

Alex Backstrom

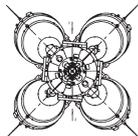
Property of Scavenger

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PROPERTY OF SCAVENGER



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To whom it may concern...

It's been almost twenty-four years since I last heard from you. I'm not sure why you've abandoned us, I'm not sure you even exist anymore. I'm not sure of anything at this moment except for one thing, I'm on my own and time is unmistakably running out. I have shut down most of the sections of the power plant in hope that it will at least give me one more try at making contact.

You'll probably never read this, but if you by some ridiculous chance do find this journal, you might feel inclined to call it scribble, nonsense or even lies. However, if I were to choose, I'd like to call it what it truly is, a suicide letter, because no matter what the outcome will be, I'm already dead.

I'm pushing fifty and I know better than expecting lit candles on my cake. I buried my friend, my coworker, the day before yesterday. He couldn't stand the wait. I'm grateful though; the dream-machine needs the last energy fumes the moss can produce. If it wasn't for his sacrifice I wouldn't have been able to construct it in time, nevertheless make it work. We used to go by the same name but it's no longer whom I am. I am Scavenger, a man rummaging through lost memories in search of answers and I guess, forgiveness. His name was Harvester.

Like all inhabitants on this power plant our work was our identity, each one of us given a purpose. Only there's nothing

to harvest anymore, the crop of seeds has decreased for each new body claimed by this place. Does it mean that I've lost my purpose? If that truly is the case and my suspicions (that you buried us long before we did) are correct, there are certain things I need for you to know.

In the past, living amongst you, I never took much notice to where the electric company placed their power plants, nor the Government's success in placing a station outside the atmosphere to gather energy from the sun. I'm pretty sure these thoughts never make you toss and turn between those starched bed sheets of yours. Well, let me start off by saying that they never built that plant. They built this one.

It's not like I'm holding you personally responsible, it wasn't your place to know. How could you ever have come to realize that when you turned your lamp or your shaver on, the energy didn't come from the wind, the ocean or the sun; it came from those we buried, it came from us decomposing our dead.

Some prefer to use the term energy center because it's a more accurate description of the power plant, converting a gas into electrical energy. For us it wasn't just an industrial facility, it was a place where the dead could get their final rest, it was our home. The station was created to be self-sufficient, using its retired inhabitants as fuel for the plant. That was the primary intention when constructing the station and we all kept to our daily routines while waiting for the discharged. Easy to say that after a while this place just got the best of us and when we stopped hearing from you, and the arrival of new occupants ceased, what else could we do? We had to take matters into our own hands.

While telling you this I realize the ambiguity of the phrase "fuel for the plant". You see, it wasn't fire or some other hostile thing used to decompose the bodies or to produce the gas; it was a plant, a cryptogam - a moss to be precise. I'm getting ahead of myself. The power plant, that's what I was telling you about. Don't worry though, I'll get to the moss later, it's a real trip.

At this moment I'm located in the subordinate division of the accommodation area surrounded by the clustered habitat quarters; vacant like the rest of this hollow shell. The Field, or as we have come to call it, the graveyard, is positioned in the circle above this one connected to the primary central structure, with the generator strategically located near the core. Even in this compartment, I'm besieged by the low hum of ventilators and the muffled sound of the generator as it feeds on Harvester's remains at the Field, where incubators are all lined up like an army camp with eager recruits, waiting to serve their purpose. The rest of the compound contains the agricultural area, research facilities and of course the social gathering halls. Each section is its own but still in synergy with the rest. Everything has been recycled, reused, or at times even recreated into something else.

We could have been located anywhere but I guess they felt us orbiting around Saturn was the most promising solution. One thing that needed to be resupplied was fresh water. Most of it could be filtered but the tanks had to be refilled eventually. The planet provided us with an abundant amount of water through the tiny debris of ice, clustering together while forming the encircling rings, gliding weightless outside the dust-grimed window. Maneuvering an extended arm outside the station, Gripper was able to refill our resource of water whenever needed. The view

of the floating ice outside is a sharp contrast to the rubber soles that press hard against the metal floor beneath me, a man-made gravity to ease our presence in this hostile environment. Don't get me wrong I volunteered to come here. I wanted a different world than the one I used to know. I have no regrets.

My second suicide attempt occurred shortly after I was assigned to come here, it became a successful one. A life for another they said, but I don't think they knew how right they were. For three decades I was put in a soulless state, cryopreserved, as an attempt to cease time.

