

Spring 2022

An Attempted Liberation of the Soul

Nicholas Galluzzi
Bard College

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.bard.edu/senproj_s2022

 Part of the Fiction Commons



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-No Derivative Works 4.0 License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/).

Recommended Citation

Galluzzi, Nicholas, "An Attempted Liberation of the Soul" (2022). *Senior Projects Spring 2022*. 149.
https://digitalcommons.bard.edu/senproj_s2022/149

This Open Access is brought to you for free and open access by the Bard Undergraduate Senior Projects at Bard Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Senior Projects Spring 2022 by an authorized administrator of Bard Digital Commons. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@bard.edu.

An Attempted Liberation of the Soul

Senior Project Submitted to
The Division of Languages and Literature
of Bard College

by
Nicholas Galluzzi

Annandale-on-Hudson, New York
May 2022

Dedication:

To my mother, who has always been my foundation,

To my love, both past and future, which had always been my hope,

And to dreams of a clean World Peace in a bountiful and enduring world.

Acknowledgements

Many thanks to Dinaw Mengestu, Laurent Brodie, and my kind mother for their direction and their edit suggestions. Without them, this piece of writing would be a mess of errors.

Table of Contents

Chapter 1: Lost in Fog.....	9
Chapter 2: Bad Decisions.....	20
Chapter 3: Who to Trust.....	34
Chapter 4: Of Gods.....	47
Chapter 5: Reflection.....	58

Chapter 1: Lost in Fog

The air was filled with a thick and oppressive industrial fog as Constant worked. It hung across the workcamp in a uniform haze almost suffocating in its intensity, forcing Constant to breath slowly throughout the day lest he find himself gasping helplessly for breath. Was this fog the work of the Panathema Box and its opening, or was it merely the work of mankind's industrial greed? The answer was beyond Constant's vision. The pun was almost funny.

Constant was busy hauling. It was the job that had been given to him by the Assignment Bureau three weeks ago. He had been visited by one of their agents, in a military uniform, flanked by two soldiers, and taken to the workcamp of the assignment where he had been staying ever since, slowly making his way through his job along with the other thousand or so fog-obscured faces who had been doing the exact same thing. They were all strangers to him, and most were wearing the same Arcane Umbra military uniform as those who brought him here: that of their city state's current military regime.

Given the terrible political situation the city was in, a responsible citizen might try to do more than merely cling to their life and survive, but unfortunately surviving seemed like all that Constant could do or be good for when his horizons were just 3 feet in front of him.

In that sense, he was the same type of garbage as the rotting plant matter he was so busy moving around.

The fog was better now than it had been a few weeks ago, when even the ground and his footing had been obscured. At this point, he could finally see the flat stone ground that he was standing on, and finally see the situation for what it was.

During his first few days at the camp, Constant had questioned why they hadn't been given so much as a wheelbarrow to help them with their work and whether such a tool would help the company complete their assignment faster, but after three weeks he was just thankful for their lack of tools. If there were still things to be hauled around, then the government would still employ haulers, and if they still employed haulers, one of those haulers might still be him, and he'd be able to stay in this job instead of slipping into something worse.

It was still better to be here, than in the smoke-filled cul-de-sac of his former home, where the pollution had gotten so thick that living without sickness had become impossible. This smoggy workcamp, in a ruined city district, was where the new government had put him, along with all of the other troublesome cases. At the midpoint between its valued citizens and its criminals, this was where their military government decided to send those various people who they just didn't want to deal with, through the remains of its legal system or otherwise.

Hauling was his occupation. In the truest sense of the word, he was definitely being occupied.

Or at least, his body was. His mind wandered off, far afield, to sunny skies and open fields where all of the buildings were intact, such distances from his monotonous work that part of him often forgot he was even at this pointless workcamp: particularly the main part of him.

There, he would forget the reality that he had to pull himself, along with the rest of this trash, this broken biomatter and rotting wood, from one end of this yard to the other end for, hopefully, the rest of his life.

In his mind, he was flying through the clear and empty skies of his youth when even the urban landscape was covered with trees, flowers and fruits, rather than the rotting carcasses of

green plant-life that he was now putting away. In Constant's mind, those moments in his work where he'd be allowed to zone out and think of the past, were the only salvation he had left.

Yet surprisingly, despite how often he daydreamed, it was in a moment of rare lucidity, while he was concentrating on his hauling, making sure he wasn't stumbling over the spillage from another person's bag, that he heard the voice of his salvation.

"You ought to get out of here."

Constant had never heard any of the other workers talk in the middle of their shift before, so the voice itself was startling. Glancing around, he couldn't see anybody. If somebody was talking to him, with a voice that unmuffled, their shadow ought to be visible at the very least. The fog which surrounded them had already demonstrated how good it was at blocking out sound.

That voice... Had he just imagined it?

"I mean, in a certain way you did. Telepathic sounds aren't technically experienced, so a person's imagination has to do at least some of the heavy-lifting on that front."

There was a voice in Constant's head. He had reached the point where he was hearing things.

"Yes, to the first one. No to the second one. I mean, as I just explained, you're not really 'hearing' anything. You're really just *imagining* that you're hearing something. The meaning of my words might be coming from me, but everything else is coming right from your head right now."

That wasn't what Constant meant.

“Oh, come on... Let me throw in the occasional comedic misunderstanding to lighten the mood a little here. After all, if I have anything to say about it, we aren’t going to stick with this depressing mood for any longer than we have to.”

So, Constant supposed, this being in his head must simply be the incarnation of his futile desires. How depressing it was, that they’d grown so overwhelming while he wasn’t paying attention, that they caused him to start hearing things that didn’t exist.

“Claiming that I don’t even exist is pretty ridiculous...” the voice continued, responding to Constant’s inner thoughts. “Even if I was just a voice in your head, I’d still be part of existence since I’d still exist as a voice. And for the record, I’m definitely not a thought or mere figment of your imagination, and I’m definitely going to get you out of here.”

Once again, Constant glanced around, but there was nobody there. Only an encroaching screen of misty white, enveloping him from all directions. Suddenly aware of the moments he had wasted, paused in the middle of the hauling route, and the sting of the warden’s punishment for when he arrived late to the drop-off point from this fog, Constant picked up the pace.

He’d have to escape if he wanted to avoid punishment for his time waste.

“Great! To freer pastures we go! The empty sky awaits us! First we’re going to have to sneak around the guards... Then we’re going to have to mask our presence in order to escape through the barrier...”

*He’d have to escape *from this fog and apologize to the warden* if he wanted to avoid punishment for his time waste.

“If you really want to avoid that punishment, the only surefire way is to get out of here. You want to escape with all of your heart, don't you? Well I'm saying that we should try with all of our heart to get out...

Yet it was a matter of life or death against guards who held the power to kill him on sight. He longed to escape with all of his heart, but since the outcome of such an attempt was obvious, wouldn't it just be better to live?

“If it was only you, maybe the outcome would be obvious, but if it's the both of us trying to accomplish it...”

Both Constantine and his imaginary friend? Wow. What a team.

“I told you! I'm not just imaginary!”

Then what exactly are you going to contribute to our escape cause, my 'not-just-imaginary friend'?

“Well a plan, for one. The fog on days like this would be perfect for trying to run away.”

Literally anybody could tell you that. It wouldn't matter though. In a perimeter outside of the worksite, defogging magic was used to make the fog much thinner, and thus wouldn't hide him from the perimeter guards.

“Not if we used a little fog-magic of our own...”

The fog magic that Constant didn't have the ability to perform, and had never learned?

“Just watch.”

And suddenly there was a change in the air, and the fog, which had been moderately thick before, became so dense in the area immediately around Constant, that he couldn't even see the shadow of his hand when he put it an inch in front of his face.

How? Constant wondered. How had this voice managed to casually use fog magic if it was only part of his head?

“Well it’s largely about spreading your mana around an area with a uniform distribution, and then masking and altering it into the shape of opaque gasses. On the other hand, it’s also largely due to my skill in obfuscation and my ability to hide the inconvenient truth, even when it’s in plain sight” the mystical voice explained, as if that was remotely close to answering Constant’s question. He continued though, only giving the minimum information necessary to avoid argumentation. “Suffice to say, this isn’t my only trick... I’m going to get you out of here safely! Trust me!”

The trust that Constant felt was pretty minimal. He didn’t even know what this voice was, and couldn’t wrap his head around what its arrival ultimately meant for him. You only ever really heard one type of story about powerful voices communicating with poor disenfranchised people in this world. Given its lack of introduction, it only made sense to assume that this being was not any sort of god, but given the lack of any other feasible alternatives, maybe it was a divine being.

“Sure. Whatever. For the sake of simplicity, let’s say that I am.”

Of course, to say the least, gods themselves often couldn’t be trusted either. Consider Kriegott, their society’s current God of War and the entity responsible for...

“My god, there's no pleasing you, is there... Look: you have somewhere to be, don't you? If we don't escape soon, the warden will start to question where you are and we'll be searched for. We can clear up this entire question about what I am and whether you want to stick with me long term later, can't we?”

It was true. They'd need to hurry, but now was definitely the wrong time to escape.

"What is it now? We have a solid initial plan, don't we? You trust me, right? I have answers for what to do once we get out as well. But we really need to go before people start to get suspicious."

