside. He walked with purpose toward the door, the note clenched in his fist, breathing in fear, exhaling regret. He had memories of what had happened at this place, vague and shaky. He was snarling at himself as he reached the door, pushing it open with the stub of his toe.

Red and black paint everywhere; complete contrast with no compromise. Even the bar top shone with cheap red lacquer that made his mind burst with colours and memory. Long, dark, purple-velvet curtains blacked out the main drinking area and, even though it was just after midday and the sun was high in the sky, fake electric candles lit the stalls that ran along the side of the bar, helping a great chandelier in the middle. He noticed that he was the first and only person in there; the lack of movement surprised him while he took into consideration the alcohol fuelled,

sweat greased intensity that had helped exhume his beast last night. Scanning, he spotted a sculpted figure in the corner polishing glasses and quickly rushed up to him. He needed to know what he had to say; he wanted clues, straight up, no bullshit; he didn't want to experience any more than he had to and he was running out of time. He did not want to relive more than was necessary.

“I’m sorry,” he said, placing a hand down on the bar, the tactile feedback of its sticky lacquer making him instantly reclaim it and brush the nerves off the back of his neck.

“I desperately need some help; I’ve had quite a terrible night. Too much Gin - you know the drill. I was wondering if you remembered me?”

The barman turned around and slung the towel he had been polishing glasses with over his shoulder. He was young with a chiselled face but tired lines gave away a life of too many long nights, and their toll on his vitality. He could see in his eyes that his spirit was dwindling; a fire that ebbed, slowly, before it was soon to be extinguished, before this handsome man, with all his will, was to become a barman, no longer an actor. He remembered him, the silhouette and face, some of his sharp movements with the ladies. Oh God, the ladies.

“Shit, Echo, dude!” The barman proclaimed in a gnarly SoCal accent. “I almost didn’t recognize you. Fuck man, what happened to you? You look like you've seen a ghost? Fuck, anyway...what a night, didn’t expect to see you this early, if at all. What did you say? What the fuck are you doing here?”

He drew a sigh of relief; recognition was the first step and this poor bastard had clearly been entertained in some respect. The young man had taken on board what had happened and could cope with it; perhaps it wasn’t that bad after all? Or perhaps his withered life-force had

given up, his beast had consumed him and he no longer cared; he'd fucked it, fucked everything. The small talk would have to be skipped anyway - Lucy was all important.

“Seriously man, I just don't know.” Johnny took off his glasses and rubbed his face intensely for a second. “I’ve got very little memory of being in here last night, very little memory of anything really, but I can feel it you know, feel the regret inside me. I think I've done some terrible things over the last 16 hours...Ohh fuck, Mikey, I remember now, you knocked off early and we had a few long island ice teas, then some more and some vodka and gin, lots of gin. Jesus, that was early as well. What the hell happened though? Seriously, I’m missing quite a few pieces”

Mikey was giggling, ‘Arh man, I can’t believe you don’t remember that girl. You hadn’t really told me much about yourself, but Christ, I didn’t think you would have that sort of gift, you know? If you can call it a gift. Man, she was stupid as fuck, I mean, some sort of Southern girl, come to the city to, ‘make it on broadway!’” He drew invisible circles at the right side of his head with his index finger, and contorted his face. “Man, like I don’t know what that’s like. Anyway, you took her to bits man; you knew exactly what you were doing - you were like a viper or some shit, you snake in the grass mother fucker!” He slapped his hand down on the table while arching backwards, laughing manically.

“Look man, I don’t know what the hell you did to that girl, but she’ll never be the same again. I mean, I’ve been through a lot in this line of business you know? Bar tending? Fights, fucks, frenzies...the lot. But you man, you’re something else, like a man possessed. It must be that voice of yours - I bet people mention it all the time, right? I’ve certainly never heard anything like it before, you know, like it’s on two waves or something, like there’s two people speaking inside you at the same time. Fucking bizarre if you ask me. I swear it’s got something to do with

it. You just turned to her and whispered into her ear; those big blue eyes of hers changed right then; something was different with her. Then you lead her into the bathroom in the back there...haha...you know, 10 minutes later you both came out. You grinning. Shit man, she looked like she was going to fall apart; her walk was all funny. Must have been some ride, yup, she lost her innocence right there and then I can tell you. She just came back over and sat down on that stool. Her eyes were ice; there was nothing behind them, man, just that 1000 yard stare they talk about. And her mouth wasn't shut properly. Eventually she was just sat there dribbling on her pretty little dress, just, blank. Never seen anything like it. You said to me, 'One day, she might realise I've done her a favour.' You're a brute, man! Where did you say you came from again? It's real hard to place you"

He stood there, frozen, his memory quickly shooting back to the street, a short time in the past, and questioned how Lucy's note could have been written for him. How he could possibly have found someone who was willing to sit with him, to potentially embrace him after they must have met him in such a state, such a horror, a fucked up human. Then he thought on the next notes, the ones that had fallen to the ground out of his pocket as he tried to find more signs of redemption, but instead got swamped with his own terror.

'You force yourself on the weak tonight'

"I am not a fucking brute! Fuck! Cocksucking, motherfucker, cum guzzling bastard sodomite pig whore!" He slammed his fist down on the table, raging and panting. Mikey quickly went reaching under the bar for what he assumed would be a weapon of protection.

“No look, I’m not shouting at you Mikey, I just...fuck it. That’s the sort of horrible shit I don’t want to remember, I don’t care for, you know? Mikey, the reason I’m here, the reason I’m asking you these questions, I’m trying not to become that person! The so called brute you just described - it’s not me, it’s something else, it’s inside me but I know if I try I can control it; I have to be able to man.” He was leaning over the bar trying to stop the young barman from grabbing the choice of weapon he was haphazardly looking for. He stepped a few yards back as Mikey began to stand slowly, raising from behind the bar centimetre by centimetre, obviously trying not to laugh, trying to keep a straight face, and no weapon in hand.

“Bing! An elevator? Get it?” He burst into laughter, literally slapping his knee.

“Look, Mikey, I need your help, seriously. You’ve added some horror to my misty memories of that night; you’ve given me that much at least, but that’s not what I’m looking for, you see. Look at this fucking thing.” He placed the note from Lucy down on the bar, jabbing it with his index finger to pin it still, and using his middle finger to spin it around to correctly face Mikey.

“Have you got any idea who Lucy is? It’s not this girl you’ve just been talking about, I know that much at least. I need to know where I’m supposed to meet her. I need this Mikey, like you wouldn’t believe. So, I’m trying to retrace my steps from last night, to piece things back together, and find out where we’re meeting. You got any idea; anything like that go down in here?”

“Not from what I can remember,” he replied, going back to cleaning glasses, calm now, after his fits of hysterics. “You didn’t stick around long after that thing with the girl went down. We had a few more shots, very quickly like, and you said you had to move on; bigger and better

things or something, you arrogant bastard, haha.”

“Look, did I say anything about where I was heading?”

“No dude, not a word, but look, if you’ve got that note, maybe you’ve got others? You know what those old Columbo movies taught me? Always check for fucking packets of matches, you can trace anyone with them fuckers. Didn’t they find JFK’s killer with that method, or was that...?” He drifted off into a mumble.

Johnny reached around into his pocket and rummaged in the gathering of notes, napkins and crushed cigarettes, sifting through quickly; he didn’t want his whole confessional laid out on the bar side for Mikey to see. He just wanted the next note, the next clue. He’d been lucky enough to go to his night’s first port of call on his first attempt, so from here on in he was only going to get closer. He used his index-finger and thumb to pincer a note out, and placed it on the table.

It was written on the back of a flyer.

“You growl at the fragile tonight”

“What the fuck is that supposed to mean?” questioned Mikey, quickly lifting the note from the bar side.

“Nothing, fuck, give me it, it’s nothing. Just some drunken bullshit. It doesn’t mean anything.” He snatched the note back out of Mikey’s hands and saw the front; a flyer for a bar, advertising live music and other sordid business - a burlesque show for one. The Motorcade.

“Right, this is where I have to go, this is my spot, this is my next port of call. I have to get

here as quickly as possible. Mikey, I'm going to let you know now, the person you met last night wasn't me; it was some horror I don't want people to ever meet again. I can't apologise enough."

"Listen dude," Mikey replied, "I don't give a shit to be honest. Go on, take your crazy voice and find that woman of yours, maaaaan." He walked over to the juke-box in the corner of the room, flicked a switch underneath, hit two numbers and "Journey – Don't Stop Belivin'" kicked in.

Johnny walked briskly out, Journey aptly wisping through the stale air.

"He took the midnight train going eeeeh-nnnneey-whereeeee..."

"Ha, fuck you Mikey; see you in another life." Johnny said, holding his middle finger up and backwards to the barman as he walked out. Mikey laughed, waved him the finger back and, with a sigh, turned back to cleaning his glasses as if nothing had happened. Miserable, stuck, not an actor; a barman.

Johnny's taxi was waiting patiently for him outside, engine still running. Slamming the door shut, he forced the flyer into the drivers face, pointing out the address and saying it out loud to reinforce the urgency of the matter and making the destination doubly clear.

"The Motorcade, on the corner of 6th and 12th. Now get moving."

"No problem boss. Not too far - be there in 10 minutes," replied the deep Indian voice.

A spin of wheels, some fast manoeuvring and he was soon outside The Motorcade. With just under an hour gone and a shriek at the cab driver to stop immediately, he was jumping out of the cab, unintentionally cursing the poor bastard. His trip to the Hortishoon had overrun slightly;

he realised he hadn't the time to explain himself to the person or persons he was about to meet. He had not the time to justify his actions, or apologise for what they may have experienced of him the previous night; he just needed answers if he was ever going to make it to meet Lucy. His head was clearing though - the beast was closing its eyes, going into a slumber, crawling back into its cave - and Johnny smiled as he jumped out of the Taxi, clearing a good two feet and landing half way into the sidewalk.

The Motorcade: more booze, more women, more fast movements in the night and a peculiar mix of punk rock, '80s electronica and disco. He walked up the short distance to its indented doorway, thankful for its shadow, the sun still blazing down, now with particular intensity as it looked upon the world from an almost vertical angle.

He pushed the door open with an authority he hadn't had when entering the Hortishoon. He felt a beat to his step, he could almost hear mighty rock guitars blaring behind him as the doors swung open, his shadow out before him, light from behind, his face dark, he needed answers. He noticed in the corner of his eye a barwoman ducking behind the bar and trying to crawl away as the door swung back and he caught it, before it hit him in the face. The air conditioning had broken. Maybe she was searching for the cool air in the bottom quarter of the bar's moist and sickly atmosphere? This place was less attractive than his previous port of call: some sort of weird '80s punk theme, or perhaps it had never been updated since the '80s. Bad spray-paint graffiti all over, stickers, posters, stapled flyers; the walls looked sore with their piercings and paint. The bar area looked like a '50s diner, with fixed chrome stools, and more chrome along its top. He rushed up and, putting his elbows down on the top, let the momentum carry him slightly over, letting him glance at the girl crawling away on the other side.

“Look, don’t do that; lets not get fucking stupid around here. Get up. What the fuck did I do last night? You’re not calling the police are you? I’ve got some questions; I just need a few answers.’

She got up hesitantly, rising slowly from behind the bar as Mikey had in the last place; quickly becoming a theme, he thought. She was slight, wearing a pink tank top that had ‘Too Punk To Fuck’ embezzled on it, and adorned full sleeves of tattoos from beneath her neck down to the tips of her fingers on both arms: everything from flowers to spikes, a myriad of colour, quite fitting considering the surroundings. Her body was much more of a pleasure to look at than the building however - small and delicate. He thought about how she must have compensated for her fragile frame with all the ink. He was instantly attracted to her, but no time for that, he thought. Get what you need to know; the clock is ticking. She began to speak, at the same time leaning her left cheek into her shoulder and fluttering her eyelids; a flirt as well, he thought, or some form of self protection mechanism.

“Look, just don’t start with that voice of yours at me again. I should call the cops for what you did last night. Flashing your teeth like a fucking Bengal tiger or something, you scary bastard. That growl of yours, didn’t only scare the living shit out of me; Fat Jimmy didn’t even like it, and I’ve never seen him scared of anything. Then what you did to him, fuck. Hey, so, what do you want?” Straightening her neck out now, her blue eyes juxtaposed by her ‘50s styled jet black hair, twinkled in the spot lights of the bar.

“Erm,” Johnny coughed, trying not to get too distracted. ”Seriously, please, you have to help me out, what happened? Why are you thinking of calling the police? All I’m doing is looking for a girl called Lucy; it’s really important - I’m supposed to meet her at two. That’s in just over

an hour.”