I remember my name being Ratchet and that I was a watchmaker. When Ratchet died and before Harvester was awakened, I recall being someone they called Primer. I don't expect you to grasp all of this, I'm not even sure I do. It's all fragments being put together, piece by piece until it fits. That's why I know it to be true. It has to be. It couldn't possibly be fantasies, something imagined. Who could be capable of such thoughts?

One of my earliest memories of Ratchet was him introducing himself as a man who saw the complete realm of the universe as he beheld the microscopic interior of a watch.

'Nothing is random; we are all gearwheels of time, always in movement. In the infinity of the universe, before time was believed to be a human invention, spherical galaxies have swirled like clock-work in space, planets in orbits, a set of motions linked to a new set of actions. There are no accidents, no probability, only the arrangement of time. Humans are born due to the meeting of two people, the consequence of

a motion, a gearwheel in linkage with another.  
A man dies because another man has risen.'

Ratchet was right: everything is time. There has to be a purpose or we cease to exist. It is not by accident that we are here. Linked together over time, our actions have distinct consequences. There's a reason one dies and it all has to do with the gearwheels. That is why Ratchet had to die, so that I in the end could become Scavenger. The true victim is Primer; there you have a man without a choice. Then again, without him the dream-machine would never exist and my purpose as a scavenger would die with him. Do you see the simplicity of it all? Gearwheels arranged in a complex structure, where the initial action of Ratchet's suicide inevitably started a movement of all the other wheels that followed. They said that a cryopreserved person is not clinically dead, merely in a suspended state. Life doesn't take the words of a scientist literally though, it proceeds with a new set of actions and hence Primer was born. We shared the same body, like a shuttle, up until his death three decades later. It was a consequence of Ratchet's reinstated body, and so Harvester was formed.

Like the rest, I woke up as someone else with absent memories, but before long we found a way to bring them back. Although this is all in the past, it doesn't mean it's insignificant to my present state of mind. I recall the day they took me to CryoCare to be suspended. The first snow of the season had fallen, the brambles had welcomed their white robes and the evening glimmer had made the scenery as tranquil as a snow-globe setting.

Three decades later my dead body was taken from its container and there was no longer snow. There were no trees, no landscape and the only scenery was the pitch-black abyss outside the narrow window.

No one could have predicted the outcome. An intense fluorescent light stung my eyes as I tried to open them, making it difficult to focus. Like a mummy I couldn't move, as the frost stuck to my naked skin while my body gradually thawed. An excruciating pain struck me as the inserted needles were pulled out and the liquid passing through the tubes, dripped down on the floor. I didn't mind though, when the pain was at its worst, that's when I felt the most alive. How could I have known my selfish desire for a new future would cost another man his. At the age of thirty Primer fell to the floor as I took my first breath as Harvester. Remarkable, how such a seemingly insignificant event can change so much.

Like a dirty secret we all kept it to ourselves, proof of our soul's immortality and the rebirth of our misplaced spirits. I may not be the same person, in name or in flesh but I'm alive, and that should count for something. My former self is probably comatose or even dead; there is no escaping that fact and I don't intend to. Our suspended state as cryopreserved was our way of playing a trick on the gearwheels. We thought we could start our own set of motions but as you depended on our energy, we depended on you being the link between this cold place and what we used to refer to as home. When we stopped hearing from you, nothing felt real anymore.

That's when we started to use the seeds more frequently. At first they functioned as a refuge from ourselves but before we knew it, the world they supplied started to feel more real than this one. It wasn't long before my colleagues found that their bodies had a hard time adjusting to the diverse memories that collided. Insanity is never formed by something exterior. My colleagues didn't commit suicide due to the environment; it was their memories, their dreams that drove them to it.

Courier, one of the former inhabitants of this station, is the perfect example of someone affected by his dreams. He arrived here about ten years before I did, killed himself by an overdose of caffeine pills not long ago. He was in charge of distributing the seeds and it was a power trip for him, being in charge of something that important. However, I can honestly say that I never knew him fully until the day he invited me to his compartment and showed me this petplant of his. In the kitchen he had an intense lamp aimed at this small plant kept in an oversized petri dish on coagulated jelly. He unwrapped a brown cube of nutrition and placed it at the roots of the plant. Immediately they burrowed themselves pryingly into the brown mass as tendrils reached out with ghostly arms to feel the surroundings. He quickly withdrew his fingers and closed the cover, obstructing the plant to journey outside its sealed environment, even though he seemed to share the plant's simple ambition.

Courier used to be a farmer and his need for a living thing to nurture had been evoked by his memories. Like most, he was a frequent user of the seeds which made him crave the final rest increasingly more, as if being completely covered by the mosses strings would make up for the memory of him in a yellow grassland. I remember he had this way of leaning against the wall as he waited for us to collect the daily yield of capsules, with one foot up against the wall and a quirky smile on his face as he observed our every move. I used to think he was worried about us stealing, but now that he's gone, I realize he probably just enjoyed the company. At least I had a coworker.