But the problem was, if a worker like Constant made their escape before dropping their cargo off, then what exactly were they supposed to do with the huge bag full of rotting garbage they were carrying around? A giant pile of evidence to be abandoned in the middle of the path, way too large to sneak out or to hide anywhere on the flat surface that was Constant's hauling route. A hauler could only hope to make a break after he dropped his cargo off, while his bag was empty and while it could be made to hide under his shirt or within his pocket. Anyone could tell you that.

"Uh... Ok. Yeah. Yeah; fine." the probable god said, "But right after dropping off our cargo here, we're going right out, ok? If we delay this for any longer people might start to notice something different about you."

Constant agreed, and with a newfound sense of energy and purpose, he started to sprint forward, towards the shape of the looming free skys which marked out his best life.

...

Constant was in pain.

"Oh; don't worry! We should be almost out..."

Constant was in *serious* pain.

“Well you can still walk, right? The punishment spell they just used on you doesn’t cause you any bodily harm, right? I was paying attention. It only creates the sensation of pain within your body, made to stimulate your pavlovian response and discourage you from defying orders. It’s not like anything could be broken or sore, just from that.”

Constant didn’t know. Maybe his body wasn’t literally dying after that round of severe punishment he got for being five minutes late to the drop off point, but it certainly felt like he was, and frankly, it was taking all of his focus just to keep his feet from falling out from under him at this point.

“*Sigh*. This is why I didn’t want you to go back. If I used my abilities, I’d be able to hide you pretty effectively, even from pursuers, but if you can't even walk any more without noisily wincing, there's not much I can do about it.

Which was really dumb. It seemed that this voice of his was severely underestimating their city's current dictatorship and the sort of pursuers that might be called to come after them once they noticed his escape. Many had tried to escape before, but historically, merely having a god in your corner was never going to be enough to defy the might of the great city of Arcane Umbra.

An article in the paper from some months ago came to mind. There had been pictures of recently caught deserters, hung up for execution, long before Constant had ever been sent to the camps. The new government had been so gleefully proud to broadcast how many people they had caught trying to run away, how powerful and capable these people had been, and the numerous methods which the Bureaus of Pursuit would use to catch them. This mysterious voice in my head hadn’t seen any of those, right?

“Well, I can’t claim to know everything about that, but surely your absence at work would be way more conspicuous than a spare piece of equipment laying around...”

On the contrary, he had existed as just another body within that work camp, unnamed and unimportant. If Constant didn’t show up to the drop off point in a timely manner, the wardens would assume that he was having trouble, or slacking off, or had been pulled over at the pickup point and had been harassed. Rather than searching aimlessly through the thick fog, they would’ve just waited for him to reappear again and punished him then, but abandoned equipment was much easier to track and stumble over. That was the sort of thing he’d actually seen reported.

If a fully loaded abandoned bag was found without his corpse attached to it, they would be tracking his scent, his trail, and his mana within minutes.

“What? So your fellow haulers would’ve ratted on you?” the voice asked, apparently not realizing that they had ratted on others and had gotten awarded for it. “Do you seriously doubt their basic sense of comradery?” the voice continued, apparently not realizing that they had never once spoken to him. “Have you seriously never felt any sort of comradery with them?” It asked, as if it felt ashamed by Constant’s justified caution for the people whom he had never properly interacted with, many of whom wore the same military suits of the new regime, and thus worshiped Kriegott, the new god of war. “I’ve got to ask, was there seriously nobody who you tried to trust?”

Whatever the case, now that the incline of the ground was starting to go downhill, Constant couldn’t help but wonder if they had passed the soldier’s perimeter detection range

yet, and could thus release the incredibly dense layer of fog that the voice had surrounded him with.

“Not yet, and please don’t change the topic. This is incredibly important. Probably more so than escaping in the first place. Putting aside the few haulers you saw in the camp who also had military uniforms, why did you never actually try to befriend or trust anyone!?”

‘What good would it even do!’ Constant thought, red-faced and practically yelling into his mind. What did it matter that he had never relied on anyone to keep his discontent secret and his hatred disguised?! What did it matter that he had no friends to eventually betray him or acquaintances to pick on him and extort him for whatever they thought they could get away with?! To be frank, even if such a trusted soul did exist in the camp, he wouldn’t want to bother them with the burden of that knowledge anyway!

“Well for one, one of those people might have been capable of helping you in the same way that I did...” The voice said, though Constant felt that was kind of ridiculous. “I’m serious: fog manipulation is not some sort of rare and exclusive ability. It comes naturally to people. Statistically speaking, several of your fellow haulers in your worksite must have once learned it.”

But realistically speaking, if someone had the ability to do some magic as advanced as fog-manipulation, they wouldn’t have been sent to such a low security camp in the first place.

“It’s not like it’s easy to check whether someone is capable of such a thing...”

*But realistically speaking, someone with an ability like fog magic would’ve found no use in me as a companion anyway and would’ve already left.

“Think about it this way. Would you have left without the push I gave you? Even if you had the innate capability?”

And wasn't that a point. Embarrassingly, Constant probably wouldn't have. What a confusingly inept state of things for the captors who had otherwise seemed so imposing just a short while ago. In the end, if that was true, it seemed like the structure of their workcamp must've logically maintained itself mainly through fear and it seemed as if Constant had hardly known anything after all.

And that confusion applied to all things. At this point, rather than figuring out the nature of the voice within his head, Constant wondered if he would ever even learn the voice's name...

“You wouldn't want to know exactly what I am. You wouldn't like the details.” the voice confessed as Constant sank deeper into the fog rolling down the hill. “But if you want a name, you can call me Prometheus, and for me it's a matter of pride and gratitude: I'll definitely get you to where you want to go. In fact,” Prometheus intoned, dispelling the fog that covered them in a dramatic flourish, “I think we're out.”

Chapter 2: Bad Decisions

The citystate of Arcane Umbra was once a sprawling mass of great magical trees, sophisticated architecture and industrial districts. Edge to edge had been covered in either homes, facilities, businesses, or dense parkland, all packed together beneath an intense magical shield, so large that it could be seen from space, and considered so potent that even spirits could not get out. Its population was easily the highest in the world. In all respects, it had been a superpower on the world stage and the safest place on the planet.

Yet within the last few years, it had been transformed into a pariah military state, had been bombed flat by fire spells, and finally, had been choked out by the opening of the Panathema Box. To be frank, Constant had no idea as to the full state of his beloved city, though every additional inch of scorched earth and unrecognizable rubble he walked in seemed to lower his spirits further. It almost seemed as though the bombing had never stopped, and that the fog had merely made it too quiet to hear.

Idly, Constant wondered if even the city center, that self important militaristic place he'd never stepped foot in, was also like this. If it was, maybe he wouldn't have quite as much to fear from pursuers.

Yet even within an incredible city like this, there had been dips and sinkholes. Places where the less wealthy had decided to build their houses and live their lives. Constant himself had once lived in one.

What stood before Constant, now that he had made it below the smog, was a similar submerged cul-de-sac, obviously unique, but reminiscent of Constant's own: a circular ring of

homes surrounding a street loop, a convenience store, and the dying remains of a public garden. The polluted fog hung over it all like a long-hanging ceiling, but provided just enough respite to form a sort of bubble of relatively clear, though still foul smelling, air.

“So your district was so similar to this, but the pollution was somehow different?” the voice calling itself Prometheus asked.

Neighborhoods like this existed all over the city, and as far as Constant could tell, it was mostly a matter of geometry whether they truly got choked to death or not by the Panathema pollution. For instance, this one seemed to be abandoned, but was still pretty suitable for squatting, and it was still doing way better than his own neighborhood had been towards the end.

The yellow paint of a damaged house even reminded him of what his own home had been like. The place he’d come back to after the laws changed and his entire company collapsed, back into the arms of his aging mother and father. And where he’d felt stuck for the next several years, distant to the worst of the tragedies happening around them.

Much like his own had been when he’d left, this cul-de-sac seemed to be completely abandoned, though at least a place as pollution-free as this might offer him a moment’s respite to regain his breath and tend to his sore nerves. At least the broken brick and rotting wood of the houses could offer him some shelter. At least he could hide within their shadows, though they scared him so horribly with their potential.

... Scared him so horribly that Constant wondered what he’d even been thinking, planning to hide within such a dangerous place. He had only a small impression of what might be hiding in there, and nothing he thought of would’ve been any good for him to find. Bats,

rotting debris or even fugitives of the law could be hiding in there, and the dark brought to mind mental images of magical monsters as well. Like any other lawful citizen, he should be out in the open, where authorities could help and assist him in case he got attacked, Constant thought, until suddenly everything clicked and the depth of the fact that Constant had now become an outlaw finally sunk in.

He'd been thinking about this logically before, addressing his problems one at a time like in a thought experiment or a drill or a dream. Only now did it finally occur to him that even if the shadows of those buildings did have bats or beasts or outlaws, it was probably safer to hide within them than be out in the open. At any moment, his pursuers could descend from the fog and kill him.

In fact, thinking about things realistically, Constant was probably going to die within the next couple of days. Escaping the city had been a feat for people at the best of times, let alone while under this martial law they'd been living in for the last few months. Blending into or hiding from society would also be impossible, given the sort of magical technology in the government's possession. And it wasn't like there was anything he could do to backstep and avoid criminalization by this point. Arcane Umbra's new government hadn't established a very forgiving system. Suffice it to say, there would be no pardon or return home for him at the end of this adventure, whether he surrendered at the end or not.