“Well, you were picking on this kid. He’d been crying in the corner after his girlfriend dumped him or some shit, just some kid down on his luck. You don’t remember any of this? He was pretty annoying, but didn’t deserve what you did to him, shit. You were sat here one minute, growling under your breath and snarling at me. The next, you get up, walk over to him, grab a handful of hair on the back of his head and smash his face open on the table, shouting at him to shut the fuck up. Fuck, I thought you killed him until he pissed himself, then you kicked the table away from him and let him slide off the seat onto the floor. There he was covered in blood and piss. You turned around, came back over, and sat down, drinking just as heavily as you were before, still growling. No-one knew what to do. Fat Jimmy picked up the poor kid and dragged him out to the street. He came back to try and have words with you but you just turned and growled. I’ve never seen the Fat Man react like that; he actually took a step back, and on the retreat you hooked his nostrils and kneed him in the balls good and fucking hard. He just went onto his knees and you’re all like, ‘Cry you fucker and I’ll break your back.’” He hobbled out, you demanded more drink, so I kept them coming. You’re one scary fucker,” she said, with a weird smile in her eyes.

It suddenly came back, like a focusing lens. The colours and objects around him blended and took form; memories of the night were coming back with intensified horror. He looked down at his hands and didn’t know what to say. He looked up and across the room; he could see the bloodstained floor, sawdust sprinkled in the general area. He quivered for a moment, wondering why he wasn’t already in jail, and, turning around, he said,

“That’s all I need to know.”

“Look, don’t leave. I thought you said you wanted some questions answering or something. Maybe I can help, I don’t know. You smashed the shit out of that guys face, but fuck, you know, it’s a bar - shit like that happens.” He turned around to her flickering eyes again. Fuck, he thought, she can’t possibly say anything worse, and he’d only been in there for about five minutes while she quickly relayed his horror. Some weird Stockholm Syndrome-like reaction to his presence had obviously gripped her; she almost sympathised with him. Perhaps this is why Lucy thought she wanted to meet with him; she’s terrified beyond the point of rational thought. He is the beast, he is the blackened, and ultimately that’s what she wants. Lucy, in actuality, isn’t there to help quell the beast? No, that’s simply not the case, she found a beauty in him that no-one else could, and she knows she can help. He needed to keep moving to get answers.

“Listen, the only question I have is, do you know Lucy Tower? Like I said, I’ve just over an hour - well, just under now - to find out who she is and meet her.”

“Oh, you some sort of private dick or something?” she said raising an eyebrow.

“No. Fuck this.”

He turned his back on her, on this bad noise; all she had for him were bad memories and more drink, neither of which he wanted more of. He needed Lucy. But he was getting increasingly worried; he was beginning to accept that there was nothing else, these stories projected horror, no normalcy - he was this morbid whore of the devil, and Lucy didn’t exist. Perhaps he’d threatened someone into writing this note, a trick on his own mind, the beast within knowing that he wouldn’t remember, and that he’d go out searching for her, recapping everything he had done, making him see and hear first hand the horrors that had prevailed.

And his anger raged inside him. He was slipping; he could feel it. He was letting the beast

win, but after what he had just heard he was beginning not to care. He was beginning to accept what he was, that there was nothing that could change that. Drink was the catalyst, but the beast was always there inside. He could quite easily become that terror by himself, without the need for booze. He could stomp on those in front of him with no remorse, and pick what he wanted in life, take everything, unforgiving, a brute of a man with no regrets and no time for anything other than himself. If that caused pain unto others, so be it; he had to accept what he was. After all, if he gained solace from this monster through the love of a woman, through her touch and compassion, his heart and soul settled, then surely she was taking away something from him? She wasn't allowing him to be himself; she was turning him into something else. His natural state is the monster; man's nature is the fiend. If she takes that away, what becomes of him?

He could feel his blood rising as he exited the bar in a slow and purposeful manner, the girl still whaling at him in the background, asking him to come back for drinks, asking him for a chat, for some talk, to keep her entertained the way he did last night. He knew how to entertain the whore, and as the beast began to warm up, his perversely bad inner being, the one that took with no remorse or regret, he almost turned round. He almost ran up to the bar, to grab her by the throat, drag her over, kicking and screaming, into the back alley. To force himself on her, growling, tearing at her clothes, forcing his cock down her throat and shouting at her to choke; flipping her over a pile of boxes, cracking her in the jaw, sending her head spinning and forcing himself inside her dry holes. Cumming on her face, punching her again, just for shits and giggles. Leaving her there, bruised, bleeding, panting, sweating, crying, naked and torn.

He desperately tried to restrain himself as he left. Screaming, he ran to the taxi; he couldn't give in - there had to be a way for good to win. For the evil within him to be crushed.

But he was out of clues. He looked through the rest of the notes; some were on dirty newspaper, some were on entirely blank paper, but one of the originals he had noticed lay there. It followed suit that if he had first forced himself on the weak, then growled at the fragile, the last thing of that terrible evening would be:

'You are the enemy of man tonight'

But this note was written on a piece of note paper that belonged to the hostel, its logo and website name running across its head. He had run out of options though; he was beginning to sink quickly and he needed to be around people that didn't know his story. At least at the hostel he could find someone to talk to, at the very least he could call home in some capacity.

“Look, just take me back to where we began, and make it as fast as possible - I've run out of time and ideas. We're fucked man, we're all fucked.”

“O.K Boss, whatever you say,” the Indian replied.

He was a tortured soul; he had spent close to the last two hours of his life on some terrible introspective journey, desperately clawing at something that didn't exist, at good, at trying to find a natural propensity to be kind, in himself. All he had, in reality, found, was a savage, one who preyed on the weak and had no scruples about ruining people around him, whether with his words, fists or genitals. He was dishevelled, having lost all hope. Paranoia crawled in with dark eyes. He began to shake slightly and, as the adrenaline wore off, he looked at his watch; it was just sneaking up to two. He was sober now, but somehow he felt even more of a connection with his beast than he had ever had previously. What had he now become? What did he believe? Is it

the beast that makes the man? Or can he learn to be more? He wanted to believe that the answer to that question is 'Yes', but will he ever truly change, or will he always be running scared? Living in fear that one day, somewhere, the beast will re-emerge and take apart everything that he has grown to love? Is change permanent, or is it simply a mask that one wears, never truly giving into this monster within? Could love be the solution? Could it terminate the beast, give him pleasure and rapture, rather than forced terror, internal screams, hate and rage?

The taxi whistled back through the streets of New York. It was still hot and the city stank; backed up drains and pollution blew into his face through the lowered door window. His life had always been full of decisions, ones that he always thought he acted on perfectly well; ones that were sometimes difficult, but as time had progressed, it turned out he had the ability to steer in the correct direction. Now, he seemed to be faced with his demon, and the decision of whether or not to leave this demon be, to consume him, to make him into something else, or to fight against the gigantic swine, pulling him down as best he could and forcing him back. He had to decide. But he still had questions; he still wanted to know what he thought: can love truly kill the beast, or just trap him?

If man is intrinsically good, and evil forces his greasy fingers upon him, is he naturally, at the pit of his soul, still good? His essence is the light. Or vice versa: if man is evil, and good comes in, the light prevails, but dark is always there. He didn't know which way to think; it wasn't good enough having both, because he was frightened to think what may become of him, what beauty he could produce if he tried, but for it all to be eventually worthless, to be torn down by his own hand when his barriers failed him; it was almost too much. He needed to know there was enough good in the world so that he would never have to visit his beast again. But all had

failed; he had not found Lucy, the one hope that he had. Perhaps one day? Not on this day though, and that angered him. Why would this day be different from any other? Why would any other day in the future be dissimilar? Why try, when there is only evil?

“You’ve done a good job, cabbie. Thank you.” He said to the driver as he exited, finally arriving back at the hostel. Romantic thoughts remained of a beautiful girl sitting down to meet him, to talk and to fall in love with him and he with her. To be free together in this great bustling metropolis, to soak up art and theatre, to get lazy in the afternoon and nap, then, into the shower for a powerful soapy romp and hit the city at night. To be in each other’s embrace and for the good of her soul to override his anger, the inner turmoil that he faced; for her to be his saviour. But he was finding it hard to accept that any of his thoughts could ever become reality, and even if they did, he was still fearful of how they may end. All good must end, he thought, it's just the nature of things. The argument continued to shake him. Even if he searched for her relentlessly, one day finding her, taking her and enveloping her soul, was his love for her pure? Would he love her for the beauty that she was, or would he love her only because she made him a better person, and she freed him from his evil? If the only reason he loved her was because she brought about change in his nature, then nothing had changed at all - his pursuit of her was as selfish as the pursuit of any other morbid sensory need. His conclusions continued to move further and further from the good, to the bad, to the horrors, to what he hated, but he felt like he had no other choice but to embrace them. Because fighting them was an exercise in futility.

He was back. Standing on the same sidewalk as he had been two hours earlier, he stared at the yellow cabs rolling on by in a blur, and the sun dried him out. He turned to go back into the hostel, not entirely sure what to do with himself. He thought about just sitting. Moving to the

garden with the rest of them, the ones he would enjoy and hate at the same time, and just sitting. Trying to overhear, trying to listen for good in and amongst them, and deciding what he needed to do, which way he needed to turn.

He entered the busy reception area and leaning over the front desk to pick up his key from behind the counter. He noticed a scowling look from the on-duty Asian receptionist. Perhaps he had overheard his racist slur before he'd left? He could try to explain, in turn digging the hole even further, but he just decided to turn away, to take his other bottle of water and move to the garden area. To relent to the swarming evil that was doing its best to consume his better half.

Walking through the hallway, the Tourette like taunts that he had still been shooting off like a Gatling gun of insult before he had left, and while he was still half intoxicated, had now dissipated. He seemed to be calming; the hostel was busy with young smiles and pretty faces - joy, excitement and inspiration is in abundance in places like this. A free time of exploration. He tried to ebb what good he could embrace from the people around him. He turned to his right and looked through the bay windows that led out onto the garden as he headed towards them; it was quiet and serene. The sun shone down on the red brick of the old building and trees fluttered in the light breeze as the pressure changed in the vertical shaft of space between buildings. The dullards were in abundance, and his mind kicked; if this was the slow graduation from regular citizen to beast, it was going to be a long hard road, one that no one, especially himself, would enjoy, and one that would undoubtedly create a terrible product. But as he strolled, she stood out, the girl in black.

His mind kicked again but this time with a different feeling; one of hope. He was almost instantly sure that this was the girl he had noticed before he had left, sitting there with her back to

him, laptop open. He could just about make out her reading a blog that he also enjoyed. He recoiled; it couldn't be. He knew when he looked down at her from his window on the fifth floor about two hours ago that she was something different. Even with the terrible part of his mind still readily active, even though he only saw a glimpse of her for a split second, he recognised something in her that part of him instantly fell in love with. His heart began to beat furiously and he slowed his walk. What the fuck could he do now? He grabbed at the note in his pocket and squinted.

Upon closer inspection, he noticed how it had been smudged, and letters had been lost in the folds of the card. Where it currently read to meet at 2pm, it perhaps could have read to meet at 12pm, the one having been lost in the cracked and dishevelled paper, the same as with the J from his name and the Y from You're. What did this mean? What calculation was he making here? Did he have time, the will or inclination to savour one last bit of hope, to have faith in good one last time? He continued to walk closer, his heart almost thumping its way out of his chest by now. The sun shone down on her black hair, cut into a bob, reflecting it neatly, and his heart rose. He could feel himself; he could feel the good inside. He walked around to get a side view, just to see if he could grab a visual signifier, something that would open any memories of her and the night before, but nothing cleared. The haze was still prevalent, the hate was still strong, his demon was still grinning and rubbing his filthy hands, waiting to grab whole at his heart and bite solidly.

But hope remained. It was as if he was seeing her for the first time, and he instantly fell in love. He knew she was Lucy; there was no way she could be anyone else. He could see her with much more clarity now, legs crossed neatly; she wore a black knee length skirt, seamed stockings, patent black, laced, high-heel shoes, a white and black polka dot top and red corset belt that, with

her perfect posture, showed off a wonderful figure. Her eyes were masked by large black sunglasses and her facial profile was hard to view because of her bob-cut hair, but her soft pink, pouting lips glistened with her perfect, unblemished snow white skin, and he knew that she was beautiful. Not that beauty mattered in this instance, but the fact that such a dream-like girl, matching up to his expectations in every way, had potentially written this, made his adrenaline pump harder than it ever had. He began to walk towards her from behind, thinking he would place the note beside her and wait for a reaction, good or bad.