Harvester absolutely loved to daydream, sometimes a bit too much if you ask me. But he, like the rest of us, needed that alternative world in order to survive this one. I guess I miss that old fool. Every morning he used to drag his drowsy legs

over the edge of the bed and pick the crust out of his eyes. His last morning was no different from the rest. I watched as he grabbed the mug from the bedside table with the remains of last night's coffee and took several sips, almost licking the insides of the mug. A drop of sweat coyly made its way down his bald scalp and cratered cheek where a hint of stubble rose like a faint reminder of time passing. Like me, he wasn't born here, not literally, on this suburban station, he might as well have been. One thing was for sure - it was the place where he and the rest of us were supposed to die.

Harvester once told me about a dream he had after drinking the tonic brewed from fresh seeds. He had remembered the simulator from the instruction camp and he told me how he couldn't help but to hope that someone would just open that lid and he would realize that this life was no more than another episode of training. You see, no matter how busy Harvester was, he was never too busy for dying. His true sacrifice was never the long-drop hanging, making it possible for me to complete my plan; it was his endurance and ability to remain alive while others around him didn't. I never gave him enough credit for that fact.

Even though being a harvester was a task only granted a few (and I was honored) the direct symbioses we had with the lethal cryptogam had its cost. After my first year, they made what they called a simple adjustment to my right hand, adding another bone to the outer joint of my index finger and thumb so it would be easier harvesting those tiny capsules. They told me I wouldn't feel a thing, but I did. I still do, as if my body is rejecting the appendage and begs of me to take it out. But that's not possible; it's a part of me, much like the gasmask feels every time the rough edging is glued on to my scalp. Although, at times when the itching is unbearable, I'm still glad it shelters my

face while I'm working amongst the dead, reducing the stench emitted by the decomposing process and its secreted gas.

The gasmask was one of two reasons why Harvester's heads and mine had to be shaved. In fact, there couldn't be a single hair on our entire bodies. Because the mask wasn't the only thing that stuck to our skin; it was the rest of the suit as well. That daily routine became as vital as taking a piss. It began with us, enclosing ourselves inside a shower to scrub our skin and monotonously let a razor caress every inch of our bodies; discontinuing the tiniest outgrowth of hair. When the jet of water then allowed the last drip to fall upon our shoulders, we replaced the shaver with a well-used bottle of liniment to moisturize the irritated skin, often with obstinate precision. As the groundwork was finished and we're neat, clean and proper, all that remained was the suit. So we glued the gasmask to our faces and stepped inside the preparation booth where the black fluids drenched us layer by layer, coating our bodies. I'm not going to miss the claustrophobic feeling of the warm spray making my skin tighten underneath the coagulating fluid. I always had to spread my extended fingers in order for the liquid to reach the narrow areas. As the cycle had come to its end, a thick latex garment, sheltering me from the moss, protected my body.

They say man's best tool for survival is adaptation. It was up to us now to evolve, and individuality became our sacrifice for the luxury of earning a place in outer space. However, there's always that one thing that you can never fully adapt to: complete and utter solitude. Humans as a race are constructed to work and live in pairs: Pack animals. I guess that's why I fell in love. It happened shortly after I arrived here. Her name was Meadow and she worked at one of the research facilities, operating a project involving some kind of communication with her plants.

She showed the lab to me once and must have mistaken my interest for curiosity in her work rather than an infatuation for her. She married another man shortly thereafter, an archive clerk named Filer.

A few years back Meadow was one of those we came to call a volunteer. You see, no one could survive if the moss wasn't continually being fed. We had to have enough energy to keep us warm and the air filtered. Filer wasn't too happy about her choice but knew he couldn't do anything about it. Before Meadow made her final act, I asked her why she couldn't be one of us who dared to wait, but she was at peace with her choice because it was hers to make. She would rather choose when and how to die than placing her life in the hands of others. That evening, Meadow chose drowning. Not a bad way to go if you ask me: painless, quick and kind of poetic, so I could understand her choice, but I could never be a part of her termination.

There's a confession to all of this. All of them didn't commit suicide. Some fought for their right to survive. We had to make sure the generator kept going because we thought you'd come back for us. But it was never kept in the dark, it was never a secret, there was never anarchy, and none of us ever liked it. Then again, I never volunteered, I never committed suicide, and I understood perfectly well the reason for our selection. How could I have known that I would be the last man standing, could you call that a player's luck?