Constant didn't regret it. It was easy to convince himself that he didn't regret it, because there was a goal that he was striving for, a goal to accomplish that he thought might make all of the suffering he was about to go through worth it, and a potentially achievable goal too. But despite those anticipatory thoughts, the reality was he'd probably live the rest of his life

desperately and attentively hiding within shadows like these, relying on the full total of his mental facilities, and the full depth of his potential depravity, just for that one moment of completion he was currently working towards.

From now on, he'd be too busy and stressed out to picture the sky once again, even within his own imagination.

That one solace for him, getting cut off, depressed him nearly as much as death itself.

"And that's definitely enough negativity for today," the voice (Prometheus?) said, cutting off that train of thought. "I might worship the God of Reflection quite a bit myself, but there is a time and place for everything. You've logically concluded that we should be hiding within the shadowy interiors of those houses. Therefore, let's do it. Come on. Everything else, including thinking, processing and despairing about our situation, can be done afterwards."

Of course the voice in Constant's head wanted him to forget the horrible situation he'd just been put in without an honest analysis or reassurance... The voice was the one who put him there!

"Constant. I don't know a lot of what we're up against, so I can't promise your safety, your peace of mind, or our success in your goal. But just because we'll be the ones hiding in the shadows, does not make us the bad guys, so you shouldn't despair. The happy moments aren't all behind us yet; our adventure's just begun. No matter what we find in those shadows, and in all of the shadows beyond, I can at least promise you that we will not sink into depravity. We may be outlaws now, doomed to fight against authority, but we will live the rest of our lives with honor, and at very least, you will be able to imagine the sky once more."

It reminded Constant of something he'd heard from his mother. "More than anything, it's the futile obsession with lethal military power that's bringing down our society," she'd once ranted to him in their living room, right after he lost his first job, weeks before his father's death. "It's the worst. In the end, on the battlefield, even the strongest magical paragon will rarely win against a soldier with hatred in his hand. I don't want you to be either. Do something useful with your life instead. When you're looking for freedom, running is the more moral option anyway."

Just because he was going to be an outlaw, didn't make him any less justified here. In the end, even if he did die, he'd be happy with himself for trying this. Hope and adrenaline filling his veins and drowning out his despair, Constant centered himself and walked forward to view the fate that lay before him in the broken house.

He almost vomited. It was a freshly slashed corpse of a soldier.

...

The corpse was symbolic: the reveal that all he would find in this cul de sac, so much like his own home, and the life he had wanted to get back to, was death. The shock of it made Constant freeze and just stand there dumbly in such an intense maelstrom of emotions that the voice in his head didn't even try to interject. He wanted to punch the corpse of the dead soldier. He wanted to punch the manipulative voice inside his head. He wanted to punch the entire government of this city all at the same time, the entire oligarchy of military dictators that

had conspired together to make these injustices uncombatable. Yet most damningly, he wanted to punch himself and the naive part of him who ever thought that life could be simple.

What sense of honor? What virtue could he find in his remaining life as an outlaw, when he'd be the one to create scenes like these from now on, retroactively justifying the government's paranoid oppression. It was foolish to think of outlaws as anything else, wasn't it? Murdering others just to cling onto their own sad doomed life...

"I mean, there are definitely more inhumane ways to kill someone..." that disgusting voice in his head said, trying to loosen his morals. "I mean, even your mother would've known that, for the sake of living, self defense is still important, right?"

Was life really worth living if that was all that remained? What was Constant fighting for anyway? Happiness? Peace of mind? A sense of his place within the world? That was so *him*, wasn't it? Such a Constant sort of struggle. It almost made him sick.

"Look. Do you feel calm enough to start moving again?"

Constant wasn't sure he ever wanted to move again. Why shouldn't he simply imitate the corpse at his feet and fail to move, even once more, for all eternity, and save people the trouble of killing him?

"I mention this because this is, in fact, still a pretty fresh corpse. So we should probably get out of here."

Constant wondered what would be the first to find him if he just laid down forever within this broken, empty room. The soldier's corps members, looking for their dead comrade, or the soldier's killer, probably an outlaw, so much like him, returning to hide the evidence.

“Constant, please tell me that you don't actually want to die right now, right? That despite my words, despite the reality of our situation, you’ve given up *all* hope?”

Yet what hope was there for Constant anymore anyway?

“Constantine, seriously, speak to me! Do you still hope for something better?”

Constantine was beyond hope at this point.

“No. Constantine, for the sake of your mental health, just ignore the context for a second and tell me that you still have hope, ok?”

*Constantine still had hope. Apparently.

“Now speak it out loud. You have the agency.”

CONSTANTINE STILL HAD HOPE.

“Out loud. Open your mouth, and at a modest volume speak the words ‘I still have hope,’ ok?”

Constantine didn’t think that this would help much. Was it even safe to talk?

“If you don't speak for too long, you’ll be at risk of going mute” the voice said, lying in pointless humor, “This is an empty room and we’ve already closed the door. It’s totally different from when we were escaping from the camp. The chances of anyone hearing us right now are *incredibly slim*. Please. It’s for the sake of your mental health. Please just open your mouth and whisper some words to the two of us.”

The expectant tone and awkward silence that followed gave him a sufficient push. It took a second for him to find his voice, which had grown slightly raspy from disuse during his time in and before the work-camp. But finally, he opened his mouth and let out a tiny whisper.

“I still have hope.”

“Repeat it.”

“I still have hope.”

“Specify now.”

“I still have hope that I might complete my goal without killing my heart in the process.”

“Good. Good. Are you feeling better now?” the voice, Prometheus, asked.

“Yeah; just a little.”

“At the very least, we should move to one of the other broken down houses. For the sake of your goal. You can do that, right?”

Constant could, so he got up to leave.

...

Constant hardly even knew what he was looking at when he entered the second house. After the shock that lay in the first house, the serial nature of what lay in the second one, and his lightheadedness while observing it, made it feel like some sort of dream. The windows and broken walls were all covered in furniture and other broken trash in various states of disrepair, likely dragged in from some of the other houses to reinforce the positions of some group here. Unfortunately, the trash pile defenses came short of what you’d describe as a successful barricade, and a particularly gaping hole existed in the roof. But it didn’t look like the defenders here really had to worry about that any more.

There was a small pile of mangled corpses in the center of the room arranged next to each other. The bodies of men, women, and even children formed a sort of ring here that went

up to Constant's frozen knees. In the center of this donut pile sat their likely killer, splayed out in a half consumed pool of blood: a creature. It resembled some sort of massive bat, with a wingspan wider than Constant was tall. Its eyes were closed in a way that appeared to be sleeping, but with the blood and viscera which coated its mouth and its claws, there was no mistaking the creature's guilt here.

Constant had to blink a few times, because a monster like this was not the sort of thing that he could've imagined existing in this city. A monster so large and successful, who had fed on so many innocent civilians, couldn't reasonably have existed here unpursued for even as long as this. The entire city state was crawling with soldiers. No magical monster should've lasted more than a few hours, even if it had found some impossible way to sneak through their city's all encompassing barrier.

And yet, thinking about it carefully while staring intently at this brutal scene, this horrifying bat-thing was probably the one responsible for killing that soldier from before as well. Constant could only make sense of it by imagining the bat monster getting the drop on him.

It was disgusting that a force of evil as obvious as this could evade the city's guards and fearlessly brutalize this household, content to just rest in this gluttonous haze afterwards. It was thoroughly beyond his expectations for what he might find on his journey. But truthfully, more than anything, he was glad to blame this location's travesties on such an obvious monster.

With this, at least he felt just slightly less disillusioned with his role as an outlaw.

“I’m fine. I’m fine.” Constant mouthed to himself again and again upon viewing the situation and quietly backing away.

The fact that something like this was allowed to exist at all, in a city as heavily observed and militarized as theirs was disturbing. Unfortunate. Terrible. The military government had justified itself through the citizen’s need for security, and now Constant got to witness their justification firsthand mere minutes after stepping out of his bubble? This stupid bat wasn’t just killing people; it’s existence where it shouldn’t be was the entire goddamn reason for the whole stupid regime! Constant hated it. He hated this bat-like creature for inspiring that sort of response in him, and proving his mother’s philosophy wrong.

That even a world of perfect logic, without any interpersonal conflict, would need to remain disdainfully militarized because of this modestly sized creature’s existence, inspired a sense of rage like none that he’d ever felt before.

He desperately wanted to kill it. Even at the cost of his life.

“If we could, I’d agree with you wholeheartedly,” the voice intoned, “But that isn’t just your typical bat. For dealing with a magical monster like that, I’m afraid that I don’t have enough militarization.”

Fortunately, that could easily be fixed.

...

The solution was Constant’s idea. By leaving behind the equipment from the fallen soldier in the other house, this giant bat thing had provided for its own defeat. Without that

symbolism, Constant wouldn't be about to try something this illogical and repugnant. Save for his ideological fury, he was precisely the wrong person for this job.

The most important equipment for Constantine was the military uniform.