He prayed during his slow walk, he cried out in his mind to Fate to bring them together, he wept in front of the devil as he sold his soul to be with her, and chased after Karma as its tricky dance manoeuvred around him. As he stepped up to her he took a deep breath and put the note down.

“I thought I said 12, Johnny?” She turned with a soft smile, her light pink lips moving lightly across her face, revealing an adorable smile that sang kindness and warmth. “I’ve been waiting for you for some time now, though I’m glad you’ve made it; we’ve a lot to talk about, you know?”

He could barely bring himself to words, he didn’t know what to do with himself; he had her, he had all he ever would need. He felt the love well-up in his heart, like a purification process filtering out the evil from his being, and he felt good. He knew which direction his life would lead, he knew he would never look in any other direction again, and he knew he would love her forever.

10 – The decision

“So, that's about that,” Mars said, turning to the young journalist, taking another mouthful of rum and finishing off the bottle. “Urraggh. Now...now, we're here John-Face, we're in this dark and frightening corner. You can understand where that story went, the journey those two went through after they met, after Johnny found his woman?”

“I can get a pretty good idea,” replied John-Face with a reluctant acceptance.

“It's clear by the lines on your face, John-Face, that you've perhaps loved once, at least, you've experienced what you think love would be like, because it's never actually been reciprocated has it? You've got a look only a mother could care for. And you, like Germany Germany, would do anything, without a care, or thought for others, to achieve your goals, to answer your questions, to move forward and claim your place, with no remorse. Shitting-Christ John, why do you think I chose you to tell this story to?” Mars winked at the journalist. He walked over, standing about a foot away from him, brought his arms out and back, then let them spring forward, quickly clapping them together, pushing a faint wind in the boys face.

“Oh yes, I chose you because you'd get the twist, and I knew you could take it. You don't become the biggest, most widely acclaimed and hailed musician of modern times without some brains. Boy, because you've never loved, you understand what man might do to quell his soul, the extent to which he might reach in any direction for something that might help him and his torment. But John-Face, love....LOVE, it is mighty. It is a powerhouse that will make you change your mind about everything; one day you'll know, you'll find out.” The midday sun was shining hard through the room, reflecting off the marble floor and the gold and white surfaces of the room, filling it with light. Mars walked over to the bar again, going around it this time. He kicked

the door of the mini-freezer open, grabbed at the ice and poured the gin to his right.

“You see John, the love Lucy Tower and Johnny Stillechoing had - it not only quelled his beast, it was actually able to turn him, like he had originally questioned. It allowed this terrified young man to grow, to flourish outside of his fears, to take on the world and produce beauty, to help mankind become better. The love he had found in Lucy was *that* powerful; they were completely consumed by happiness until the day they died in each others arms, both knowing their time was coming to an end. They just sat with each other, embracing, having left a long and beautiful legacy on the world. One of love, of children, of art and passion. The world was a better place for them having met, on that fateful day. Johnny never slipped again, never to return to the beast, and all of his questions were answered in the eyes, heart, mind and soul of the lady he loved. And she loved him, with every inch of herself.”

John-Face had composed himself again. He was still listening to Mars; he had almost been taken in by him, once again. He had listened intently to every word, doing what he had been trained to do: to take notes, to find answers and raise questions in the words that streamed from his subject. But he wasn't letting this crazy bastard get to him any more. No more open-palmed slaps to the face, no more mind twisting mentalness; just the facts.

“Fuck you, Mars,” he replied and watched him turn and his right eyebrow rise a little in reaction. “Your madness has gone too far; what the fuck do you expect me to think now? Right, yeah, I've never had the love of a beautiful woman, I've not had the looks to get on in life too easy, but I've got the fucking brains, you animal. And I know madness when I see it; you think you got me this interview? I got me this interview Mars, I got it through being the best there is.” He confidently pointed at himself. “I'm a bit nervous sometimes, but I'm fucking solid inside,

Mars. And now, what are you expecting me to believe? To think that as this story goes, this bizarre fuck of a tale that you've spat out at me for almost 20 hours now, to think that because some guy loved some chick, it all changes? Look, simple fact Mars, life doesn't work that way - this is not Hollywood. I'm expected to believe that your Germany character, with all his background you've so graciously filled me in on, completely changes his outlook on everything because he thinks he's experienced love? Listen Mars, you are insane. Why don't you give me something good to fucking write about and top yourself, eh? You've passed it”.

“John, I'm coming to like you more all the time. To be honest, whether or not you believe any of this is not the issue at hand. I needed to clarify things, because I know what I am, I know where I'm going, and I know what has happened. You are listening to these stories because they allow me to structure everything that has happened so far in the absolute correct manner. Because without precise trajectories...” Mars shot his arm out in front of his head, looking down it and squinting, focusing on the tip of his extended fingers. “Without it, the human race is doomed.”

“You're full of shit, madman,” John quickly spurted.

But Mars' outward appearance was a front. The collected being that he was, was beginning to get scared. He reluctantly quivered at the thought that the journalist was right. None of this made any sense, his ability to exist on two planes at the same time. To tell the story of Germany while he followed the line of Mars; he was finding it more and more difficult to understand, to explain away by sheer, magnificent and insane coincidence. What if this little cocksucker was right, he thought. What if he was only the madman the journalist thought he was, and in fact, there was nothing else. Just madman stories with nothing more than a sag-faced little bastard for company. Mars said over to himself again;

“No time for this, just keep going, keep grabbing at everything you've got. That feeling is getting more powerful; you know it, you can feel it. As my mind grows keen, I can feel my time, I know it's coming to an end.”

He turned to face the journalist. The boy was sitting, grinning, almost hiding behind the screen of his laptop, curious eyes looking over, his saggy eyelids like that of an old man.

“What are you mumbling about, you crazy bastard?” he said with contempt in his voice.

“Listen fast, you filthy little shit.” Mars paced over, raising the back of his hand and cracking the journalist across the left cheekbone, making them both wince with the power of the impact. He pointed down at him with a shaking finger.

“The only real question that concerns you right now, is the one that is foremost in my own mind, the one that everything so far has set up, as a man Germany had never loved; the force I am bound by had never experienced anything other than selfish success, fear, hate and powerful lust to answer the questions in his split mind. Now, he has been given the chance to answer them all, with the Absolute Tooth. Jack Rawstone took him and explained how he could finally rest in the knowledge that he had complete freedom from responsibility, while retaining the freedom of choice, how absolute knowledge gave him tranquillity. But he must perform a task, to kill a man that can never reach that perfect state because of his bind, and to Germany, such a task offered no obstacle. He was even relinquished with a smaller gift: that he enjoy the rest of his time in the Cerebral Goo. However, through the completion of that task, he has become corrupt and everything has changed. For everyone and everything. Previously, there was only pure fire and instinct to perform what he must do in order to comply with the entrenched, and split, ideals and beliefs he had in his mind. This fire and instinct has become infected, it has become overwhelmed

with something he had never experienced before, something that had never even crossed his mind. A raw emotion that the one who set him on this path should have taken into consideration. But he didn't, he had no regard for its power, and now Germany, me, I have become so unsure, unsteady, in my judgement, that the continual existence of the human race is now the question.” He panted, still staring straight at the journalist who was taken aback by the impact of the slap, trembling slightly.

Mars swooped round, guzzling at his gin on ice. He noticed how the journalists left cheek had started to shine, and he rubbed the back of his hand with the base of the cold glass.

“It is love, John-Face; it changes everything. You've seen the movies no doubt. You've read the books I'm sure. You personally don't believe it exists, you chose not to because you have no firsthand knowledge. You do not care for such a powerful, pure form of any emotion. Especially one that can have an impact; an impact so drastic, that it can change any man. Let alone one like Germany Germany, a being with such intimidating hate and might. But you are wrong, John-Face, you're terribly terribly wrong. Tell me, now you've calmed...” He reached down and pinched the journalists chin between his thumb and forefinger, raising his head slightly so that their eyes met once more.

“If you had experienced the greatest, most beautiful, meant-to-be, mind consuming, out of control, gut wrenching, spine tingling, soul devouring love that the human race had ever seen or any human had ever experienced, could you let that rest, to continue on with only hate and pain? Could you sit there, selfishly driving for your own wants, moving forward to face and gain the only thing you can ever remember wanting. Could you give your all to the piece of you that has driven your existence and being through time and space, to fight against nations, governments and

even yourself? Or, John-Face, would you take things to the next level? Answering your questions is no longer enough. Becoming the future of humanity, having your soul put to rest by absolute knowledge, gaining a respect from the universe that no man has ever known - this can all exist, but it ruins that one thing that you now want just as much. It ruins Love. Now, you have to have Love, now there is no existence without this intrinsic human characteristic, one that is comparable to insanity for the reactions it can cause, and perhaps has done that in me, in Germany Germany.” He let go of the journalist's face, but knew he must carry on, he had him in his mental grasp again; they were both consumed by the exploration, the flow of Mars, of Germany, of what neither of them could fully understand.

He sat down, opposite John-Face, where it had all began. The sun poured into the bright room, now full of chaos as its contents lay strewn all over, smashed and battered through the waves of madness that Mars had been going through. The table that he had started everything off with, scattering the ripped notes of the journalist over inanimate objects to try and give him some concrete concept of what he was going to attempt to explain, was a ruin - tipped over in a fit of madness that felt so long ago now that he could barely remember it. He leant over, lifted the table back onto its legs, and slapped his hands down on its scuffed surface, almost forcing a wave of intensity into the journalist's eyes.

“Because, John-Face, this is where I am now. I have to decide; do I take the Absolute Tooth, knowing that neither I, nor anyone else, can ever love again; or do I destroy it all? Take everything away from existence, extinguish the torch bearers of the universe and destroy the human race, what it has become and everything that it could possibly be? What am I when I leave this Cerebral Goo? I am perfection, I am a shell, I am not human or machine. I have not been

born, but I have not been produced. I have evolved, I have consumed, I am the absolute peak of human evolution. But with all this comes a cost, John - don't you see? Love is an imperfect construct; it is so totally fucked-in-the-head that as man becomes the supreme being at the end of everything, it filters out this raw and unbridled emotion. One that causes such reactions and movements, such actions, thoughts, randomness, that with it, humanity can not reach its pinnacle.

“But, John-Face...” Mars grabbed at the air in front of his face, creating a fist, slowly lowering his head to look at the floor, leaving the fist floating in the air in between them.

“Without love, is it what I want, is it what humanity deserves? I chose you for this interview because of your lack of knowledge on the subject; without experience, you're clearly defined - I can predict your answer - but tell me, is that the future?”

The journalist was hurt, both physically and mentally, by the tirade that he had endured over the last 24 hours. His brain felt like it was shaking inside his skull, and he not only didn't know where to turn, but felt that if he did find out which direction to go in, there would be nothing there anyway.

“Well, of course it is. If you reached what you say you can reach - this perfect state - then you'd recognise that love is just something for savages anyway, wouldn't you? Surely, it's been filtered out for a reason, because it's imperfect?”

“John, you see now why I chose you for this interview, because you would help set me in what is credibly the correct direction, one that doesn't mean the death of all mankind. Oh, and don't call me Shirley,” Mars lifted his head and winked at the journalist again, raising his cheek with a smirk. “But you don't get it, John-Face. More questions are borne out of this predicament, more questions about the validity of sentient life, the human race. You see John, what I have now

come to realise, this perfection, this state of Graduate, having achieved the Absolute Tooth; it's only perfect in one man's eyes, in Richard Vortigerns. And perfection of one man is not necessarily that of any other man. Especially this one, especially Germany Germany, now that he has realised what Love is, and what it means to be human.”

He lowered his head again, rubbing his temples as if his mind was beginning to hurt as much as the journalist's; they were both in clearly visible amounts of pain. One, bruised, fluctuating in a state of unrest, not knowing what to think or believe of what he had been told. The other, nearly mentally incapacitated by his thoughts, by the impossibility that was playing out before his eyes, and the ultimate question that he truly believed he now faced.

“You see John-Face, once I exit this Cerebral Experience, am I alive? I am a perfect human by all accounts, but what makes a human? The collection of atoms that I will become, the son of the Universe itself, is such a vast distance away from what we sit as, here and now, and where we came from. Richard's idea was perfect for Germany Germany as he once was, making him the most formidable being time had ever witnessed. But now, Love has moved him, me; we, I have shifted, and this is where it all falls down.”