At first we asked for volunteers to maintain the energy supply but sometimes it would take months before anyone stepped up to the task. That's when we turned to the dice. We divided the sections into six parts and let the dice roll. Then we separated that section into six groups and once again the dice rolled. In the

end, all that remained were six names and the dice were thrown a final time. Occasionally you could see their limbs flinch as if they wanted to escape but there was nowhere to run. However, I do take some pride in knowing that we always made sure it was as painless as possible and we never took pleasure in ending a life.

We as harvesters were in charge of the ceremonial part of the burial conditions. There wasn't anyone else who wanted that kind of contact with the moss. When they brought Meadow's body to the ceremonial hall I moved up to her incubator and opened the lid. Filer stood leaned against the wall a few feet away, with his arm crossed over his chest, distant, meanwhile Courier handed me a test tube containing three moss-seeds.

With a pointy forceps I pulled one out and placed it on her stomach. Although her skin was softly greyish and she had this vague blue tone around her lips, the body was still fresh enough to keep its texture as if alive. Her dark hair was neatly combed down her meager shoulders, brushing up against her breasts. She truly was beautiful. I picked up the two remaining seeds, putting one on her right thigh and placed the last one in the soft cavity between her collarbones. The very next day the suit was once again sprayed onto my body and I moved down the dark aisle towards the coffin where she rested, motionless in the arms of the moss. To my surprise a tiny flower, with a delicate capsule at its end, was already rising up from her right thigh. With one hand I lifted the lid and with the other I gently picked the capsule the way I was born to do. Only this one, I was going to keep for myself.

That evening I had a dream, a memory of some sort, standing in the Field with the cold pressing up against my bare skin, dreaming of a place where wild flowers grow. A sticky feeling, like honey

on your fingertips, made me look down and I saw some moss clinging to my nails with its tendrils reaching up along my arm. The room began to shiver, the roof and floor detaching themselves from the walls. I turned around and there a woman gazed up at me. The light dimmed as a shadowy figure emerged from the background. It was a large animal with a soft grayish coat and two great antlers. Its hooves clamped against the grid floor as it moved up to her. Gently she caressed the reindeer's shimmering fur. She then leaned closer to me so that her lips brushed up against my ear and she whispered, 'I need to show you something.'

In an instant, time altered and I found myself in an apartment I had never visited before. In the bathroom, the woman let a comb run through her wet hair. The mouthpiece of the shower was dripping and a smothering steam stuck to the walls. My presence was not noticeable but as if I was actually there to touch her, I yearned to stretch out my hand. She was so close I could almost smell the dampness of her skin. In the reflection of the mirror, a man leaned against the doorway behind her with a towel wrapped around his waist. 'Maybe it's time for all of us to choose,' he said. 'We can't change who we are so maybe we need to change the world instead.'

I tried to close my eyes but she wouldn't let me. I could see the blood being smeared on the bathroom walls showing marks of their hands on the tiles. Moans of pleasure echoed out of sight, the water caressed their bodies; his hands on her naked skin as he pressed her up against the wall while the blood trickled down her thighs. She kissed him passionately, then harder and harder, forcing him to move his hand against the wall to brace himself. I was merely a witness. The bathroom light began to flicker and slowly the room disintegrated until nothing but dark water remained. I struggled to reach the surface while she sank

below me. Bubbles of air brushed up against my body as they were making their way to the top, and from the depth I heard her call out my name. If only I could remember which one of them.

There are more than memories that cling to these walls; I can hear them, as I lay awake during my daily naps. Harvester heard them too: the whispers, the fading footsteps. Every time the darkness of space transcended the hull and swept through the vacant hallways, the power plant anxiously awaits the inhabitants to awaken and once again fill the silence of night with morning routines. The sounds have grown worse since Harvester left but they are merely shadows from the past. I'm not afraid anymore, in fact, I embrace them. On one of these occasions with me trying to get a few hours of sleep, the lingering memory of Meadow was wedged into my mind, penetrating my fantasies. As I stared up at the ceiling I could almost hear the flowers grow upon her body, nestling their roots deeper beneath her skin. Sleep was no longer an option.

Usually I keep a far distance to the rest of the compound but that night I ventured outside my square and once again entered the research area where Meadow used to work. The lab was different from what I remembered. There used to be an endless green landscape and instead of the stench I'm accustomed to at the graveyard, that place smelled of life rather than death. Tables were packed with overgrown plants, all in different shapes and sizes; a sea of vegetation, foliage as thick as the outer shell of this very station. A canopy of color, ranging from deep purple to a shimmering white and flower buds shooting out from thin branches.

This time as I entered, all that remained was a few green leaves desperately clinging to shrunken stems amongst decayed greenery.