"It works like this," Constant mumbled to himself, by way of explanation to the voice inside his head. "Essentially, every one of the regime's military uniforms functions as its own separate shrine to the new God of war, Kriegott, and just by donning it and preparing to risk your life in battle, you're giving him worship."

"I see... So this vile thing is the militarization you were talking about," Prometheus considered with an agreeably distasteful contemplation. "And the resulting miracles are consistent?"

"The 'miracles' he blesses you with just provide a framework. Basically, using your own mana, Kriegott allows you to cast a few high complexity spells without ever properly learning them: Soul-rend, Arcane oblivion..."

"All disgustingly and unnecessarily brutal..." Prometheus noted, quickly catching on. "The activation of these must function as his 'prayers' as well, I suppose... If nothing else, he's a disturbingly well thought out god."

Thus, any old schmuck with the correctly tailored physique could wield the power to shoot arcane lasers from their fingertips to directly damage their enemy's soul. As his mother had often said, society's turn towards a barbaric divinity such as this was exactly the wrong direction.

“You’re sure that you don’t count as a god?” Constant mumbled again, as he struggled to pull the suit jacket off of the corpse. Naturally, Kriegott was a jealous one who couldn’t abide by any other worship, so definitive technical clarification was important here.

“I’m not, but I guess that I exist on a similar dimension to some of them.”

In that case, Prometheus would probably need to sever the mental connection the two of them shared for a few minutes, to make room for Kriegott.

“That would be...” the voice started, seeming to wince at what had been proposed, before pulling himself together and displaying sounds of halfhearted agreement. “Yeah; I suppose doing this is the most important thing right now, to clear your mind,” Prometheus agreed, “But I’m not going to have the easiest time reconnecting with you, so you’ve got to return to this building once you’re finished, alright?”

Constant nodded, and with that, he pulled on the military suit.

...

“Welcome Constantine Pyrrhic, new acolyte of war. Now that you have put on...”

Unlike with Prometheus, this voice in his head, the voice of Kriegott, sounded somewhat procedural. Perhaps that was inevitable if you were a god who serviced millions on a daily basis. Eager to be done with this, Constant snuck his way out of the first house and back towards the second, with the corpses and the bat monster.

“... you will be under my protection, as Kriegott, the God of War. You will be granted my powers, powers beyond comprehension, until the time when the suit is damaged or removed from

your frame. In return I expect nothing but complete loyalty. Never again will you dally with another god, live in apathetic peace, or let those who have wronged you off without retribution. When I call you to action, you must be ready. On these fronts, **betrayal will not be tolerated.**"

Regrettably, Constant was starting to feel the mental effects of the 'worship' already, sapping some of his limited mana, but leaving him feeling more powerful anyway by turning his remaining fear into anger and inducing an adrenaline high. The idea of this emotion control was annoying, especially in its very obvious utility in moments like this, but Constant tried to suppress his irritation with it. He had a bat monster to slay.

...

The whole thing happened while the bat monster was still asleep.

Soul-rend was a prodigiously terrifying spell that was capable of instantly killing even the strongest of opponents with a single strike. Capable of deforming the shape of other magical effects. And in a very literal sense, even capable of rending souls and the like in twain, right down to their very conceptual centers.

The 'prayer' was a typical magic casting stance, a tribute of additional mana, and the words 'Soul Rend'.

The gluttonous bat-thing never even properly awoke from its slumber within the blood puddle. With a single hit from the terrifying spell-like prayer, its form was warped and with only a single painful waking scream, its magically produced body was shattered as the monstrous

spirit which had produced the body, and might've been able to reproduce it later, was presumably contorted and rent into pieces as well.

All that was left in the room now was a bunch of broken down corpses and the broken, bloodstained remains of some furniture. The anticlimax made Constant feel a little weird. He moved to leave.

It gave Constant a pretty sizable feeling of power. This was the sort of spell which could have potentially killed Prometheus as well, no matter what he was. In that sense, this could be his one and only chance to rid himself of the misbegotten voice.

"... I notice that you have corresponded with a pestilent spirit within the last 4 minutes, 18 seconds," the voice of automated Kriegott continued. It hadn't actually stopped since he'd put the suit on, continuing to list the many benefits and offer various instructions for when it came to his worship. "This is not technically a violation of our contract, but now that you are one of my disciples, you're not to associate with it, and if you are given the chance, you are to attack it with a prayer ~~#1~~, *Soul Rend*. Otherwise, there will be consequences. Do you understand?"

Constant nodded, having understood.

5 seconds later, having ripped off the uniform pieces with as much spite as he could, Constant finally calmed down enough to feel like his normal, thoughtful, impotent self.

This time, even despite the piddling meal of Oat-fruits he'd eaten that morning, he finally did throw up.

Chapter 3: Who to Trust

“I think it’s situations like that which your mother must have been referring to,” Constant’s best friend Prometheus said. He had returned to Constantine’s head just moments ago, after Constant had stood around in the dead soldier's room for a few minutes. “It’s hard to imagine a deity who is any worse than Kriegott.”

Constant readily agreed. It was why he had abandoned the uniform in the shadows of a dead bush, by the side of the road. Still, the unfortunate reality was that he had needed to use it anyway, just to get rid of some giant bat. So then, who was he to judge its utility to society, if there was no other way to dispose of the monster...

“That’s not the only method that could’ve been used though. It might’ve been the only way to assure permanent destruction, but I’m pretty sure that thing was a Panathema monster, so it must’ve been captured and sealed at some point in the distant past. We’re ill equipped, but a soul rend wasn't *strictly* necessary there.”

Of *course* that was a creature from the Panathema Box. The opening of that artifact just a couple months ago was the greatest crisis of their time. Despite their generation’s own industrial factories, it was still the main reason why the insufferably thick layer of polluted fog that he was walking back into, as he left the cul de sac, blanketed the city. Moreover, it had almost certainly been the reason for his old kind mother’s deadly sickness which had taken her life away just 3 days after the box was opened. “The Box of all Evils” was a pretty fitting name for it.

But in that case, his mother was kind of right! The opening of the Panathema Box had been sold as a military stunt from the very beginning, hadn’t it? A case of government

overreach against all of their historian's most desperate protests, done within a central plaza to broadcast their military victory against the evils of the past as loudly as they could.

Demoralization for the enemy.

The whole thing had been so dumb that it had seemed almost appropriate when the majority of those past evils were revealed to be a form of concealing pollution and homicidal air that killed millions of their own people and which the military had no proper answer for.

In the end, it had been the futile obsession with lethal military power that was to blame once more, continuing the neverending trend of fresh calamities to be visited upon the Arcane Umbra people: military takeover, draft, bombings, internment camps...

"Horrible times like these don't last forever though." Prometheus assured him. "The disasters will eventually let up. Now that so much death and destruction have already passed, this society just needs the strength to pull its discordant elements back together into a proper shape."

Constant hadn't been looking for strength much throughout these crises. He hadn't thought that it would help much, and the obligation to fight was something that his mother had firmly told him that he should avoid. "Do something useful with your life instead," continued to echo. "For the good of society."

Well, the last month had proved pretty definitively that there was nothing useful to do with his life any more. So much so, that he was currently in this situation where he was expecting his life to be thrown away. So why shouldn't he be strong? Why shouldn't he be a bit less helpless if a fight breaks out?

“You seem to know at least *some* advanced magic of your own, Prometheus.” Constant murmured to the voice inside of his head. “Could you teach me anything?” He wanted some non-lethal options for defending himself.

He wanted stuff like the traditional art of Arcane Umbra combat: the noble plant magic where you cause a tree to sprout from the ground and grow it in such a way that it coils around your enemy, restraining them. It was said that the city’s modern founder, Mythious Arcanian, used such a magic to reforge the city from the ruins of the precious capital, and was so skilled with it, that he was the one who had created all of the enormous magical trees which the city had once been known for. The trees which had only recently wilted due to lack of sunlight.

“To be honest, this is the first time I’ve ever heard that tree magic was even possible,” Prometheus admitted. “If you’re talking about non-lethal stuff, I can teach you a method of magic that controls the ground at your feet to sink or rise up to confine you enemy, though in terms of mana cost, it might be a bit too intense to be practical for you...”

Constant was baffled. . “How wouldn’t you know about the existence of tree magic?” he asked. “It’s been a staple of magical combat for at least the last 200 years...” Not even knowing about it... And Kriegott had called him a pestilent spirit... “Prometheus, what are you?”

There was a pause. The voice had already established this as an awkward topic, and Constant could admit that there probably wasn’t a very comprehensive or simple answer as to why some minor god-like figure was acting so personal or chummy with him. But Constant had a dark suspicion in his head, worrying him, and he needed some sort of grounding against it.

“So,” the voice started, and you could already get the impression that it was sweating at what it was about to reveal, “you know about the Panathema Box...”

Constant spontaneously broke out into a headache and stopped his trek up the smog-covered hill.

“It’s really awkward, and I don’t like to associate myself with the other things from within there, but I really should tell you the truth now, so that you don’t end up distrusting me forever after figuring it out on your own.”

Constant’s headache intensified.

“Basically, for every literal monster which popped out of that tiny, magical, extradimensional box, several figurative ones escaped as well, and over the course of the last couple months since it’s been opened, the air of this city has been *rife* with plagues, curses, and exotic particles, *along with* all of that aforementioned air pollution.”