“Right, but now what the fuck are you going to do?” The journalist grabbed at the strands of power that he had left in him, desperately trying to compose himself, to keep on at Mars; he was determined not to let him win, and he could see that the crazy fucker was starting to crumble as well. Sitting there head in hands, withered dyed black hair stringing its way through his fingers, shaking slightly, he was clearly starting to unravel. He thought quickly; get my story, get the bastard to do something drastic; get him to kill himself.

“Look,” he continued, “You're still alive, or whatever, you're still here, so if any of what

you're saying is true, how much longer do you have to torment yourself. How much longer are you going to be Mars Trednme? Because all the while you're sitting here, you're not able to firstly, get your Absolute Tooth, or secondly, do whatever you decide to do, like destroy it all or some shit.”

“You're absolutely right, you're absolutely right,” Mars answered with slack cheeks, filled with air. His mind was buzzing, both sides of him were awake, alert, peaking in their intensity, and he knew it wasn't long before it was all due to change. At least that's what he wanted to know, to believe. Mars felt Germany writhing and raging around his skull, stomping and kicking at the walls of the mind and path he was trapped in; he wanted loose and he wanted it now.

He wanted to be standing in front of Jack Rawstone and setting the man straight; he wanted to be surrounded by the vast pillars of steel that swamped his mind. He wanted to be there and to tell Mr Rawstone that he, Germany Germany, was no longer his slave, that he was more, that Jack's plan had gone wrong, that it had been corrupted by the magnificence of Love. He wanted to stand there, having set his own plan in motion, having set everything right, and tell him that everything was due to end. That, without Love, perfection was never to be reached; what Richard Vortigern was due to create, his vision for humanity, that perfect being, was no closer to perfection than at any other stage in the human evolutionary process. Because to be without Love, even without just the capacity to be in love and not actually experience it, is to be dead, not human, but some other entity entirely, cold and defunct.

To tell him that he had come to realise this, that the man that Germany Germany once was had gone; he had changed, developed, and walked through his own set of evolutionary steps. He did not know how he was going to do it, but he knew he could with his own might and will. He

knew now, that he had another mission, another goal. That this one was more important than his last, because this one meant that humanity, that the existence of everything, was to end, permanently. He was to destroy everything because the being that he would become would no longer suffice. That everything Richard was fighting for, all the thoughts he had passed and qualified in the 'Exitus Omnis, Novus Inceptum' speech he had given before they themselves stepped into the Cerebral Goo, were meaningless. If The Negotiators did what they were doing to create a better human, one that was deserved of all the death and pain that our species had suffered and caused through time, then one without the capacity to Love was not acceptable. Humanity deserves more than cold judgement. That is what it is to be human, that is, in itself, its own form of perfection.

The acquisition of knowledge, the Tooth; it was all well for Germany Germany, and he would have accepted it with open arms if he had never been able to consciously experience both Love and Germany's will in the same instance. But that was not the case; Jack Rawstone had changed him, had moved his being inside the very thing that was meant to free him, into a trap, that would, he foresaw, ultimately bring about the peril of all life in the universe.

Mars vomited violently on the marble floor. Its pure liquid contents, dark brown in colour, splashed against the floor and flicked up small particles onto the shins of the journalist sitting opposite.

“You crazy fuck; what the fuck are you doing?” John-Face flinched.

“Jesus-Christ on a shitting-fuck-boat, that didn't help at all, fuck.” Mars sat back up straight and wiped his mouth slowly with his sleeve, moving it across his mouth from his inner elbow down to his wrist. There was that word again, 'Crazy'. This journalist was certainly doing

his best to fuck with his mind.

Germany rested. He put his metaphorical ear to the ground and focused through Mars' eyes. He could feel him, his keenness; his dangerous mind was tightening up, like weave around the tip of a bow, securing itself with creaking noises, ready to be stretched to its breaking point, in order to push a missile of death through the air, to a specified target. He sat here, looking at the journalist, saliva glands still pumping wildly, and thought about everything that had happened: the story that he had just told, the choice he had made, and what he had to do next. Germany heard it all and felt the pressure, the other thing, and he flinched. As much as he knew it was an inevitability, he still didn't think it would happen this way; he thought he would have to follow Mars' path for some time yet, all the while baking up his plans and ideas. He didn't realise he would have to jump straight into the thick of it.

“Boy...” He composed himself. “As a great lyricist once said in the 20th century; this is the end, my only friend, the end. So, here I am, I've made my choice, on the plane of reality that I believe is actual existence, and whether or not I am right or wrong, there is only one final action to be taken. That is, now I must kill myself.”

The journalist didn't think he would do it for a second; he just sat there, still bedazzled by what had taken place, with dirty clothes covered in almost every bodily fluid possible, stinging eyes and skin, raw lips, splintered fingernails and aching bones. His jaw dropped slightly as he saw Mars stand up and walk slowly over to the antique Indo-Persian suit of armour that had been knocked to the floor.

“If this whole thing is bat-shit fuelled craziness, well then, none of it matters, and I'll just be another burnt out rock-star that decided to kill himself in front of a journalist. If it's not, well,

who knows, this thing in my mind could wake up where he needs to be, and destroy what is left of humanity thousands of years in the future.” He let out a small laugh as he leant down and picked up a dagger from the armour and drew it from its sheath. He brought the dagger to his throat ready to slice it open, jugular to jugular. The journalist began to panic, his head jotting from side to side, not sure whether to help save him or let him do it. His reactions weren't quick enough, especially after everything he had been through.

“Who the fuck knows John-Face Ryband my good sir? But I'll tell you one thing: it's been one hell of a ride. You just make sure you save some of tomorrow for me, you hear?”

11 – Time and Tide

“My objectives are clear, my intentions are sound, my direction is set out before me and all I need now do, is move forward. I am the progenitor of doom; I am refined death, the pure incarnation of universal misery, black terror that will lead to the ultimate demise of all. I am Germany Germany.”

He stood in the birthing chamber, soaked in bright orange colour, having leapt through the trapdoor for the final time, having experienced his lives over again, and released a faint sigh at how it would never happen again. He was used to it by now, living in the shell, in the mind of another, the re-birthing process, the memories, the peace that came from some, the horror that was realised in others, it was the perfect thrill. He took a second to look back on his last life and he was glad, glad that the madness of it, in its final moments, that of Mars Trednme, had been simply that; madness. An unexplainable story of coincidence and not the harsher possibility, the flip side that he had feared, simple and defunct one of delusions of grandeur and shrieking paranoia. How he knew, how he could talk to the journalist, how he could explain the fate of the universe, millennia before it had to come to fruition will never be known. It was an amalgamation of absolute insanity and the arrangement of all chaos for the one perfect serendipitous moment in all time. One that created a vacuum of alignment, and something that with all the technology and knowledge in the universe, could never be explained.

Germany stood, head bowed, a slight grin crawling up the right side of his cheek now, naked, legs shoulder width apart and hands cusped in front of him. He rocked his head side to side, tugging somewhat at his neck muscles and listened, as he always did, for his breathing. The

one constant that he had found in the universe, through all his experience and maddening journeys, was that of human breath. As long as he remained alive, it was the one thing he could count on and anchor himself with.

He was thinking, waiting, his internal hourglass spilling time, grain by grain, breathing and planning. Now out of the Goo he had entered into this dystopia, this future that once was his perfection, and now was prison, the prison of all men, of humanity. For a race of god like individuals would eventually roam eternity without quarrel or qualm with matter, with instance, with themselves or anything around them. They would walk freely throughout time in the solace of the Absolute Tooth, but they would no longer be humans, they would not be what Germany had once fought so relentlessly for and had come to agree with himself, what they deserved to be.

He saw this now, he realised. He had had time to think, and now he had time to initiate what he believed to be the only justice in the universe; to take it all away. It was not a decision he had taken lightly, nor would it be one that he would enjoy implementing. But as his head rocked lightly, he felt the pain inside, the one of longing, of ugly depression rising, of loneliness and yearning. A horror, a feeling of regret and desolation, unwanted, and dysfunctional, out of place, his gut kicked for her, for everything that she meant to him. For love. He was a shell, he had experienced purity, the likes of which only one other man had ever experienced, but that man did not have to live with the consequence. He did not have to forge on after that happiness had ended. He did not have to long for a light that he knew would never come, never be rekindled. He was not propositioned with absolute perfection in exchange for a dastardly deed.

Germany had to bare this weight on his shoulders, he had to long for Lucy Tower and know, absolutely, that he would never have her again. He had to digest multiple factors, and dwell

on what he had experienced, on history, the facts of the human race. Of the millennia of highs and lows, peaks and troughs for his great people, what they had achieved, where they had been, and what they had sunk to. Punching thoughts on how, once more, a fate had led him to this point, to his decision, and how he would now take it all away. He had fought for what was right before, he had taken on the mighty powers of civilisations and superior human-like beings, and he had won. He knew he had won, and now he would do it again. His mission, his fate, his reasoning was just as clear as before, only this time he had nothing holding him back.

Though his opponents were greater, he too was stronger and more intelligent than before, he had become the pure driving force that he had been previously only streamlined, guided and pure of thought. He had been upgraded, enhanced and added to, he had the empirical knowledge of some of history's greatest minds and warriors. He knew his own life, he knew what he had achieved, but he embraced those of the others, the majesty of mankind's greatest beings, their strength and power and he would utilize every last synaptic reflex that he had absorbed to achieve what he now must do. His plan was formulating, but he knew first he would have to confront someone.

He unlinked his hands, balled them into fists and on bringing them to his side thought how their current position was quickly becoming their natural resting place. Solid rage at his sides, like guards of fire, intelligent beings without remorse or morals, he felt how they had their own ideas of control, and how they knew what to do, when to do it and would not finish until it was done. He raised his head slowly and he saw the white wall without perspective, where his benefactor had first appeared bearing the message, the story that would change all things.

Standing up straight, he saw the small figure, without perspective it just looked like a very

small human wearing a top hat, but he was getting bigger, he was walking towards him and he knew exactly who he was. He always came to meet him out of the re-birthing process, to make sure his friend, his comrade in death was still able to do what he had originally asked of him. Germany breathed deeply and prepared himself, he looked down to see he had been clothed, in the original suit he had worn when he was in the hovering clear tube in the spinning Gigastudio, at the other side of time, a place long turned to dust. He grinned again, the figure up close now, wearing his usual eccentric attire of mid-19th century formal dress suit complete with top hat.

“Jack Rawstone, well, on time as always. We’ve got some talking to do, and in the usual manner Jack, you’ll listen, and if I have any questions, you’ll tell me the answers, quickly, without hesitation and they will be the truth. You know who I am Jack, you know me better than any other being, you know what I am capable of, but there is more now, you have done an injustice to the universe.”

Jack smiled and lowering his head took off his hat, wiping his forehead with a hanky and looked up, over his glasses without actually raising his head. “Germany, I see you haven’t changed, which is a good thing, as much of a brute as ever. Well, I would not have accepted anything else, a fine example of humanity, a fine example of the future, a shining beacon of what the first graduate will be like. You Germany, are so many things, you are the early, yet unripe fruit of Richard Vortigern’s great plan, of the Absolute Tooth of...wait,” Jack turned away from Germany, and slowly brought his head around, over his left shoulder, replacing his hat and stuffing his hanky into his pocket, he looked anxious. “What do you mean, there is more now?”

Germany grabbed Jack’s shoulder and spun him round so they faced each other, noses almost touching, squaring off, both with their own ideas on what was about to happen, on the

inevitable results of this exchange. Whatever mercy, whatever moral aptitude, whatever undetermined niceties that may have existed between them before, as one asked and gave, and the other accepted and promised, were now gone. Germany replaced his grin with a snarl and watched a bead of sweat accumulate on Jack's forehead, above his brow and below the line of his hat. Jack looked up, almost crossing his eyes, before its surface tension gave and it shot down the ridge of his nose, gathering as a drop on its end, his eyes following as it dripped to the floor.

Calmly Germany began, "I mean Jack, that now, not only am I your grim reaper, I am now the destroyer of all things. You have created the doom bringer, I am apocalypse. Your gift, the one that let me remain as Germany Germany whilst I lived out the lives of others, to experience them and take pleasure in them, it has changed our circumstance, our deal." Germany quickly patted both their chests.