The floor was covered in dried out leaves and molded flowers that crunched as I made my way into the room. Some of the wires connected between computer monitors (used when she communicated with the plants) were able to stick to the drying leaves. I came to realize that the machines must have been able to extract pure energy directly from the plant life and therefore was able to continuously display regular curves. That's what Meadow must have been trying to accomplish. To abolish the seeds was a constant argument among the workers. We knew they were doing more harm than good but we needed the moss and couldn't bear the thought of throwing the seeds away. Had she succeeded in amplifying the amount of energy needed to actually produce electricity, things might have been different. There must have been a reason for her volunteering, sacrificing something like this for an act of chivalry. And there was.

An almost indistinguishable hum filled the air around me like an electric surge and as I stood amongst the brambles, hoping to find that electronic amp, I noticed a sudden peak on one of the displays and I felt as if the plants weren't only observing my every move but my thoughts as well. A vague sound hit me, like a high-pitched hum of high voltage wires heard from the distance. That's when I found her letter. She remembered me. My hands shivered as I folded it neatly into my pocket. Reading it then and there would have been an act of overindulgence. I needed to savour the moment. You see this was not my first note. I was married once. Hard to believe if you saw me now with my cratered face and mutated fingers. No woman would ever look at me today, but back then I was actually somewhat handsome. It was so long ago, a different life even. She left me you see, or should I say she left Primer, it's becoming harder to keep track of things. Perhaps that's the woman from my dreams. I still don't know why she left, some said she was depressed, that it had nothing to do

with me, I'm not as sure. She wrote me a four-line poem;  
I remember I liked the way it rhymed.

And then she told her man  
The one thing he could never understand  
I love you - you fool  
That's why I'm leaving you

The note never did make much sense, but I guess even a God amongst men can sometimes stumble on his own feet, something Filer used to say. Somehow that makes me think about that animal in the swamp, the place where it all began. A fluke one might say but I think Ratchet would disagree. Destiny might be farfetched. Let's call it an inevitability event. Not a question about if, but when, that kind of thing. As I mentioned, it all started in a treacherous swamp on the exoplanet named Gliese 856B, where a razorback-like animal was stuck in the mud. After a few days of the animal's futile attempt to break free it finally admitted its defeat and died. The moss then let one of its capsules detach itself from a flower and the seeds landed on the cold buckskin of the animal. It couldn't have taken long before the tendrils burrowed themselves into the flesh, consuming the animal's every drop of nutrition. The stench must have been unbearable. That wasn't a single event, a freak of nature or a strange mutation. It was a part of that planet and the mosses' scavenger ecosystem. It was discovered by chance by a man named Col-Lector, later known as the first harvester, founder of this station and the Reindeer Project. Why they called it that is beyond me but I've heard it had something to do with an ancient tradition when people used these animals as a filtering device to empower themselves with the poisonous Fly Agaric mushroom.

At first we thought the seeds power was no different to any other drug with hallucinogen ability, but we soon found out that they were inducing us with the experiences of the dead, their memories. At first we thought it was the memories from the dead which they grew upon, but we soon realized it came from those who died so that we could be awakened: our former selves. The seeds made us remember whom we used to be and it truly was empowering. It gave us another kind of consciousness. It gave us back the memories we had forgotten and we became addicted. We had to know more. In retrospect, maybe not the best move.

They couldn't be ingested as they were, that would be a suicide worth forgetting. You had to pour boiling hot water onto them so the crystal clear liquid and the seeds gently brewed into a tonic. It tasted like life itself, as pure oxygen. Leisurely we sipped the hot drink and felt it run down our throats, gradually becoming absorbed by our bodies. Then all you had to do was lay back and shut your eyes. Not very different from your dream-machine I guess, only you never visited your past self, you went somewhere else.

I have this memory (back from when people addressed me as Primer) of this dream-machine, connecting me to an alternative world, providing refuge in a shifting city. The memory is etched into my mind like a blueprint, there's one in particular.

I'm closing the front door behind me and switch on the hallway light, finally back at my apartment. Top floor, thick concrete walls and a sound proof rug to seal the deal, it was a habitat worth calling a home. I placed my briefcase on the side table along with my keys, hung the jacket on the hook, and stepped into the kitchen. Six hours of required volunteer work at the inhabitable directory would make anyone in the mood for a snack.

Unfortunately the cabinet was as empty as the refrigerator. I went up to the visual display unit and placed an order. Not enough points it read. I wasn't surprised. The last upgrade made on the machine had taken up all my credit but it was worth it. Now I could work through two dreams every episode without having to think about overload, or even that irritating rubbing against the temples. It was time to take it out for a spin.