Constant really didn’t want this to be the case.

“Basically,” the voice finished, “Though I have no real memory of getting trapped in there, I’m almost certainly something which recently escaped from one of the compartments of the Panathema Box.”

And there it was! The one thing that Constant hadn’t wanted to hear. A voice in your head starts talking to you asking to be your friend and volunteering to help you in escaping from the city. And then, in the next minute, they reveal that they’re a literal affliction on you, from a box of ancient evils, invading your brain and reading your mind.

“Calling me an affliction right off the bat is a little much, isn’t it?” the voice said, in a soft, self-conscious manner. “I mean, technically I might be akin to a virus, and sure I might’ve been sorted into a rather malignant group by this society’s predecessors, but what pain and suffering have I given to you? I’m trying to be your friend, aren’t I?”

There were several concepts which came to mind when someone thought “virus”. High among them was the idea of a merciless unthinking murder-machine designed through evolution to sneakily impose upon and invade your flesh. If such a machine could speak, there would be no doubt that it would only use language as a tool of deceit and subterfuge. Trusting a virus in any capacity would be nothing but foolishness.

“Yeah; ‘virus’ would be a pretty stupid descriptor for me. Think of me as an earthbound spirit, or technically an alien. That’s probably a more accurate description than ‘virus’ is anyway.”

Disregarding the obvious issue of whether or not Constant could trust this voice to properly categorize itself to him, the idea of housing an alien in his head did not appeal to Constant much more than housing a virus did.

“Look, I’m not a parasite if that’s what you’re worried about. I mean, maybe under some definitions, but I’m not sucking out nutrients or anything from your brain and body, nor am I killing or reproducing through your cells, or creating a tumor or anything like that. I’m just borrowing some of your excess brain matter to live in and some of your mana for my soul to think with. Not enough for you to miss. No more than 10% of what’s being produced so far, I promise.”

Disregarding how there was no reason for Constant to believe any of this stuff, what exactly did excess brain matter even mean here?

“ Do you really want to hear it? It’s pretty screwed up, but you wouldn’t believe how many separate parts of your brain existed only for the purpose of sabotaging other parts. The part I’m inhabiting right now was basically just on a constantly active loop that continuously

says 'everything is hopeless' repeatedly. All of the surrounding parts are trying to isolate it from the rest of your brain. When it comes to mental spots like this, I don't usually consider my occupancy to be too much of a problem."

It was rather depressing how this part of the explanation was probably the most believable part so far. He'd fallen to despair more times than he could count, even before the point where his father had disappeared after a government protest, years ago.

"What motivation do you even have for helping me get out of here then?" Constant murmured, as he started walking up the hill once again. "If I'm alone, is it easier for you to kill me? Is that why you were so eager for me to break out?"

"Is benevolence really not a sufficient motive?" the voice asked, "Well, it was also because the mana you were missing would cause you to be treated suspiciously, and anybody who was magically viewing your soul could've easily noticed how I've been attached. And then they'd probably hand you over to your government to start doing experiments with the goal of finding out what exactly I am without placing your survival as much of a priority. If you went on the run, like you had wanted to do, deep in your heart, at least your death wouldn't have been due to me."

Constant took a moment to pause and catch his breath from the uphill climb. The voice of Prometheus was probably full of shit, and might even be malicious and trying to lead him to his death, but the unquestionable truth was that Prometheus was also the only person who he could even theoretically trust right now. Moreover, even despite the elevated risk and hopelessness he felt, Constant didn't regret his choice to run away. It was too late to turn back. Whatever a partnership with Prometheus was, Constant was already all in. And even if he did

die at the end, the last hour had proven that maybe he could do some good for the world regardless, before he kicked the bucket.

To service towards that, Constant decided to learn the ground manipulation magic.

“Well, if you want to work your way up to that, the best way is to start practicing with...”

...

Constant was still climbing back up from the cul de sac, and still practicing how to move a pebble around in his hand magically, when Prometheus sensed something just slightly off of their intended path, and enticed Constant to inspect it.

“I think it’s a living person,” Prometheus revealed, “and not a threatening or dangerous one either. You should go and talk to them, they might be nice. It’s good to talk to people outside of your head every now and then.”

He hardly needed the recommendation, suspicious as the voice had made it. After his encounter in the ruined cul de sac, Constant wanted some human company regardless.

When he found her, she was sitting at the entrance of a drainage pipe, a huge circular hole, outlined by rust-proof metal, with an opening that was at least as large and wide as he was tall. It seemed as if she had dragged away some planks of varnished wood as a stand-in for floorboards, or more likely, perhaps she had created them with tree magic. That, and the mostly intact furniture and quilts she’d managed to drag into her metal hole, had made the entire location look shockingly cozy and inviting.

Though maybe she had made the quilts as well, considering how she was knitting when he arrived.

The first thing that struck him upon seeing this woman was just how young she was. She had the sort of youth that gradually filled you with hope, seeing a child with the prime of their life ahead of them, who had managed to prosper in this world, to some extent, even before that point. It left Constant with an intense sense of relief for the state of the future in realizing that the young girl would probably exist within it, right here within this pipe, or in some other cozy place like this one.

The girl, it seemed, was also appraising him. Looking at the ground-magic he was still idly practicing in his hand, that he awkwardly stopped once her eyes roamed to it. Perhaps looking at his dirty white internment garb, or the slight shaking of his hands in a mixture of ever present exhaustion and nervous energy.

“Young.” She finally concluded. “You’re surprisingly young. Much more than the others I’ve seen.”

He disagreed. Constant was not young. Not like her. Unfortunately, his life had peaked years ago and was finally nearing its end. Her generation, hopefully, could live on with truth and peace in their hearts after his passing.

“I suppose you’re trying to escape from the work camps as well?” she queried.

“So there *have* been others?” Constant muttered. Knowing that his path had previously been charted was an encouragement all on its own. Even if they were all likely dead by now, like he would soon be. It was an unfortunate reality for Constant to reveal to someone so young. “I am someone who's trying to escape; yes.”

“There have been several others. Runners. Mostly from the workcamps.” The young woman revealed, and hearing her remarkably clear voice made her seem even younger. “Strong and experienced men mostly. There’s been a steady stream of them over time, desiring for nothing more than to fight for their liberation. Apparently there’s a whole organization that hopes to overthrow the government. Sometimes a few of them come back to check on me and make sure that I’m alive and tell me to point any others who stumble across this place in their direction.”

“And which direction is that?” Constant murmured, at a loss for words at the small, soothing angel that had waited in this broken down pipe just to meet him. She pointed down at one of the other broken down pipes in the area. This one was haphazardly covered by a pothole. So she meant to say that there was a rebellion hiding in the sewers?

“Right under this government’s feet, apparently...” Prometheus spoke in jovial humor from within Constant’s head. “If that’s true, so much for the terror of the Arcane Umbra government.”

Yet, jokes aside, it did still make sense to Constant, in a way. The sewage/waste systems of the past, had always been the home of the gangs, the homeless and the outlaws. Its designers had made it large due to its purpose as a dump for storing all of the rotten plant matter, the characteristic feature of the city’s famous tree magic. Thus, its wide, dark and slop-filled tunnels had attracted all types of undesirables hoping to escape prison. Moreover, even towards the height of the military’s power, there was never any news about the sewers finally being safe. If Constant went down there, maybe he’d even find someone like minded. Someone

who, despite the hatred of society, could survive right under their nose. Constant might even find a solution to living in this world...

“I don’t know...” Prometheus commented from inside his head, as if he thought of something particularly funny, “This whole thing about stepping into the sewers smells a bit odd to me...”

This comment was, of course, made by a being who did not have a nose, and was thus unaware that the passive smell of this city’s smog was roughly equivalent to sewage air all by itself.

“Smells aside, if you want to hide from or resist a military force, I don't think that a series of narrow pipes would be a particularly good place for us to do it from. We’ve been surviving off of my mist magic recently, and outmaneuvering people like that doesn’t work nearly as well in tight spaces, does it? Moreover, your goal is to see the sky, isn’t it? Hiding underground seems pretty antithetical to that.”

Realistically speaking, the only way that Constant would ever be able to see the sky in this current day and age, would be to escape the city first; an undertaking so impossible that gaining powerful allies would merely be the preparation necessary to have a chance.

“I wouldn’t be so sure about escaping the city being the only way to see the sky. I’ve got a pretty good idea for that myself.” Prometheus replied, but he never got the chance to talk.

“You’ve been silent for a while now...” the girl said, pulling Constant out of his head. “Are you ok?” At Constant’s sheepish look, as if by telepathy, she seemed to catch onto something. “Were you communing with a god, or something?”

“O-or something.” Constant agreed. The girl was definitely incredibly beautiful. Distractingly so. The smooth curl of her oily hair and the slight sliver of her neck, visible just under her scarf, could’ve been art for the level of emotion it drew out of Constant.

He’d previously made the resolution to keep his mouth shut about the existence of Prometheus as an act of loyalty towards the disembodied voice, but now admiration won out. This young girl seemed too innocent and in a world of heavy propaganda, Constant could not gather up the maliciousness needed to lie to her. He decided to reveal everything.

“Actually, I’ve recently been hearing a voice in my head, insisting that they’re not a god, but which has been motivating me to follow my heart and escape.” Constant explained, to Prometheus’ audible, betrayed puzzlement.