"I was once scheduled to return, to be grateful for your gift and I should kill you, so you can find peace, and have your greed burned with your instance in the universe. Now, the deal has changed, it has reached further than you could have anticipated, there were unforeseen factors in the repercussions of our actions. Now I have experienced the love of Lucy Tower and now I know, humanity, or rather what Richard Vortigern wants to call humanity, the super beings that we are planned to become, are not befitting of the human endeavour. You will die, I guarantee that, but so will everything else. "

He lowered his head, looking down at his patent shoes, almost touching ends with Jack's, and he was dripped with sorrow. He squinted, his heart pounding and ground his teeth, flexed his lips and pushed air coarsely between his teeth. His eyes shot in and out of focus, between the floor and his hands before him, and he noticed how Jack's little feet seemed to be squirming, faint

bumps of eagerness showing themselves under the shoe's vamp. Looking up he saw a face of misery, one not in fitting with the movement in the shoes he had just seen, but one overriding none the less. He withdrew, giving them space and raising both hands on to the shoulders opposite.

“It is not that I want to destroy humanity Jack, you have to realise this, it is that I cannot let us become that which is not befitting, the perfection that I once considered to be true, to be a product of Richard's Absolute Tooth, is a fallacy. I cannot allow the universe to be commanded by something that does not know barriers, I cannot become that myself. I cannot end you and sit back and accept the Absolute Tooth, I have decided this, and with the heaviest of hearts, but the surest of minds, I have determined in its place there is nothing, so I will take it all away. I recognise if I took the Absolute Tooth, I would see the futility of this train of thought, how I would understand how wrong I am, but the fact remains, it is an unacceptable reality. I long for love, I have fallen, all has changed, I want that love of Lucy Tower. I want the rest of our race, I want others to experience that which is so pure and infectious, insane and beautiful. Without it Jack, we are nothing, I will make certain that we are nothing, I will end this nightmare.”

Jack stood and shone inside, all the while maintaining the façade of astonishment, of distress and grief, a silence he had been holding for almost a minute now, whilst his feet wiggled with excitement inside his shoes. His plan was coming together, after all the millennia of waiting, of planning and lying. Of torment and belittling speeches at the foot of Richard Voritgern, he was beginning to gain the upper hand, he was starting to win. He knew he was the better man, the more astute Negotiator; his grip on the Se Lier D'amtie protocol was mighty and as his insides surged with adrenaline once more. His outside was motionless and for a second he forgot what he

had planned, what was he to do now. A blank mind brought about by unbridled elation and the struggle to contain it.

He focused, watching Germany before him, head bowed, shoulders shrunk, the man looked in physical pain, a shadow of his usual self, he was so twisted inside, and Jack knew he had him in the palm of his hand. But what next, a fine line to be walked, he regained control and thoughts began to flow, logic overriding emotion once more, and quickly composed his inner being, thinking, doing, the protocol, his patients was about to pay its dues. The beginning of the end was here, and he spoke.

“Germany, although you know I want you to kill me, naturally, in turn for what I have given you,” he said with an air of thought, placing his index finger on his chin. “I cannot let you go through with what you have just proposed. You have just said that I will still die, my fate is complete, I know that, I knew it all along, but I cannot let you go against Richard’s plans, you are no man compared to him, he who is our saviour. Germany Germany I cannot le...”

Germany stepped forward and to the left hand side of Jack quickly, without even seeming to move. He stood there for an extra split second “...t you do this”.

On that confirming note Germany raised his right leg and kicked out sideways at the knee of Jack Rawstone, landing the cup of his sole neatly against the outside of his joint. Jack’s legs buckled sideways, joints collapsing almost simultaneously and lazily forcing a crunching sound into the air before the motion picked up intensity and speed. Splintering bone shot out of skin popping through with a youthful exuberance, releasing snapping noises to sprint away from their origin, sound-waves dodging in-between the squiring jets of blood and synovial fluid. The force of

the kick shifted Jack a clear five feet across the floor, sliding his body in a vertical-sideways zig-zag across the white, skidding and spurting. Stopping abruptly, his body motioned as if it was being physically pulled toward the floor and racing down, shoulder first, slammed against the white and ridged Smart-putty. The kinetic energy of the fall quickly rebounded back through his bulk making him bump-up an inch off the ground, and as he dropped back down, he let out an almighty, searing scream.

Germany clapped his hands slowly as he walked over toward the crippled and writhing Jack Rawstone, his feet lightly patting in the pools of blood. Stepping up to him, he leant over, instantly flashing back to the jellied state he left the Faster in, all that time ago.

“I thought I might have to do something like that, you will die Jack, but not yet, no, I might need you yet. For the mean time you can just settle there, try and summon some sort of robot to help you or something. I am now going to move to the vaults on your home planet of Volition Six, where I will begin taking apart humanity with these hands.” He raised his clenched fists in-front of his eyes, turning them slowly and opening them at the same time to see his heavily lined palms. “To destroy all that you have recorded, all that you have ever collated on humanity, and what now feeds the Cerebral Goo. Where I will begin to make sure that the future according to Richard Vortigern cannot happen. I will destroy existence and leave nothing but a black hole in the face of the universe.” He stepped over him and away, into the white, gradually shrinking.

Jack mustered enough energy to shout at Germany’s back, “This is not your time Germany, your place in the universe has already walked its road, and Richard is your master now.” His voice whimpered as Germany continued to walk away, he shrunk into himself and curled into the foetal position. Between the beats of his heart and the small spurts of blood from

his knees he smiled, he knew he had made the right choice. He knew his plan was coming together. He knew he would be set free, he knew Richard's plan would fall and for the first time in centuries, he felt a happiness in his soul, dank and filthy, but happy none-the-less.

A warrior, a scientist, a lover, a creative, a dictator, he is all of these. Vengeance, hate and horror, revenge and death, pure unfiltered evil, unrelenting fire, consuming rage, forced, penetrating, humiliating, belittling, he is all of these.

Love, passion, kind, merciful, grateful, compassionate and kind, giving and devoted, warmth, pure of heart and mind, smiles and content, pleasure and rapture, excitement with anticipation, heart pumping and full of hope, faith in good and right, he is all of these.

Grieving, loss, suffering, weeping for those that have vanished, sorrow, a pitted soul, taken away, weakness and misery, faded, gutted, lifeless, apathetic, will less, he is all of these.

He rises at the edge of absolute, of all history that has ever been played out and he looks upon the treasure that is pinnacle of humanity in awe. He sees the new dawn that is possible for all, he sees the removal of pain and torment, he sees a complete synergy with a harsh and unsettled universe, he sees their future and what will become of his fellow man.

He steps up to them without regret, he steps up to them who challenge him and want for all, he steps up to remind the universe that man is more than a collection of actions, he steps up to say that they cannot fade away, he steps up to make sure it ends before the weak have their chance. He steps up against the hell he sees before him, he steps up to kill the emptiness that may reign, he steps up give back what he believes is right to the universe.

He stands by himself, he stands alone at the breach of a world, he stands with his plans laid out, he stands with intention, he stands pure of heart, he stands feverous and ready. He stands with all the voices, he stands with all the experience, he stands and remembers the beauty that was, he stands and is ready to extinguish what is left, he stands and is soaked in sun light as the planets sun sweeps over land, bringing in the new day.

He thinks of his plan, he thinks of all time that is has taken, he thinks back on his life, thinks of his parents and their love, he thinks of his rage and hate, he thinks of his suffering, he thinks of the suffering of all. He thinks about peace without weakness, he thinks of solace, he thinks of the final harmony, he thinks of her, he thinks of how he is right, he thinks of Richard's plan, thinks of the silence and he embraces it.

He knows that he is breathing, he knows those breaths are security, he knows what he is about to do, he knows it could not have happened any other way, he knows that his line throughout the universe is set, he knows he is saviour and terror, he knows he still has questions, he knows he may never get the answers, he knows what he has to do and he stares at the tools that he will employ to do it.

He kneels before time, he kneels and looks to the sky, he kneels on the knowledge of all man, he kneels and weeps, he kneels and weeps for her, he kneels and weeps for the life of man, he kneels with remorse in his heart, he kneels as time bears down on his soul. He kneels as the piper plays, he kneels and counts the lines on his hands, he kneels and recites his plan and he knows it will work.

He screams with weary age, he screams with war torn anguish, he screams saddened and

hateful, he screams rage and fire, he screams as his fear is complete, he screams as his thoughts are complex, he screams at his love for her, he screams at its eternity. He screams with the universe, he screams with matter, he screams as he becomes one with that which surrounds him, he screams at the light and waits for his pulse. He screams with crushing arms of victory, he screams as he becomes the hovering beast that devours time, he screams and becomes culmination of all things, he screams for what is due, he screams for time and tide and he is unrepentant.

He walks to the platform, he walks with his back to it all, he walks with his head bowed, he walks with a heavy heart and he walks with righteous might. He walks forward as he has always done, he walks to his destiny, he walks inside, he walks and knows he is the unforgiven, he walks and knows he is the flaw of all time, he walks and knows there is no other way, he walks and he turns and gives the order.

He watches his machines, he watches the artificial construct as it autonomously manufactures copies of itself using the history of man as its fuel, he watches the machines replicate, he watches them devour the planet. He watches the black consume, he watches the planet as it is eaten, he watches it disappear, he watches patiently until he knows it is destroyed. He watches through the eyes of all the scientists he has lived as, he watches through the eyes of all the warriors he has fought as, he watches through all the eyes of the artists he has created as, he watches through the eyes of all. He watches that of man turn into suicidal constructs, he watches as they propel themselves into the closest sun, he watches the knowledge ignite, he watches history burn, he closes his eyes, he cannot watch any more.

He is the lone witness of absolute destruction, he is the feller of planets, he is the father of death, he is the eraser of time, he is the cleaner of the universe, he is humanities greatest foe, he is

their saviour, he is doom, he is Germany Germany.

Sat patiently in a soft and moulded smart putty chair, his elbows placed on armrests, his right forearm laid out flat, fingers rhythmically tapping, he looked over to his left and he thought. He thought of its weight, of the majesty of its power, of the respect such an ancient tool could still bring, he tensed and pointed it. He thought how fitting it was, how the last piece of human history in existence was an instrument of death, an early mode of mans basic, yet highly efficient death bringing design. A mechanism housing a projectile which, when brought to life by a form of reaction, be it kinetic or chemical, would annihilate anything in its path. He felt the dimpled wood of its butt in his hand and awed at the tactile feedback. Squinting down the barrel of the .357 Colt Python he thought how he could not resist its shine as he laid out his plans back on Volition Six, and he thought on the life that brought him so close to the implement of doom.

He continued to think, as he always did, and took solace in his minds eye. Meditating on what he had done, where he was going and what he had to do, breathing, steadily. Always planning, always scheming, always absolute in his choices, always solid of mind, always ready for his next step and in the dark of his transports cabin, surrounded by the dim light of flickering buttons and monitors, the outward faces of the computers that were all fully automated and programmed, he shot toward Planet Cereborus. He left behind a gap, a planet sized void that would undoubtedly cause the rest of this particular solar system into a terminal and absolute failure. Gravitational patterns that had remained static for millions of years were now out of sync, now interrupted as the final machines ate the molten rock at the centre of Volition Six and flung

themselves into the local star.

He held a moment of silence for the death of human history before he pictured the spinning, glowing, orange ball of Planet Cereborus and he continued his stream of consciousness, flopping his arm under the weight of the revolver. He thought about the artificial planet constructed to house the shells that walked the Cerebral Goo. Put together, grown, an amalgamation of gas, iron and an array of artificial elements that worked to allow the constant and even distribution of the Cerebral Goo across its entire surface. He thought about the malleable upper crust and how it gave, how its porous and soft planes continued pouring information and nutrients into the Goo, allowing its guests to absorb all that they needed to live, to think, to experience the lives of others, over and over again. How they walked through it, never touching, perfectly synchronised in the chaos of hundreds of thousands of lives, all blind to each other, all blind to their destination.

He thought how they were free to wander the surface, to live as a specimen of humanity deemed great enough for the effort, free of a God, free of any giant sky wizard with requirements of either fear or love. Yet bound, bound by a set path, a fate, a destiny that they were scheduled to reach, the end of the life they were living, the life that had been set out by no one other than its original host and then, on to become the greatest of things. A peculiar amalgamation of freedom and castration, all in order for them to smash their meaning together in the creation of the Absolute Tooth. That which will allow the free agent, absolute confidence in their actions and thoughts, a product of the acquired knowledge of all time, so perfect that they could never be wrong, never consider the notion. Absolutely free.