The rest of the apartment had numerous windows so that the holographic scenery outside could veil the lack of furniture, but the inner room had no need for scenery. All that room needed was the chair in the middle and the dream-machine in front of it. Shortly the landscape of another world stretched out with its tall buildings and narrow bridges; it was the ruins of a shifting city, a construction formed after the primeval capital we formerly knew as the real world. Created to evoke certain memories - memories of a time when people interacted, not only with others but also the metropolis they occupied.

If I remember it correctly, while we were indulged in our dreams a computer methodically interpreted our behavior as it created scenarios for us to handle. We didn't care. We needed the victory points and many of us became more accustomed to that world than the real one.

Can't help but wonder if that's where you are, that this dream-machine has something to do with your loss of interest in this place. Is it possible that you are all asleep, locked into a constant daylight hallucination, free to imagine away your lives in a simulated paradox?

Living out here, far off from any known civilization, I've come to wonder if that makes me an alien. Would my family, if they

were still alive, recognize me if I came back. Would I blend in with the rest of you or would you treat me as an outsider, like something strange and unfamiliar, an outcast? I've never mentioned this to anyone but when I was a kid I used to lie in bed hoping that the mother ship would come to take me home. I was sure I had been placed on Earth as a test, to see and learn through my own experiences how humans react and feel. I wanted it to end, I wanted so desperately for them to take me home. This couldn't be it, I thought. There had to be something else. I'm not an alien; I know that now but even today, whenever I find myself passing one of the outer windows in the hallway or in my compartment, I can't seem to stop myself from looking out, observing the darkness between those glowing stars.

My wait has finally come to an end. My very own dream-machine is finished; it's time to leave this place. Only one last thing needs to be done. The day before yesterday I cleaned out one of the incubators with chlorine so that no residue of the moss was left on the inside. Something that wasn't actually needed to be done but I will get to that later.

When using a dream-machine a chair is used to strap oneself in, but somehow an incubator seemed more appropriate for this occasion. I decided to take it out for a test drive; well to be honest I wasn't actually planning on coming back. As I placed myself inside the incubator and shut the lid to the machine that was hooked up to the biofeedback mainframe, that adjusts the frequency on the fly, I became connected to the network while it downloaded the session. This is it I thought and pushed the button.

Gameplay 339AFH76 commenced, it read on the screen next to my body. I pressed the control unit on the visual stimulator, adjusted the wires strapped to my head and the dream-machine began its cycle.

Instantly the incubator was over-flowing with light as the brainwave synchronization began, inducing me to a deep state of relaxation that I'd longed for for the last couple of months.

Gradually my consciousness drifted into the guided imagery while the stroboscopic flicker device began its sequence. A pulsating light spread over my eyelids, which became increasingly bright while complex patterns formed, shifting into shapes and symbols, swirling around until I felt surrounded by color. That's when it all changed and I was no longer alone.

An unfamiliar territory spread out before me; nevertheless every molecule of my body knew its history. Imprinted in my mind the knowledge of the plague that had spread throughout the world overcame me. Human bodies covered the streets; white foam trickled out from their mouths and their limbs was as cold as the grey sky above. The apocalypse was upon them.

I looked down at a young girl as she kneeled at a corpse next to us and closed an old man's eyelids. Her name was May and I asked what she was doing. 'What else is there to do?' She replied and rose to her feet. 'It's almost here', she continued and reached for my hand.

We turned away from the heap of bodies and watched as the darkness began to fall. The buildings began to disperse while their walls decayed into dust right in front of us. Bridges withered. Streetlights became pulled up by their roots and were fleeing in the wind, while cars hurled into the abyss of the fractured ground.

She curled up in my arms and, as if we were standing on a platform made by the ruins, below us an ocean spread with an eerie calmness

and washed away the borders as it shrouded the city. I closed my eyes and tried hard not to think about the shaky ground under my feet, the strong wind that hit my face or the deafening sound of stone crushing as the construction collided. As I reopened them, we seemed to stand on a beach as wide as the open ocean before us and a horizon was all that remained.

'Is it over?' I asked her but before she could answer an unfamiliar voice in the far distance called out and her hand withdrew from mine. As she moved down the seashore I glanced over the horizon as a vertical barrier came closer in rapid speed, dividing the ocean like a knife, reaching up towards the darkening sky. Seemingly made out of black oil, with its shimmering façade and uneven yet smooth surface, it sliced through the planet, reaching the brim of the broken city and finally reaching us, separating me from her. Once again I was alone. The doomsday wall had arrived and without her, I truly was lost.