“A spirit partner all to yourself, huh?” the girl mused in a lazy response. “I can see the benefit. It would be a bit like a god who always responds to your confessions.”

“But he’s been called a ‘petulant spirit’,” Constant specified, “And he described himself as a virus once, and then an alien, so I’m wondering...” Constant added on as the voice’s annoyance passed over him as a wave, causing him to slow down, “if I should... maybe be...”

But he didn’t finish.

“I don’t see what the problem is, personally.” the girl interrupted, “Whatever this voice used to be matters less than what they’re doing right now. And its current incarnation can’t be all bad. After all, it’s been giving you confidence in yourself whenever you speak to it, right? I can tell by your expression.”

“Yet he’s literally admitted to being from the Panathema Box!” Constant protested, “Sealed away for crimes unknown! And now I’m basically at his mercy...”

“Well, he admitted it though, right?” the girl remarked “He probably didn’t need to either; he could’ve probably pretended to be a god or something else, but instead he resisted the practicality of a lie, it dispelled your illusions. And you’re saying that it’s bad how you’re at his mercy, but for as long as that’s been, hasn’t it just been proof that he doesn’t want to hurt you?”

It was a good point. “You want to switch hosts?” I asked, to Prometheus within.

“And abandon you in your hour of need?” the voice joked, “You need me way more, so I’d rather stick with you.”

“As for how weak you feel, at his mercy, well, that’s just the story of our generation, isn’t it?” The girl finally finished. She had a gentle smile that took Constant’s breath away. “But if you do want something to be done about this voice, the revolution is your best bet.”

“Thanks.” Constant exclaimed, with a genuine smile, “but there’s something I’d like to try first,” referring to the idea that Prometheus had been interrupted from explaining. And then, because he meant it more than anything else, “I hope I can come here again!”

The girl’s smile lost a bit of its light as they left, and Constant followed the voice’s direction with a renewed sense of faith.

“I guess you like her.” the voice in Constant’s head murmured as they walked, as if that mattered.

“I’m too old for her though.”

“The two of you didn’t look very different to me. If she’s somebody whose youth grants her lots of potential, you should probably fall into that category as well, if you take care of yourself.”

Constant continued walking, deliberately trying to ignore Prometheus's ridiculous opinion.

There was a moment of silence.

"You don't think that she might've been sending you into a trap, down that pipe, do you?"

Constant wondered what form of logic could possibly justify suspicions like that.

"I mean, despite the fog, her presence within the pipe isn't very well hidden. Nor is it very well defended. If the military is really as scary as you keep saying that it is, it seems pretty unlikely that they don't know about her. And considering how openly pro-rebellion she acted, you can't help but wonder if she'd been deliberately placed in front of that tunnel, as a way to funnel those with revolutionary sentiments into a single direction."

Being there, and hearing this, Constant couldn't help but wonder if trusting this viral slanderer with the idea it had, was a moment of poor judgment.

"Maybe I should be learning fog magic rather than ground magic." Constant suggested, so that he wouldn't have to rely on the voice so much going forward. "I don't think I'm doing very well with my ground magic anyway."

"Nonsense! You've got an incredible talent for ground magic! Maybe because grounding is so important to you. Give it a week of supervised training, and it'll become a remarkably useful skill!" But Constant was adamant. "I suppose it wouldn't hurt to start it though since it's such a simple and useful spell."

And upwards Constant climbed, learning all the way.

Chapter 4: Of Gods

The hill, it turned out, was higher than Constant had originally thought. Again and again Constant would need a moment to stop and catch his breath, but again and again, Prometheus would continue pushing for him to reach for the top.

Eventually, the hill maintained its relatively steep incline for long enough that it was easily recognizable as Temple Hill, and Constant felt the need to put his foot down. Surely there would be people near the top of this historic landmark, and he'd get caught if he tried to go any further, despite the voice's assurances that it could sense other life forms through the fog by detecting their heat, and that this particular area was remarkably empty.

Arriving near the top, and realizing what sort of debris he was stepping on, Constant couldn't help but realize why. It seemed that the entire place had been wrecked. Shards of temple marble littered the ground significantly before the elevation even started to level off. The top of this hill, which had previously stuck out like a sore thumb upon the face of the city, had been blasted to bits, and the Temple of Manyfold Gods had been destroyed.

Thinking about it, Constant realized that this wasn't so unexpected either.

"But if you go to such a high elevation, you'll have the possibility of looking above the pollution clouds and seeing the sky, right?" Prometheus pointed out, and Constant finally understood his logic.

Despite the uncomfortable chill to the swirling air, it gave him a sensation of undeniable warmth to realize that Prometheus actually was on his side with this.

And indeed, upon reaching the blasted summit, the smog was slightly thinner, and Constant found that he could see for many meters in front of himself without assistance, yet still, he could not see the sky.

Constant dropped to his knees, like so many before him had in this place, and let out a futile prayer. The defiled bricks of marble would not respond, and the shrines which had littered this place had all lost their function, along with their forms. There was no hope for an answer.

But if only one of them could respond, and could help him, by just reducing the smog above him enough to properly see the sky, they would hold the sum total of his worship for the rest of his short life.

“After all of the trouble I’m going through for your sake, your life better not be short,” said Prometheus, his friend and hope, “And I’ll be fine without your direct worship for this. I’m not a god after all.”

Constant’s heart leapt in amazed awe as the smog around him shifted away, and a wide tube of fresh air, from the top of the small mountain, extended into the sky.

Prometheus deserved prayer for this. He really, honestly did. A display like this was incredibly impressive. Just the ability for Constant to, momentarily, breathe clear air was a type of miracle all on its own.

This funnel of clear air, Prometheus’s greatest gift to Constant, was sublime, and for a second, it almost distracted him from his mission: the only action he could still do that would let him find purpose. How embarrassing would it be if the opening that Prometheus provided was so amazing that he didn’t even make any use out of it?

Most easily spotted through the funnel of de-fogging magic, was the city's magical red dome of translucent barrier magic which represented its boundary; the force which protected the city from the very worst of its enemy's magical assaults, yet would also render almost any escape attempt pointless. But that was fine, given how it was largely transparent, and offered little more than a filter to the view that lay outside of it. The smog didn't naturally extend above the barrier either, so beyond that, the sky definitely should've been clear.

No, the real problem, that hadn't even occurred to Constant upon making the request, was the time.

"Dammit! It's still daylight!"

"What's the problem? Isn't this what you wanted to see? All of your best memories are about looking at the city and its sky in the daylight..."

"Is it possible for us to stay here, or for you to maintain this for another... 3 hours?"

Constant fumbled out as a request, after looking at the position of the sun. "This view is useless to me right now."

"No?" Prometheus seemed to speculate before regaining certainty, "We'll have to be firmly gone by then. A widespread defogging spell like this would've definitely attracted the attention of observers from all over the city."

"But if it's that dangerous, then why would you risk our lives to bring me here anyway?"

"Weren't you the one who kept going on about how looking at the sky was the sort of goal you'd be willing to sacrifice your life for?"

“The *night sky!*” Constant specified. “I need to look at the *night sky!* I just... I just need to check something important for my own peace of mind. Something which would make the difference between whether I have regrets in this life or not...”

“Whatever the case, we need to move. I think that I’m starting to sense people climbing up the mountain. They’re probably our pursuers.”

“But... I mean...” Started Constant, glancing longingly upwards at the huge tunnel of clean air that Prometheus had created, stretching into the sky, “If you’re so powerful that you can do this, and you know of so many other abilities, do you think that maybe we’d have a chance at defeating them?”

“Not against this many.” Prometheus clarified, “And I’d try to convince you to run from them, even if I could. I mean, is whatever you’re trying to do really worth murdering so many people?”

It probably wasn’t. He mustn’t have been in his right mind when he thought that up.

With a deep breath of fresh air, Constant took off, back down the mountain, covered by a thick smog to mask his presence, and instructed by the voice inside of his head on where to run in order to go around and to narrowly miss their enemies.

...

After a few minutes of that sort of frantic action, Prometheus was proud to inform him that they were out, no longer surrounded, and seemed to have given their pursuers the slip, allowing Constant to take a small breather before continuing.

“We really need to escape this general area though,” Prometheus insisted, “With the type of magical strength I displayed, they’re going to see us as a threat and will probably take this whole thing very seriously. Honestly, at this point, going underground doesn’t seem like such a bad idea after all.”

Constant also wanted to crawl into a hole somewhere and rest for a bit after all of that. “But wait...” he said, “If these soldiers check the entire area, isn’t the girl in danger too? Where is she?”

“Her pipe is towards your 3 o’clock, about a thousand and two hundred feet down from us.” Prometheus responded, “But I’m sure she’ll be safe regardless of what we do. I really can’t imagine our enemy having been unaware of her existence.”

Constant felt as if that was a little callous, despite understanding the logic.

“We may as well go in her direction anyway though,” Prometheus quickly added. “It’ll probably be easier to use one of the sewer entrances there, than to rummage around the rubble for one here instead...”

With a nod from Constant, they left.

...