He sat in the command chair of his ship as it continued on, to the planet, and he

considered his first stop, his penultimate destination, before he would have to go and deal with what lay on the planet itself. The gigantic Cathedral like structure that was in orbit above its surface, its great and clear dome reaching out to the planet., allowing the Negotiators inside to bask in the glory of their achievement. The King Hinge, shooting around the planet, housing their great hall and their prying technology, a God like watching station, a heaven above what they had created. Where Richard had given his great speech, the Exitus Omnis, Novus Inceptum to the other Negotiators before they had entered into the Goo on their path. Where they exited and continued to live, with the Absolute Tooth but still bound by their original human traits, bound by the lives they had naturally lived in their first instance in time. Imperfect, they now waited patiently for their perfection to grow and come into existence, Richard waited with his Negotiators by his side for his creation, for the first of many Graduates to take control of the universe in a wondrous perfect glory.

Germany tipped his head and looked out at the stars, their millennia old light seeping in through the translucent Putty window and glinting softly off the silver barrel of the gun. He ground his teeth and furrowed his brow, he thought on how they had been tamed, how they brought no awe now, they were the robust and flaring slaves of men, like everything else in the universe. He blinked rapidly and shifted his face, he smiled at how they would soon be set free again, to some day birth a creation that was not so outwardly bound by extremes and the poles of its makeup. He smiled and thanked Jack Rawstone for his gift, and he thought of her, of their love, of how she was point zero, how she reset everything in his mind, how she was gone, forever. How Richard's plan must not come to fruition.

The Smartputty under his right forearm began to quiver, as if it was shivering with cold,

and he quickly came back into focus, the Orange globe of Cereborus was visible with the naked eye now. He shifted in his seat quickly, and moving to his feet he watched in the reflection of the window in front of him as shoots of Smart-Putty reached out from behind. The arm like tentacles shot forward and wrapped around his body, gripping him tightly, hugging him and squeezing. They held him up into the air, into the middle of the ship, wringing his body limp, he dropped the gun to the floor, and exhaled the last puffs of air out of his lungs as the first flickers of his rage punctuated his thoughts. His body kicked, his mind pointed and sharpened quickly, shifting to ways he could escape, but the Putty consumed him, his body was now completely cocooned. Only his head protruded, he kicked and squirmed, his body weak, no energy, no oxygen, nothing to fuel him, only blank thoughts of fear and rage. Overpowered. And as quickly as he had devoured his enemies in the past, the Smart-Putty had devoured him. It was now breathing for him, his chest pulled lightly in and out, just enough to keep him conscious, whilst the rest of his body struggled, his brain pulsed, veins protruded, he was at its mercy, but not prepared to give up.

Another strand of Putty flopped down from the ceiling of his craft and formed into a screen, it flickered into life and he saw him. His gloved thumb and index finger brought up to the centre of his upper lip and sliding apart, flattened his moustache.

“Hello Germany, I’m entirely sure you think this is the end? I’m entirely sure that you think I have put myself back together after your savage attack, and now I’m going to kill you? To stop you from destroying what Richard Vortigern has taken so long to put into action? Well, you are wrong, very, very wrong Mr Germany Germany.” Jack Rawstone’s head shook from side-to-side across the massive screen.

“I know how your inner rage is scraping for air and you are utilizing every last drip of

energy left in your body to try and escape from your captor. I know how you feel when you are under the command of another, I know how you rage against it, I know how the fire that exists in your body, unparalleled in any other human that has ever existed will fight with everything that it has, I know the rage in your mind is like the beating heart of the universe. It will even continue to kick and repel your body when you have drifted out of consciousness, so is its might and ferocity. You are the crown of humanity, you are everything I expected you to be, and you have achieved everything you needed to achieve. And now? Now, you are about to end it all. Sir, I tip my hat.”

Jack, on the screen before Germany Germany bowed slightly and pinching the rim of his hat, tipped it forward.

“You see Germany, like you, I also know what it is like to be under the command of another, I know what is like to be belittled, to be told and pointed towards fates that are not your own. Just like the Faster once had control of you, how he manipulated you and you raged, and fought against, as is my fight with Richard Vortigern. Oh yes, I have rage Germany, it does not work like yours, no, it is not as noble and physical as your own, it is not of pure heart and for good intention, it is based in iniquity. Millennia ago, your visage was placed before me in a moment of serendipity and my rage dawned, it hesitated and then with a quivering eruption its filthy, slimy offspring was born of my hate and greed. It seeped out of me as I sat and concurred, at the right hand side of Richard, whilst he stood and shone, as his brilliance poured on how he would take humanity into perfection, and I could not let that happen. My filth, my rabid nature, my ever strong lust for more, my insatiability and my jealousy was realised in a plan, in a person and that person was you.”

Jack continued to talk, eyes wide and moustache as pointed as ever, his face

uncomfortably close, almost protruding out of the screen that shone before the captured Germany Germany. And Germany watched, he had no choice, his head fixed and eyes pulled open by minute strands of putty, forced to watch what was playing out before him.

“My command of the Protocol, my plan to destroy what Richard had come to create, because he could achieve what I never could, it is the forbearer of your path, and nothing else. I, Germany Germany, am the doom, I am the eternal night, I will take it all away because it is not mine, and I have used you to do it. You have been my tool, it has worked as I planned, I am the great tactician, and I am the one to end it all!”

Jack moved back quickly on the screen, picking his hat off with one hand and greasing his hair back with his other before quickly replacing it and moving right back in, snug with the screen. Germany remained motionless, in the cocoon of Putty, his mind flickered, and undernourished, starved of air, on the verge of unconsciousness he refused to believe his ears. He refused to connect the waves of sound that had entered his mind with a reality. He could not accept what he had heard, he tried to block everything out and continued to try and break free of his captor and of the sonic horror that he was forced to hear.

He kicked and wrenched upon the realisation that his universal reason for existence, his entire self concept, was crumbling before him in an unrepentant nightmare like state of suffocation.

“You think you are Germany Germany? You are merely a Shell, a remanufactured instance of what Germany Germany once was. You are my tool, you are my blunt, but beautiful, instrument of greed that has done my bidding and performed it so well. You are nothing, a copy, a play thing,

that has wiped out all history of humanity, thinking you were battling for your reason, for love, to make sure that humanity would not evolve into another tepid version of itself. But Germany,” Jack leaned right in, as close to the screen as he could get, only his mouth showing, his smile reaching a dozen feet across the display that stretched throughout the width of the ship, and he whispered.

“You are my greed, you are iniquity, you are the pitiful waste that is my mind, and now you will complete me. I just had to thank you Germany Germany, I just had to say, thank you for freeing me...” Jack’s voice tapered off and his smile reached across the screen for a split second more before it went black, and the putty was sucked back up into the ceiling of the transporter.

The hugging cocoon instantly dissipated and dropped him to the floor and he fell, he slammed against the Putty floor, he lay and he breathed. Long and hard, the deepest of breaths, sucking in the air, gulping down as if it were the last oxygen he would ever taste, immediacy and panic and primordial reaction all combined. The air stoked and ignited the hot coals in his lungs, they fired with white heat and began the reaction. He rose to his knees, on all fours and he smashed his fists into the soft putty under him, locked his joints, tensed his muscles and his nature took over. Animal like in posture, head raised forward, a position he had met before, and he knew what was coming, he felt it flare, the fire was stoked, the furnace was ready to erupt, to explode in white rage.

He roared, he roared against what had just happened, on the interception that had just taken place. He roared at the climatic shift in events that had just chiselled their way into his mind and wrenched it apart. His body rippled with hate, his jaw bolted open, riveted iron struts holding it steady and locked as God like hands pushed all the air out of his body once again, pushing his

rage into the universe. Gripping his feet like a tube and sliding upwards, squeezing everything he had to give. Forcing the scream, the roar and his hate to the brink of spasmodic action, and he gave way, his hands elbows and wrists gave up, he fell forward and his head bumped softly on the Smartputty floor, he blinked.

He pulled himself to his feet and stood panting, troglodyte in stature and searched for reason, but he was lost, his mind was a tangled mess of rage and love and fear. A fucked mash of his most potent emotions, washing around like a filthy, intoxicating concoction that could only bring on complete paralysis, unless dealt with. Unless he was able to separate the three, filter his mind and regain his composure, but all seemed lost as he swung violently around the cabin. Smashing his fists into the putty walls, stamping his feet and fitfully searching. His rage had reached its pinnacle, the unbound, unquenchable, foundation of his personality that he had never questioned before, he had relied so heavily upon in the past, and had always supported him so well, had finally reached its absolute limit. He stopped. He looked through the window towards the Planet Cereborus, towards The King Hinge where Richard would be waiting, without suspicion as Jack stood by his side and grinned, and waited for his arrival and the plan of his greedy filth to be realised, and his rage and hate became whole.

His eyes widened, he could feel his pulse, his heart ready to jump out of his chest, his arms ready to do what they always did, instinctively and without hesitation. He was readying himself for his epiphany, the manifestation of all that he had consumed and learned, the absolute expression and cumulative explosion of all his actions to date, throughout millennia, was about to take place. His moment or reckoning was here, his quickening, his mind enveloped, collapsing in and upon itself, he was at the brink, and for a split second he looked down on himself. He had to

decide which way it was to go, the path that he would chose, the road on which to hunt without mercy and produce what the universe deserved, what humanity deserved, and now, what he deserved.

All that he had ever done, as a human being then as a Shell in the great plan of Richard Vortigern, as he walked to the position of Graduate, towards the Absolute Tooth, as he was brought to sentience, as he experienced the lives in third person and looked down on what had happened throughout time. As he loved Lucy Tower, as he thought and planned, as he protruded, as he made his presence felt in the fabric of all humanity, and as he destroyed, as he was part of Jack Rawstone's plan. The questions and the answers, all of it, it was for Jack Rawstone's selfish benefit.

He bowed his head and closed his eyes gently, looking into the infinite black and awash with oils, and in a deep slow voice he said to himself, "There is more".

He pulled his head back up, neck taught and forced his hand into the rubbery translucent putty that separated him from the vacuum of space, grabbing at The King Hinge, the hall that was before him, getting bigger as the ship moved closer.

"I have come to see many things, I have the answers of the shadows. You think there is now nothing to fear, you know all, you are the miracle of time, you command that which is great, the universe is your slave, and you have created your own God. I am your God now." He gritted his teeth and pointed at the Hall, the white that was now beginning to engulf the screen, and he pulled his hand back out of the stretched putty, still pointing.

A computerised voice sounded that he was coming into dock, he straightened up, he

looked down again at his suited body and he smiled, he knew, he could see his peace.

“It is coming, it is at hand,” he whispered to himself as a hole peeled open in the side of his ship and a stretch of putty pebbles poured out. Each flattening themselves into stepping stones as they dropped down to the floor, to the main entrance to the hall of The King Hinge. He looked out, grabbing one side of the doorway that had opened up and saw the majesty of the entrance, the gigantic marble doorway, adorned with a statue of each of the Negotiators and he squinted at its lead figure. Richard Vortigern, in the middle, carved out of precious stone, adorned in robes, his arms held out at shoulder height, palms open and a miniature version of Planet Cereborus floating in his hands.

Germany stepped out, sucking in the dust laden air of the halls entrance, trace particles of stone caught his throat and he continued talking, calm and clear, walking towards the entrance.

“What you fail to realise is that I have never been under the command of another. My belief in my fate has held strong, it has seen the test of time. You believe I am but a Shell of a man that once existed, infused with his thoughts and being. I am more than that, I am he, I am his fate, this, all of this, is what was meant to happen, it is my path, it is my fate. All that you have done is prove to me what I have always believed so strongly in, that my presence in the universe, my collection of matter has purpose, ultimate purpose. Why, in a moment of absolute chaos, I was born, why I slipped into the fabric of all that we see and know, with one single objective, absolute, planned. From the beginning of the universe, it has all lead up to this moment. It meant my death, it meant pain and suffering in such great quantities they were previously unknown to the universe. It meant training, it meant preparation, it meant what happened, was needed all along, it was the plan, it was the alignment, slowly taking place. I have been the saviour of mankind before. I know

this now, you allowed me to see, and in doing so you have brought about your own demise.

Purposefully, along your own plan, but those were the only actions you could have ever made, the chemicals running around your mind, the spurts of electricity, perfectly in sync, timed absolutely with what was meant to happen in order to bring me to this point in time. And for what is about to happen, to take place.”

Germany continued walking, down the steps and up to the great arches, tilting his head back as he went. Looking up at the statues and the vast structure his jaw opened slightly as the skin on his neck stretched. The majesty of it all, the pomposity, his steps clicking on the floor, and he was reminded of when he was entering the Gigastudio for his fateful and final broadcast, for the Benefit, and to perform the task that would eventually lead to its demise.