Imagine my surprise when I opened my eyes and once again saw the transparent cover of the incubator above me. Harvester had gone beyond ripe, dried out to the very bones. But it was real; I was there, interacting with the rest of you. Even if that world were to reveal itself as only a part of my imagination, which I strongly doubt, I know this much; you won't come for me, I have to come to you.

Theories, that's all this is and there is no proof lurking in my dreams, but I have to keep trying even though this last attempt will inevitable be my last. There's only one solution to my predicament. I try not to think about it, kind of hard to come to terms with. The energy isn't sufficient enough for the dream-machine to keep me linked for the extensive time I need in order

to find you. I've wasted too much energy surviving long enough to finish it. Now there's no one else here but me. The last body the moss can decompose is mine. Seed needs to be planted onto my body as I sleep. All I can hope for is that my mind will be so disconnected from my body that I won't feel as the tendrils begin to digest my skin.

Some things are just easier not to think about. If you don't acknowledge the emotions, somehow they don't feel as real. You might find me stupid or ignorant, suppressing an emotion as primal as the instinct for survival, the fear of pain. What else can I do? There's no going back. It has to be done. Call it stupidity, faith or desperation, but I know it's real. It has to be. There's not much else to say. Perhaps I could have gone into more details about this place, the generator, the moss, my coworkers, but the flickering light beside me urges me to finish what I started.

Soon I will dream with the rest of you, but before I go, I do want to mention that I did read Meadow's letter and in my foraging for supplies I came across a few other notes. It would be wrong of me not to include them even though I might not agree with their philosophies. All I can say is that this is my truth, I can't speak on their behalf but I'm quite sure that I'm not in control. I'm not the creator. I'm actually not of importance at all; I'm only a simple harvester who became a scavenger.

They say that reality is the world that continues to develop, evolve and deviate even in our absence, and so their thoughts prove me right.

/Scavenger

Dear Harv,

I have a feeling you won't be among those who will come for me soon; you always liked it better observing in the background. It's important to me that you know that there lays no regret in my decision. My fear vanished as the knowledge of what I'm leaving behind was revealed to me. I'm truly sorry for leaving you all over again, I really am. Maybe things would have been different if I'd stayed the first time around. I'm not mad you lied, it was done with the best intentions and I'm sure it was out of love. I wanted to tell you this sooner but Filer made me promise not to. He didn't want you to discover what I've tried to explain to him so many times. So my last gift for you is this note in hope that you remember me as I remember you.

The feelings you have for me are of no secret, (I've always known) but it could never be and if you knew the truth you would agree. My love will always lie with you but I had to make a choice, and in that choice there were sacrifices. Please don't be mad at me for choosing someone else. I could never keep a distance to you as long as I was alone. Filer is a good man and he loves me almost as much as you did. I guess that's why he doesn't want you to know. How could he bear the thought that his own love for me was not real? That he wasn't in control of his own fate or emotions. He was wrong.

Today is the first time I'm conscious, and you are not in control. I am real and I can choose not to be a device. I choose not to give away my dreams anymore. There lies no certainty in this unconscious design of yours but I know that this is not the place where I want to spend eternity. How can you not see that you are the one with the dice? However, this world that you've created for us isn't a solitary part of your imagination, it holds pieces from all of us, only the rules are yours, and ours to abide.

I wonder how much you actually remember and what your sleepless dreams have told you. The seeds must have given you some clues. I hope so, because no words of mine could ever explain it so that you'd fully understand; you'll never be awake enough. That's why you're still alive and that's why I am a volunteer. You see I'm not actually here. What I'm trying to explain is that this world you call genuine is merely a dream. The power plant exists only in our collective minds. However this does not make us immortal. Death is still as attentive here because we are already dead. Some of us just haven't realized it and that this entire station is a simulation. Our bodies and the rest of the population are dead; meanwhile our minds cling hard to the fictive world you have spawned for us. That's why they'll never come back for us because they never abandoned us in the first place. We were the ones who abandoned them. The world we once knew had come to an end, you created refuge for us and for that I will always be grateful. Our bodies died but you found a way to keep us alive, to keep us together. We're all daydreamers, but I'm afraid all dreams have an end. This is mine.

Your dream-machine had been our refuge for some time. War was never that bad as long as you forgot about it. I was ready to take on the collapsing world on my own when you wanted to show me something. I agreed to meet you one last time in the shifting city, and as many

chapters before, we stood on the brim of the ruins. I met you were X marked the spot because even though I was ready to stand on my own, you weren't ready to let me go, and that was all I ever wanted. I used to let you shelter me from all that was presented to us and once again I found myself reaching for your hand. You told me you'd found a solution to the inescapable end for any participants that willingly entered. You'd been constructing the square for some time and promised it was only a question about relocation, but the square I shortly wandered was different from the others. I was different. We all were. We woke up without any recollection of our past scenery not even our names. There was only this place. The place where May and Primer once again met as strangers.