The girl frowned at him in concern when Constantine returned. He couldn’t tell whether or not it was the expression on his face which gave away that he had inadvertently called soldiers to the area. Whether that concern was understandably, purely for herself, or whether

some of it was for him. It seemed as if she knew what had happened, or was he just imagining things? Had the soldiers contacted her first before scaling the mountain?

“Sorry. I did something stupid and now there are a bunch of soldiers in the area, chasing me,” Constant revealed anyway, in case she didn’t know.

She nodded solemnly, and Constant wasn’t sure what that implied, though it warmed his heart anyway. “Thank you for giving me a head’s up,” she said. “It’ll give me a little extra time to pack up before running.” But she didn’t seem to be in much of a nervous rush as she started folding her cloth.

“You’re going to...” Constant led with, pointing.

“... To hide at the back of my storm drain pipe, yes.” the girl confirmed. “It goes really deep and forks off into a bit of a maze by the end. I know the way, so I’ll be fine there.”

The idea that this girl would be forced to hide deep within the damp darkness of her pipe, all alone, hoping not to get caught, all because of him, didn’t sit right in Constant’s head. In a way, it almost made him wish that there really was a betrayal, just so that such a young woman wouldn’t have to suffer through hiding herself away.

“Could I stay with you and help you?” Constant finally asked. There were excuses now, so he no longer felt bad about voicing his desires.

The girl glanced at him in a judgemental way for a second, as if trying to read something about him, before asking in return, “What types of magic do you know?”

Constant didn’t bother speaking up. He only knew the very basics of the basics. Probably nothing that would be of any help to her. Being her companion was a no, then. Mourning the

possibility, instead he asked, "I've been looking and wondering, the wooden boards you use look really new. Do you use tree magic? I could never figure out the basics of it myself."

"Well, it's not that surprising that someone as young as you doesn't know how to use it," the girl mused. "It's one of the most complicated types of magic, after all, given how it involves the magical creation of living processes. People first need a pretty mind-numbing amount of knowledge to figure out how everything in a plant works, and then they need a pretty baffling amount of control in order to execute it properly within a timely manner."

While she was speaking the girl finished picking up all of her cloth before putting her hand to the wooden floorboards below her. With a suppressed pulse of what he recognized as rot-magic, Constant watched as the girl reduced both her floors and her furniture to mush in order to hide it from prying eyes.

"Unfortunately, on a broad scale, I'm not very good at tree magic," the woman continued. "Creating fresh floorboards is easy but trying to restrain someone by quickly growing a tree around them mid-combat is far beyond my expertise, as is that famous technique where you generate trees capable of granting you mana at a faster rate than you're expending it, and pull yourself into an infinite loop. People who can do stuff like that are heroes."

"Well I'm definitely not a hero then..." Constant confessed.

"Nobody would expect you to be," she reassured him as her parting words before disappearing deeper into her tunnel, leaving behind nothing but a warm feeling and a pipe full of rotting plant matter; the remains of her home.

The fact that this was the same substance that he'd spent almost a month dragging back and forth across that workcamp, until he had escaped just a few hours ago, gave him pause and prevented him from following her as she ventured out of sight into her deep tunnel.

With any luck, she'd be ok.

"If she really isn't with the army, that amount of sludge stuck inside a drainage pipe rather than the sewer would be a clear give-away that she's here." Prometheus mused. "Do you want to try quickly cleaning it up before we leave?"

Constant did.

...

The pothole they'd be fleeing into was essentially a small pipe, sticking a few inches out of the ground, and nestled amongst a bunch of other partially deformed pipes in a rare section of ground on the side of the hill that was not covered by the burnt debris of fallen buildings. It had been the one that the girl had pointed to earlier.

"It definitely looks as if it might've been used recently," Prometheus observed, "Rebels or not, this certainly leads to somewhere inhabited. It's not too late to turn back and try our hand at avoiding our pursuers from within the fog."

Constant didn't know how much longer they could press their luck, exposed on the surface as they were, before the city would send scent tracker magicians after him, and they'd be instantly found. The sewers, for a number of reasons, were their only feasible option here.

"There's a scent-tracking magic now?"

There was.

“Capable of tracking down our smell from within this smelly fog?”

It would definitely be capable of that.

“Back in my time,” Prometheus mused, “we’d never even conceptualized such a thing.”

Constant was already pulling the manhole cover off of the metal reinforced hole, the standardized slab of hard, condensed iron offering weighty resistance that would’ve been unfeasible to get through, had ease-of-use not been a central feature of its design.

“This’ll probably delay our exodus from the city though, won’t it?”

Constant knew enough about the sewers to know that they even stretched to the city limits. With any luck, he could travel through the pipes towards a place where he could see the sky.

“Sorry,” Prometheus confessed. “I just really think that this is a bad idea.”

The voice in his head didn’t trust the girl, so Constant supposed that his view made sense, but the voice still needed to adapt to the point where he gave other people a chance.

Carefully, Constant lowered himself into the sewer pipe, trying to avoid any sort of nasty slip or fall that would bruise his old bones.

“Your age has nothing to do with it,” Prometheus scoffed. “It’s only reasonable that you’d try to be careful while descending into the dark unknown.”

And descend they did for the next few minutes, until Constant’s hands started to feel a bit sore from gripping so tightly to the harsh texture of the cold metal railing. After just a few minutes, he was already exhausted, but finally they reached a sort of antichamber at the bottom. Dark as it was, through the barest sliver of lumination that remained, they could still

see how it was filled to the brim with all sorts of shattered garbage and plant matter in various stages of rot.

Despite how depressing it sounded to admit to it in his head, Constant would probably be taking all of the remaining meals of his life from within the garbage around here.

“Surely not!” Prometheus argued. “Didn’t you say that people lived here? What did they eat?”

The people who had lived in the sewers had apparently spent most of their time eating from the more edible bits of plant matter here themselves.

But Prometheus seemed confused. “Isn’t this city famous for its plant magic? Couldn’t some magicians create some basic farms down here? It could just be fungi and the like. It’s too dark for anything else.”

The government hadn’t done anything and almost nobody who actually knew tree magic wanted to. There had been only a handful of volunteers. It had been pretty stupid in hindsight. If the sewer dwellers had access to some basic amenities through professions other than theft and scavenging, maybe they could’ve integrated themselves into society, and if a peaceful solution had been more seriously proposed maybe it would’ve been harder for the culture to take as sharp a turn into militarism as it had. Maybe people were just like that though and this whole conflict was just inevitable.

“If I’d known about this situation, I for one, would’ve definitely volunteered to grow those farms.” Prometheus insisted. “Maybe, once our trip is done, we can find someone to teach us some basic plant magic, and fix this place up for ourselves.”

Nice as that made him sound, it was a little odd that Prometheus would care so much when he wasn't even the same species of people who would benefit from the fix.

"It's perfectly logical for me to care!" Prometheus argued. "Though I might not be dependent on any sort of food, I am highly dependent on people like you to stay alive myself."

"But, if you were considered a monster evil enough to be trapped in the Panathema Box, how come your motives are supposedly so benevolent?"

Prometheus seemed to grin as if this explanation would reveal an object of great pride. "Before I became trapped, my intentions weren't all benevolent. Without a doubt, I was definitely a malicious asshole, with almost the exact same character that you had attributed to viruses a while back. However, as I sat there imprisoned for millenia in my own separate compartment, with only rarest and most miniscule interaction with the outside world, desperately looking for stimuli or interpersonal interaction of some sort, I finally came upon the memory of a very particular god that one of my hosts used to worship. The god with the simplest shrine requirements of them all.

"I became who I am, thanks to the God of Reflection."

Chapter 5: Reflection

The existence of gods had, in all likelihood, predated the biological bodies of humanity in some form or other. They were remarkably simple entities: mere spirits of extraordinary size, of a similar construction to the soul, but existing beyond humanity's plane of the 5th dimension, and not tied to anything earthbound either.

Instead, as an object of purpose, they would float around intangibly, connecting to the souls around them and earning small amounts of gratitude and worship, that natural currency of the spirits that was siphoned off of the flesh of one, and onto the flesh of another. Though perhaps primitive gods may have done so by force.

In these sorts of ways, gods became mighty.

Gods claim to have created the world, but barring religious fanaticism, this wasn't widely believed. Yet the existence of a world certainly changed the gods and benefited them. Previously, it was thought that they sent out tendrils to connect to each other across short distances of 5th dimensional space, but now was the age of shrines and inter-transcendental communion. Humans could contact whichever god they liked, and as long as the suitable definitions for worship were given, and mana (that other expression of the soul) was offered up in the bargain, the god would theoretically answer.

"Here" said Prometheus, drawing Constant's eyes to an area of trash on the ground.
"Use this mirror shard to connect with divinity."

Yet as convenient as contacting divinity was in this epoch, Constant still thought that this was a bit too ridiculous. He couldn't even see the mirror shard in question. It was too dark.

“Do you want me to make you a light?” the voice asked, missing the point. Hadn’t Prometheus been the one to instill how dangerous it was in here? If it was just a matter of creating a light, obviously Constant knew how to do *that*. But they were trying to be stealthy weren’t they?

With a twist of his soul and a wave of his hand, a tiny mote of light, like a small unusually bright firefly, floated out of Constant’s arm, along with seven others, quickly spreading across the sewer chamber and lighting it up.

“Didn’t you say that you were a complete beginner at magic?” Prometheus asked disapprovingly, as if he was disappointed in Constant for some perceived lie.