He entered into the hall and tilted his head forward and down and could see them in the distance, he looked back up, at the great domed ceiling, completely clear and dominated by the vision of Planet Cereborus, its orange glow softly reflecting off the white hall. Continuing to walk in silence, he was resolute, he was ready, he had absorbed all that made him and he was finally, whole. Ready to confront them he headed straight, completely aligned, in sync and gritting, balled fury, the culmination of all things, the beginning and the end. Only he knew what was about to take place, he saw the future, he saw the picture of his fate, he knew the line of time, like he had seen before, but he had not believed. He saw all that existed.

“Your vaults are destroyed Richard, your plan is at an end, the Absolute Tooth can no longer be achieved.” Germany spoke calmly, lowering his head as he closed in on the Negotiators. They sat around a large white disc like table held from the ground by a thin stem. Its top displayed what was being seen through the eyes of a Shell in the Cerebral Goo, a life that was currently

being led.

As he continued to walk closer he looked down on it and saw through a man's eyes, he saw him pumping up and down, he saw gripping hands and heard the panting. He saw beads of sweat dripping on to a lady underneath, consumed by sexual pleasure, squinting eyes and he could hear her screams of rapture. He could see her naked sweaty thrashing, breasts gyrating, long auburn curls of hair dousing her upper torso and lightly freckled face.

He spoke again, pointing at the lady quivering with pleasure and walking forward, closer still to the table, "What you are watching now is the end. An example of the final life that your Shell's will ever lead, an example of where it will all terminate. And, your own life storage is gone alongside your Vaults, if you are killed you are the eternal dust, you cannot regenerate, you are also at an end," he finished as and slowed his pace right down, his right arm in the air, pointing and motioning in an 180 degree semi-circle, at the Negotiators. Coming to a complete stand still a foot behind the chair of Richard he brought his right hand down, placing it on Richard's shoulder, standing behind him he stood and stared at the other Negotiators around the table. All sat, stupefied, still in their cup like chairs of Smart Putty at the display table waiting for a signal. Consumed by complete shock, consumed by absolute terror, all with their own questions, all quickly formulating answers, all completely wrong, all surrounded by the ecstatic screams of the lady on the table and the heavy breathing of the man. The slapping sound of skin on skin, the grunts and cries, pants and gulps, penetrating and ravishing.

"I'll show you, I'll show you how there is now no escape," Germany said calmly and raised his left arm in front of Richard, over his left shoulder and pointed it directly across the table to one of the other Negotiators. The sexual screams of the lady on the table's display growing all

the while with intensity and volume, her writhing, her spasms becoming more vicious and erratic. Locked hips and soaked bodies.

Germany squeezed the shoulder of Richard slightly in an effort to gain his attention and brought his mouth close to his left ear. “This is a .357 Colt Python, a revolver from the late 20th Century, so called because of its revolving mechanism, a mechanism that houses small capsules of death. It is modified, it is the only remnants of a race that once commanded the stars, of a people that took and never gave, of a collection of time that had fuelled your plan. It is all that is left and this and this is what it does to the human frame.”

Germany and Richard both looked up and saw the wide eyes of the 18 year old boy that sat directly opposite them and the heads of the other Negotiators all shifted to his focus. They absorbed his tanned complexion, his unlined face, his naive look, the wisp of blonde hair, and the lady began to peak. The slow build was coming to its orgasmic end, an explosion of erotic pleasure, and in the calm before the storm, an instant of absolute silence. Her body consumed by wave after wave of chemical release and muscle contraction, gathered up, unhinged, uncontrollable, in the fog of delirium.

The hammer dropped and Germany shot a single round across the table, the boys face exploded in a mist of blood, the lady on the display released a gargantuan scream of alarming volume and as they all experienced simultaneous release. Her face twisted and contorted as stingy fluids flapped and spat across the screen, as tissue and grey matter shot backwards from the boys body, streaking along the floor like flicked ink. Germany’s eyes twitched and he saw the Negotiators that were sitting next to the now headless body. They remained motionless, they had

derailed, they had no concept of what was playing out before them, they were deranged and the side of their faces were pasted with thick mush and skull shrapnel.

Germany stood up straight, and surrounded by the slow panting sound of the lady on the display table, he took his hand off the shoulder of the still silent Richard Vortigern. The smoking gun in his left hand, he dropped it to his side and started walking around the table, the lady's breathing calming, coming in time and level with that of the stunned Negotiators. He flicked through all of their faces, catching pairs of eyes and saw nothing but emptiness, until one set, those of Jack Rawstone, at the right hand side of Richard.

Their eyes met and Jack shouted out, "Chair, raise!"

His Smartputty chair shot into the air, hoisted by a stem on its underneath, he leaned forward and over Richard, pointing down. His finger shaking, his hat fell to the floor as he stood on a foot panel that protruded from the base of the chair.

"I have won Richard! You, you and your plan, look where it has got you, look where you have ended, look at us all now, look at this brute, this savage, he is going to destroy it all! I have taken this away from you, Germany has played into my hands," He leant sideways nodding, shifting his point to Germany, who continued walking around the table, in circles, in silence, in focus on Jack.

"He has done my bidding, I am time, I am destruction, I am the one that has taken away everything you have ever worked for Richard, I am your ultimate demise. And why? Because I could not be you, because your perfection tormented my very being into a profound hate, my greed consumes me Richard, we are all imperfect around this table, and my jealously fuelled greed

bore this end. Now you know! Now you know, now you know, now you, now...” Jack ran out of breath and fell back into his chair, bringing his shaking finger down to his side. Still hovering above Richard, floating over the table and the other Negotiators, he slumped and pulled his hands to his face, cupping it and he wept. His chair slowly sank back into its original position next to Richard, at his right hand side, and as the lady called out for coffee and cigarettes from her partner, Richard stood, slowly.

His mind was a wash with quick thought and action on how to save the situation. How to regain control of the madness that was taking place around him, he was formulating as he stood, and as his knees clicked into their upright position and his spine unfurled, straight, his vertebrae locking, his shoulders reaching backwards and pushing out his chest, he completed his thoughts. He had absolute confidence in himself, he was the progenitor of where humanities present, he had achieved so much, and how? Through his masterful and effortless control of the building blocks of their reason for existence, the foundation of what made them Negotiators, of the Se Lier D’amicie Protocol. He could reclaim this situation, he could still see his vision.

“I have known your path since Jack first betrayed me Germany Germany. You see, I am complete, I not only have my own life, my experience, my first hand knowledge and deeply intrinsic ability to control those around me with little or no effort, I have the knowledge of all those deemed worthy. I have the Absolute Tooth, Germany Germany. You seem to have forgotten this, I know everything, I can see everything, you are no more my God than any other person around this table.” He followed Germany as he continued to walk around the table, he looked into the eyes of his fellow Negotiators, he placed his right hand on the left shoulder of Jack Rawstone, his brother in arms, who sat next to him, weeping.

“You see, this is all part of my plan, this is our future together. Germany, by destroying the Vaults you have achieved nothing, we around this table have all lived the lives of all, we have experienced them, our memories can be extracted and recreated. You must realise this, as long as we still exist the Absolute Tooth is the fate of man. You must realise that the Absolute Tooth is perfection, it is the ultimate peace and justice that humanity deserves. It is how we, as a race, as the kings of time, will turn the key to our ultimate palace in the stars, to reign, want for nothing, to be absolute in our choices, to be free, absolutely, for all eternity. Germany, you must realise that it is the only, perfect path for humanity.”

“I realise one thing,” Germany stopped behind the headless body of the boy he had just shot, his eyes pulsed with rage, a flash of might and fire swept over them and he raised his left arm once more, “That you are wrong.”

He began firing relentlessly and the red mist replaced the heads of the other Negotiators. Grey matter flung in all directions, explosion after explosion from the hand cannon Germany had seen in the Vaults, as he lay his plan of destruction. Screams pierced the hall with ugly fear, quick and terrified, gargling and panicked, they could serve no purpose and before their waves had chance to rebound off the walls of their cage, their perpetrator had disintegrated. Shifting back through the air to where they had originated, only to be greeted by red emptiness.

The shiny piece of metal, the token of humanity, he thought of how if he had not taken it, he would not be doing what he was doing now as his eyes absorbed the horror before him. He kept shooting, without mercy, without repent, but qualified in the execution of his actions. He quickly thought on the culmination of all action in the universe, and its manifestation in him and

this moment, and he squeezed the trigger one last, fatal time.

Bodies sat, headless, their hearts squeezing out their final pump, shooting squirts of blood into the air. A circular fountain of red pumps, spraying, coating and masking, before subsiding and leaving slumped, heaving piles of tissue, splattered mess in all directions. Out of the mist two men stood, covered in the flesh of others.

Germany lowered his left arm again, down to his side and smiled at the carnage. He calmly placed his right hand on the shoulder of the original fatality, balling his hand and gripping, squeezing the blood out of the fabric, in between his fingers. Once he reasoned his grip was strong enough he pulled violently on the dead weight. Flinging it out of its chair, he turned and watched it slide along the blood soaked floor, limp and pathetic. He turned his head back around, slowly coming to face the table and pulled his body slowly round inline with itself. Facing the two men opposite, one stood, one sat, both still motionless, the only indication of life their quickly raising and lowering chests.

He gripped and pulled the back of the Smartputty chair, ripping at its stem like floor attachment and throwing it to his side and out of his way. Stepping up to the edge of table, he raised his arms high and slammed his hands down, the gun in one hand cracking against the surface, the open palm of his other splashing blood into the air. Light of the display gently flickering through the pools, showing a metropolis from a balcony view, a silent world shooting past from a great height and he could almost feel the breeze.

He leaned over, growling, teeth gritted, face taught, ears pinned back and he raged once more, "I AM GERMANY GERMANY!!"

He raged across the table to both men, to Jack Rawstone and Richard Vortigern, left wide eyed and dripping with the blood of their fellow Negotiators. He pulled his body up and jumped onto the table in one effortless motion and began sprinting towards them. His feet smashing down on the blood, crunching the skull beneath his feet and sending splashes of spongy tissue into the air. His legs stomping down like firing pistons with absolute purpose, and he flung himself backwards, whilst motioning forwards, dropping and landing on his side. He locked his knees, looking down the line of this body and slid the last few feet of the table through the awful collection of brain matter and blood before slamming into Richard with a reverberating force that brought him to a complete stop. Half on, half off the table, still on his side he had transferred all his kinetic energy into Richard's chest. A crushing blow across his ribcage that forced his torso into the air, instantly pushing it backwards whilst his arms and legs remained static, then, eventually pulling them backwards, reeled in by the mass they were attached to. Cupped vertically, his body flew back and he landed on the floor feet away from the table.

Germany stepped down, placing his feet firmly shoulder width apart onto the floor. He looked forward at the body of Richard as it squirmed in the near distance and, without turning, he squatted slightly, bringing his face level with that of Jack Rawstone. He reached his free hand around his neck, gripped tightly and straightened his knees, pushing down with his thighs and lifted. He felt Jack's pulse run through his hand, he felt his life beat and he forced his bicep tight, locked his joints and picked him up off the floor, instantly crushing his windpipe. Holding him to his right hand side, in the air, Jack writhed and kicked whilst gasping for breath. His natural, primal reaction making him claw at Germany's engulfing and solid hand, before he became motionless, a limp weight. In the throws of death he remained air bound, hoisted by Germany, life

drifting away.

He walked calmly over to Richard, still holding Jack, lofting him high like a trophy and looked down, focusing on the contorted body before him on the floor. Struggling for breath, gripping its chest, coughing and spluttering, slowly and painfully dyeing, it was a mess and Germany pointed the revolver down.

“I have acquired innumerate skills over the course of multiple life times that have helped facilitate your ultimate demise. Retaining vast amounts of knowledge combined with a potent fury that you have never had never had any chance of stopping, I am your death. Fate, time, humanity, we are almost complete, I am the universe, I am Germany Germany.”

In an instant Germany wept inside for the tool of destruction that he had become. In an instant Jack smiled as his ultimate plan became reality. In an instant Richard coughed blood and cracked his chest as he raised his hand to Germany, to convince, to reason, to turn, to negotiate with him to take back his plan.

The hammer struck down.

12 – As I am

He stood at the side of the stage and smiled, rubbing his temple and forehead with his thumb and fore fingers as he listened, his heart was heavy but he managed to smile at the show before him, things were progressing well as the days turned to weeks.