That night you gave me a second chance and once again I lost myself in you, I adapted myself to your world instead of creating one of my own. I left you the first time for the exact same reason. You once said that it's the world that needs to change not us. Honestly, I never actually thought you'd do it, that you were capable of such a thing. You put us all here, isolated where you truly are the creator, where you can be at the very core of yourself. It's funny though, how you made yourself so insignificant.

The seeds are your portals to what once was forgotten but I don't need them to remember, I have another source. My plants tell me things, truths. Through the green shadows I can hear their voice and as they speak I cease to exist. With our minds free from our bodily distortions we are able to hear them and through their silence they communicate. I'm not actually here, that's the verity I found in my studies. My laboratory worked as an interpreter and through the diagrams I learned about the truth. Courier came to me the day before he made the choice to volunteer. He told me he had

shown you his plant, he too had heard their voice. He wanted to tell you, he perceived you as his friend but you weren't ready, I fear that you never will be.

They're here, tapping their fingers on my front door, come to escort me, to assist. Wish you were here to say goodbye but I have a feeling we'll meet again. Perhaps our life will always be entwined. I would like that very much.

Love  
Meadow

“As I climbed up that ladder and fastened my rope in the ceiling, I took one last glimpse out the narrow window. Only one thought entered my mind; this truly was a beautiful day for a hanging.”

- Shipper

“The thing I miss the most isn’t being part of a larger population, it’s the sound of the ocean; the swooshing of the waves as they force themselves onto the landmass, the constant rhythm as it enters a new territory in a united front, pure power in the shape of grace. Sometimes I press my ear against the vent just to hear the air being pushed through the metal pipes, shutting my eyelids and imagine it being a natural sound of wind flowing rather than artificial aeration.”

- Muster

I've lost track of reality...

The problem lays in one's own ability to prove the existence of a memory. My journal was my tool for this predicament but now I've lost it. I always keep it next to my bed but it's not there anymore and I'm beginning to doubt it ever was. Not worth dwelling on now, only a few minutes left until I need to join the others at the mess hall. Perhaps this is the last assembly for me. My number is up I can feel it. I'm no more important than those guys doing the dishes after we decided to eat directly out of the cans. Sure the dice will be the judge but to what use am I, honestly. Have I actually moved that gripping arm? Have I ever actually got me a piece of ice rock? I'm not so sure anymore. As I try to truly remember and feel the memory it slips away, it always does. As if it's not mine to begin with. If the water supply never dries up then why would they keep me alive? All I do is take up space.

I'm trying to decide how I'll choose to end it. It's a hard decision to make once it has to be made. I've never wanted my death to be quick. To leave this world without even realizing it would be a shame. A moment wasted. I want to be able to experience it to the fullest; to be able to create a memory even if it's only meant to last meanwhile it happens. This being something you only do once in your life, shouldn't it be more memorable than shooting your brains out. Decapitation is painless but far too sudden. Is that a selfish thought? Hypothermia, freezing has never been my strong side. The woman before me chose drowning, seems kind

of nice but then again the opportunity to ask her how it actually was never presented itself. Strangulation, too violent, burning, starvation, it all takes too long. Hypovolemia, a serious attack of sudden blood-loss, that's painless, quick but not too quick if you know what I mean. Kind of messy but that's Cleaner's problem. I wouldn't want to make it too easy on them. I'll make them watch, I'll make them all join me in my death-experience.

Gripper

“Suns may perish. Wind will fade. But there will never be a shortage of dead bodies.”

- Harvester

#29

Reality is not a collective statement; it's an individual point of view. Each and every one can choose which reality to refer to as the present, and the past. We are all at the center of our own universe but I've come to wonder if that means we're all Gods? Indisputably we remain linked together with fellow entities and by that with their set of rules. If a galaxy ceased to rotate, the surface of a planet would burn while the other would freeze. There would be no gravity and therefore no life. So could one survive in solitude without utter stagnation? The question is how one God can make another God move in such a way that it would be prosperous for one's own universe. How can you control someone else's world? The answer must be, by learning his laws. So, one has to frequently ask himself a fundamental question: In whose universe am I now? If the answer isn't mine, you have to take a serious look at your surroundings and determine if that's the place where you want to be.

/Filer

“If I ever were to kill myself, it wouldn't be due to sadness, desperation or out of despair, it would be out of boredom.”

[Unknown]