“I did,” Constant verbally responded, in a whisper. “But life skills like these *are* complete beginner stuff. They don't let you out of school until you can at least light up your own room and conjure your own drinking water.”

“Well if this was part of your education then you’ve been more blessed than I realized. Basic skills like these are hardly ever taught.” Prometheus commented. “Though it explains how you could pick up the fundamentals of ground magic so quickly.”

“My education was completely standard, so I don't really know what you’re talking about.” Constant rightly insisted. “Is your frame of reference off? I understand that Arcane Umbra has a particularly good educational system, but it would be pretty hard to believe that the old empire didn’t even teach its citizens basic practical life skills.”

“Knowledge of magic was pretty guarded.” Prometheus affirmed. “If you could control their water supply, that was just another way in which you could force other people to rely on you. Knowing any magic at all used to be a source of fabulous pride.”

“Yet apparently they had an easier time sealing up ancient evils and polluted air than we did.” Constant mumbled disparagingly, referring to the Panathema Box his partner, as well as most of the city’s smoke, had been trapped in until recently.

“It had been a big public works project, even back then.” Prometheus mentioned. “That sort of thing used to be pretty common, though they were almost always unpopular for the generations that needed to work on them.”

So ultimately, it seemed as if the continuing Panathema Box crisis was political. Of course the city was incapable of banding together and sealing the evils back into one place again: they were at constant pointless war right now.

“Whatever the case, since your basic ability for magic is so much better than I thought, that’s all the more reason for you to meet this god. You’ve got enough visibility now, right? The mirror shard is right there. Pray towards it for a bit.”

Yet Constant couldn’t help but frown at the idea that there was a god being recommended to him that used literal broken mirror shards as their objects of worship.

“It’s not the mirror’s state of being that matters here. Just that you can see yourself through it. They may not be very mainstream, but this is an incredibly useful god to worship.”

Constant held up the mirror shard obediently, but frankly, he wasn’t sure that he wanted to trust any sort of god at this point.

“Trust has almost nothing to do with it. Reflection was intended as a shell god from the beginning anyway. A service without consciousness. If you talk to the god of reflection, you’ll just end up talking to a copy of your own mind anyway; an intended feature by those who invented him.”

Constant glanced at the mirror shard and tried to connect his soul and mana to whatever transcendent frequency it was giving off, but after half a minute of seriously attempting this to no avail, despite engulfing it completely,, he determined that it was impossible.

“Meditate more deeply, with all of your soul. You really need to push yourself here. This god doesn’t have enough of a mind to connect with you yourself, and beyond the framework of its abilities, it isn’t very strong, so unlike communication with other divine figures, you’ll have to do all of the work here.”

Constant looked again at the tiny ordinary shard of mirror that would supposedly connect him across extradimensional space to the voice of this unconscious god, and had some understandable doubts.

“While trapped inside the panathema box, I was capable of contacting the god of reflection with even less,” Prometheus insisted. “Viewing what little physical form I have with just the shimmering of a conjured metallic sand grain.”

‘So why aren't you capable of doing it too’ was the next question, Constant supposed. Giving it another full-effort try, Constant grit his teeth and closed his eyes at the strain, eventually opening them once again to gaze directly at the sad and gaunt face that reflected back at him.

Why did this man in the mirror have to go through so much pain, part of Constant idly wondered. Why had he needed to do that demanding physical labor, day after day, for a meal that he rarely had the stomach to finish anyway, cleaning up the messes from other people’s

battles when a professional would've been capable of clearing the entire worksite up in mere minutes had they used magic, or less than a day, had they used modern machinery...

Why did he have to be born in such a tumultuous time, during the death of democracy, the endpoint of idealism, the start of a massive coalition war against his nation, and the opening of any ancient box of evils whose contents made him continuously choke on the very air he breathed?

Why still, did he suffer, as a mysterious voice who called itself Prometheus pushed him into doing tasks which he had no hope of completing? Who calmed his many suspicions with mere unsupported platitudes and cheap vows of allegiance. Who puppeted him around on strings of advice, leading him into progressively worse and worse situations, until the point where he'd inevitably collapse.

Was all of this due to his own character flaw, Constant wondered? Were his dreams and ambitions to blame? Was it his inability to confront the problems in the world around him? Or was the voice inside his head that felt so inescapably bitter about his life the real villain, in the end.

He wondered, for a second, if a life of suffering and toil would be better than death.

The next time he could pay attention to the world in front of his eyes, it was as if he'd been swallowed by the mirror fragment, and now, instead of their sewer, he was standing within an encompassing backdrop of shattered glass, its many faults and non-reflective ridges colored in a stark black, mimicking the intensity of the stars in the sky, with the mirror itself glowing a very faint blue.

In front of him, he saw the sad, gaunt face he had glimpsed in the mirror shard, but this time, it was accompanied by the thin rag-covered mess of his body. Surely it was an illusion, but Constant couldn't help but recoil slightly at the image. The doppelganger in front of him was frighteningly built, with his pathetically bruised and depressed head sitting upon a set of shoulders wider than he'd ever known he had. This, along with his small malnourished waist and his long legs were all corded with a thin malformed type of muscle that had never been there before. Yet it was the wide-eyed terrified stare that he had which startled him the most. In a way, Constant did still look a bit adolescent, though he refused to be fooled. It was easy to see that his hair was already starting to gray and whiten, showing his true functional age and the results of his previous lifestyle.

Frankly, this mirror image didn't look like him at all. There was so much wrong with it. Hadn't he considered himself average before? Just one of the average workers within that work camp? Compared to that average, he looked malnourished, like he wasn't getting enough to eat, despite often losing his appetite in camp before he could finish. He looked hardy in a way that he would've never expected his body to appear just a year ago, and yet he also looked vaguely sick, perhaps from all of the smog. He thought that he might've been happier now that he was running away, but if anything he looked even more tired and miserable after freeing himself.

He looked lonely as well. Thinking about it, he must've been less lonely now than he'd been before, yet he still looked this lonely anyway.

"What do you want?" he asked himself. "What should you be caring about right now?"

Constant had wanted a baseline. A simple ground of unshakable logic from which to start. If he was going to care about anything, he wanted to care about the fundamentals first, and that's why he'd desperately wanted to look at the night sky.

He wondered, for a second, if that was an appropriate priority. For the sake of that grounding, he would've been willing to abandon his mortal coil in its entirety, but what would he have without it? Was a soul like his virtuous enough to find redemption even without its body? Despite the person in front of him, he couldn't see it.

The mirror image of Constant was still just staring at him, silently, nervously and probingly. Who could tell what his true nature was deep down, based only on that? How could he trust himself? He wanted to run away. He needed to, yet merely viewing his own image obviously wasn't enough to satisfy his purpose for seeing this god, so something needed to change anyway.

The person in front of him needed to open up to him.

He needed to open up to himself.

There was nothing much that he could say, but still, immediately, he bit the bullet and just started talking.

...

"In the end, it was through a form of polite transparency that I finally started to have fun with myself. At that point, I could start thinking from an outside perspective about what I obviously needed to do before moving on with my other big goal of seeing the night sky,"

Constant mentioned, while deliberately chewing on some relatively undecayed plant-leaves.

“But the thing is, I still don't get why a practicality-enforcing ritual like that would change you into the benevolent creature you are now, Prometheus.”

“It's all about perspective,” the voice insisted. “I first met the god of reflection after years of solitude within my compartment in the Panathema Box. In a situation like that, with nothing but your reflection to talk to, it's pretty easy to make the leap that your doppelganger functionally represents other people outside, and that things really will work out for the best if everybody is on their best behavior towards each other.

“So somehow a creature that Kriegott called a ‘parasitic spirit’ ends up developing social niceties just like that?”

“Nothing teaches you the importance of social niceties like spending a small eternity with nothing but copies of yourself for comfort. Once I could reach the point where I liked myself, even from an outside perspective, and my preference for others morphed into something that I could attain without compromise, the rest follows suit. There are things that only multiple minds working in tandem can do, and by treating you like how I'd like to treat myself, I can both work towards my goals and build the necessary reputation to make my activities, as a ‘parasitic spirit’, just a bit easier.”

“So basically, all you're doing is playing the long game.” Constant surmised, frowning.

“The game can be as long as you'd like.” Prometheus responded. “For most people, the game of nice society never ends, and they do all the better for it. Will there ever be a point where I can be truly sure that I'll no longer gain anything from our alliance? I doubt that there

ever will be. In the end, the safest way to be parasitic is to consistently be as un-parasitic as possible.”

Constant thought that this train of thought, correct or not, happened to be incredibly unintuitive. Though thinking about it, the only obvious logical error he could find was in comparing your clone to other people and assuming that you could trust them.

“Well I don't trust just anybody, but I felt like I could trust you. I could immediately tell that you're a nice guy who would never betray me due to outside factors. Attached to your soul as I am, I guess that I'm in a pretty unique situation to be able to say that.”

“What does my soul look like anyway?”

“With complete honesty, it's like a distorted glass lens slowly transmuted into polished silver.”

Constant supposed that that was a little disappointing.

“Your soul is like a mirror in the sewers,” his best friend Prometheus protested. “Believe me; you're a treasure.”

To Be Continued