Mars was on stage, the perfect showman as always, effortlessly explaining to the new arrivals where they were and what had happened to them. Drifting around with an unreal elegance, flinging himself, flapping and striding, a greasy and ravaged gazelle that somehow, through its morbidity and terrifying looks, kept its grace.

“You are here now! You people, you beautiful people, haha! Listen to me, to meeeeeee,” His lower jaw protruded outwards and the high-pitched end of his sentence turned into a low growl whilst he knelt down. His right leg stuck out almost flat behind him, his left leg crouching and knee jutting forward, in a lunging type stance, pointing at the crowd and holding a microphone to his face.

“We are all here because of one beautiful agent, one bludgeoning member of our race, of time and this universe, we are here to see, to realise a new time of change within all of us and that surrounds us! We have a second chance people, oh yes! It’s like nothing you’ve ever experienced before, haha! It’s an orgasmic ride of gargantuan proportions that will bring you to the brink, but you will, oh yes you will, you will love it! I know it’s been a tough few days and nights, I know you’re not yet ready to accept what you have been toe-el-de-de-de!!!” he jumped up growling once again repeating the end of his last word before landing upright on both feet. Pointing to the sky, looking upwards, eyes closed, he held the microphone to his mouth again.

“But you will understand,” he almost whispered, “We are better now, we are beauty and passion and emotion and rage and hate and love, oh yes love, we are all that makes us truly human!” He stood in silence and a slow clap emerged from the crowd, followed by another, and another until a surprised and overwhelmed applause erupted from the audience.

He shifted his gaze from Mars and looked down at the new crowd, tens of thousands this time, bigger than usual, but as always, in the hands of their maestro. All crawling towards believing in a story that, if explained any other way, would fail to connect. The epic madness had to be played out by one that was bigger than the story to be told, pushed by a being that could sound off the unnerving reality of history.

He continued looking at their bewildered faces and thought at how they were getting better at retrieving them all the time, at pulling them out of the Goo and settling their minds. The confused rabble of the brilliant and the terrifying, from all times and all corners of the once vast Human Dominion, all stood, wide eyed and beautiful, at the foot of the stage, curious and wondering. Waiting to fully understand what there is, now, what their present entails, not realising they are the future.

Not yet fully equipped with the facts, but willing to understand, and at present, encapsulated by the greatest entertainer that had ever existed. He that now exists again, ready to bring his magic to a new version of everything, ready with a second chance to spurt his brain custard over those before him. Full of fire, released at the pinnacle of his career, not caring what he had to perform, as long as he was on the stage. Germany liked him, he had lived as him, but he liked him even more in person. He liked watching him from another angle; he liked not being trapped inside his mind, he like being able to think, without being swamped by his insane

thoughts. He realised he would go mad one day, as he had done in reality, in his original reality, back on Earth millennia ago, and it saddened him, but he still had hope. There's this plethora of others before him, before them both, that will hold a partner for him to help restart the human race, to have a child, to push forth his rabid genes and to make sure humanity reigned once more.

He blinked and looked down at his arm, shifting his focus to his Smartputty wrist band that had begun to glow a soft red. He was instantly brought back to the reality that still existed and reminded that the initial perils of his endeavour were still very much alive. He pulled in from the side of the stage into the dark and looked up, the red glow crawling up his neck, over his cheek and pouring softly into his eyes. Gulping, his heart began to race and he hoped, there was still hope, he knew there was and he griped his fist. As far as he had come, as far as the circumstance of the universe and his fellow humans within it had travelled, there was still hope. The terrifying split seconds of hope that had only yet borne more hope were becoming less frequent, but always retained their gut wrenching ability to inject his very being with absolute fear.

He blinked at the esoteric lights and fixings high above him in the loft of the stage and felt the base of his spine tingle, as if he was about to grow a tail, and sensed his instinct again, he felt his old self trying to claw at the inside of his throat. Digging chipped nails into the walls of his wind pipe and slowly pulling itself free of the emotionally torn body it was currently absorbed by. But he didn't want it, he didn't want the rage, it had passed, he had done terrible things and he wanted his mind back, free of the horror that he had produced in the past.

He kicked his right leg forward, pacing towards a set of stairs in front of him that lead down a hall, concentrating on his wristband and the soft red glow that would soon produce answers. He hit the bottom step running and looked up for a split second to gain his bearings.

Instantly recognising the giant star on the door at the end of the hallway inscribed with ‘MARS’, he gripped his forearm and carried on. Still glowing red he tried to cover it, he tried to mask the colour in futility, he tried to escape the anticipation. The delay was torture, it clawed at his inner being and reminded him of all their difficulty, of all the ones he had lost, the struggle that he faced, the ultimate challenge that he had been brought to by fate, that of reclaiming humanity, starting again.

He kept running, past Mars’ star laden door and right, turning down another corridor, more doors, left and right, passing him by all the while the soft glow of the Smartputty sweeping over him above. Running, but with no destination, trying to escape from an invisible enemy, unsure, confused, a new being unlike his former self, one of emotion, one trying to quell his rage and yet again, on the back foot as he always was when his wrist band grew a red colour.

He continued to grip and smother, waiting for the signal, waiting for the change, pumping his legs up and down, wind rushing over his ears, lungs absorbing, trying to kill the consequence of the red glow and what it might tell him. And in an instant, he changed his mind, he wanted his rage back. He wished he could set his anger free, wished he still had the ability to get through it all with his closest companion, but he knew he could not rely on the solace of his fury any more. The last click of the revolver, on board the King Hinge, had not only destroyed Richard Vortigern, it had taken Germany’s rage over the plateau and into the ravine. The beyond the pinnacle of its’ terrible existence and down, into a fall from which, it would never recover.

A fall he had accepted gladly, and one at the bottom of which he was born into a new light, an era of fulfilment. All the questions he had ever had were answered in that one instance. The absolute height of his rage had shown his fate, he was brought into the universe to save

humanity.

Everything that had ever happened in the history of time itself had revolved around him and his ultimate mission, to resolve and take forward those which could think and feel. But it had left him different, full of sensation he had never experienced before in the first person. A false aura of satisfaction that told him he had achieved what he was meant to, everything was meant to be as planned, but he felt incomplete.

He continued to stomp, closing his eyes and holding his arms out, brushing his fingers along the walls of the hall that surrounded him, embracing their smooth surface, the tactile feedback of skin on putty. He opened his eyes again and quickly gripped the band, trying to quell its still red glow and he could hear the slow build of Mars on the stage. He could almost feel the combined electricity of their minds, he could hear their collective acceptance of what they were being told as he became lost in the labyrinth of corridors behind the massive stage.

He had almost completed his task, he had almost recovered them all from the Goo. He had denied Jack Rawstone the destruction of all, he had brought his fellow man over and beyond the Absolute Tooth, he had laid waste to Richard Vortigerns plans and he had taken it for himself, but it was not all there. He visualised what he was chasing, focusing his minds eye. The one thing that had always eluded him for millennia now, his own personal happiness, he gripped the wrist band and saw her before him, he saw her stood at the end of the corridor. Her soft white flesh, her pitch black hair, her unassuming stance, glowing green eyes and sheepish smile, she looked at him and bowed her head slightly with nerves.

He could feel her warmth as he paced towards her, she was his sun, his power, the final

piece was her love and as the corridor came to an end, as he neared her with reaching arms, she disappeared, dispersing like a smoke before his eyes as she always did, he turned left and kept running. Down another corridor, flush with emotion, chasing, he knew where that happiness lay and he knew the answer would come from the wrist band at any second, a flicker of hope signalling towards whether or not it could ever be achieved. He continued to grip his wrist and sprint down and towards the end of the corridor now in front of him. Pacing along, lost in his mind, lost in the maze of corridors, lost in the erupting sounds of the crowd reverberating through the Smartputty walls, lost from her. Desperately searching and desperate for what he deserved.

He thought he had done what he was meant to, everything that was necessary to quell his being. As he pulled them free of the Goo, settling them on their new home planet, on their new Earth, to start again, the future he had envisioned, the fate that burst into his mind in his moment of complete actualisation. He had cleared his plan with all that existed in a moment of absolute pure thought and he had walked into the King Hinge with firm intent and righteous might.

He was almost complete, but his process was not perfect. The process of releasing them was not an exact science, nothing was exact anymore, after the destruction of all the thousands of years of science. They had to try again, they had to fail again, and in their failure, in his failure, great pain was to be forced with potent fury into his being once more. He had come to realise how to do it, how to nurse them back to health without complete and utter breakdown, without the very walls of their reality falling apart. Without crippling them with the pure and devastating truth of what had happened to them.

The greatest minds that had ever existed, all that were being lived at the time of the end, that fateful day, they were birthing them and showing them the future. He continued to run, left,

right, right again, round the corners, each time picturing her at the end, seeing his beauty, his peace before him and each time she disappeared. He gripped his wrist tighter still, blocking out the red that signified they had lost one during the birthing process, but not yet giving him the answer that he so desperately needed. Whether or not that lost one was her.

Fast feet on the ground, pushing him forward, he let go of his wrist and shifted his arms from side to side, up and down, gaining momentum and speeding his run, turning into a sprint. Powering his determination to catch her, the gift that he deserved that he could see at the end of each hall he ran down. He had taken all, he had saved humanity, he had felt, he had embraced and challenged and beaten the greatest of things, and he was still left incomplete.

He his lungs were on fire, sweat was dripping from his brow, the gripping skin of his bare feet on the floor had blistered and was beginning to wear away as he paced. His stamps leaving bloody footprints with each gallop and he lunged one more time, reaching for that which seemed to endlessly evade him.

He stumbled, over exerting himself, falling forward, his legs still pumping, pushing him almost horizontally as he fell, he was not prepared to miss her, to give up, everything he had fought for. He collapsed into the Smartputty wall and it absorbed him, trying to soften his impact, but he kept pushing. Unrelenting he burst out of the other side, screaming into the air, lungs on fire, legs like coiled springs of might. The putty gave way and sucked itself back into the wall, freeing him. He pushed his hands out as he motioned towards the floor, they absorbed most of the impact as his chin touched to the floor, scraping slightly and he lay breathless, face first, looking into the ground.

He was outside, beyond the maze of corridors, far behind him, by the stage he could still hear the sounds of the crowd cheering Mars. He raised his head to look at his arms out before him, his chest lifting him slightly up off the ground as he panted, gulping the cool air. The wrist band on his arm now glowing green, it wasn't her they had lost, it was another, there was still hope.

Sweat dripped from his brow and he sighed, pulling his arms in, putting his hands down before him and resting his forehead on them, he looked at the ground and listened to the soft awe from the stage behind him. A tear fell from his eye, his mouth dripped, and he licked his top lip, tasting the salt from his sweat. Still panting he rolled over, spreading out his limbs and let the faint breeze wash over him, drying his skin. He blinked rapidly, washing the tears from his eyes, trying to focus and bringing his arms up, he rubbed them with the outside of his arced wrists and cried a smile.

He lowered his arms and rubbed the smooth floor with his fingers, he looked up at the sky, at the Tri-Star system of the planet he had brought them to, he was bringing them to, all of them out of the Goo and to start again and he continued to hope.

He hoped he could explain what had happened himself, what had happened to her and she would know, she would understand. She could fathom what he had done, what he had had to do, the horror that he had to perform, to bring them to this point, and she would forgive him, she would see what he had brought them to. He hoped that with her he could find the answers to the questions he had left. With her, he would be complete, his universe would align and, he would find happiness.

He lay and absorbed the warmth of the stars, he lay immersed in their light and as the distant roar of the crowd in the distance faded and sighed, he looked deep into their purple sky. Their new home, and he heard the soft pat of steps behind him, above his horizontal head, as he lay, looking at the sky, feet facing the wall he had recently burst through. He slowly closed his eyes again and looked inside himself, into the black once more and he thought what Mars must be thinking of him as he lay there. As he lay quivering, snivelling, feet bleeding, emotionally over run with selfish concern of his own happiness. He heard a soft voice, he heard the English accent, the humble tone of a young girl.

“Hello Germany, we’ve a lot to talk about, you know?”

He opened his eyes and a neon blue electrical fork shot across the purple sky silently, she stepped into view and as the sound wave reached them a gigantic boom resonated through their chests. She stepped to his side, kneeling down and picking up his right hand with her delicate fingers she rubbed the back of it against the soft, snow-white skin of her cheek and she smiled.

His eyes flooded and he sat up slowly with the help of his free hand, he nestled his mouth into the top of her neck, at the base of her jaw and he kissed her softly. He moved his face slowly up to her ear, making sure their skin never lost contact and he whispered into her ear.

“I’m complete.”

“I know,” She softly replied.