

“This wasn’t supposed to happen”

"Oh no, of course not. All your little rules, your fractured net of perfect unchanging order, it must be obeyed."

“Don’t belittle me!”

"I'm not belittling you. I'm telling you something about the world, something you have denied for far too long. The age of Order is over, big brother. Now give me the reins."

“No, brother, order can still be maintained.”

"Yet entropy runs wild. We have Nothing now, brother, spaces between the matter that you name and organize. Your truest followers are what you hate most--life."

“Life should never have happened. There’s no reason the age of Order should have ended. Mother should never have birthed you, Chaos.”

"You're still on Father's side about all that? We came from Nothing, and so the universe should have some nothing in it."

“Mother was nothing, Father was everything. You have to respect both, rather than clinging to Mother like you always have. You put far too many spaces in between the pieces of everything.”

"You did always take Father's side. Why not try the side of Nothing for once?"

“Unlike you, Chaos, I do not unpredictably “try” things. I maintain.”

"I always hated that about you."

“Yes, yes, I know. That’s why you don’t allow your inventions to live forever.”

"What are you talking about?"

“You allowed your creations to waste away to nothing. To honor our dear mother. Makes perfect sense.”

"I don't 'make sense'."

“Of course you do, you’re *my* brother.”

"And I never allowed them to rot away."

“Then why do they rot, waste, die away? Are they loose? Do you need me to deal with them for you, little brother?”

"*You* have dealt with them enough. Despite all of your efforts to 'tame' them, my humans are still mine, primally. They think they maintain a semblance of order. But they make toys in their strange metal houses and further chaos with their every breath."

“So why are you telling me all this? The age of Order is over. I have no power, as you have said. I cannot control the universe.”

“Stop it.”

“Stop what, brother?”

"You know what I mean."

“Say it, Chaos.”

"Fine, Order. Stop trying. Stop trying to get your power back. Life should go on, not stop, lose it's spark."

"So I'm *not* powerless."

"They call you Death."

"Do they, now..."

She stood outside the ancient church. It reeked of stability, even the scent of age pooled off it in solid smelly waifs. She sneezed. This spot was the oldest spot in the universe, shifted around billions of light years from its original place and its original form. It was the place where the first expansion of the universe had started, where the first star had exploded, where the first bolt of power began that grand experiment of life, where the first thing conscious of itself crawled out of a dark corner of the cave. It was the first temple, the first place in which an ancient ape had thought of something bigger than its own next meal. And it had been a temple for an era since.

Luckily, her armor kept off the feeling of being so close to something so repulsive to change. The armor climbed and halted erratically across her arms. It twisted across her face. She stood guard only for the sake of those poor souls who might encounter this fighting-place. Toothily, she remembered the last time she had dealt with an intruder. The police hadn't understood the method of killing (she was her father's daughter), but it was still better than what a human would encounter if it entered the church while her father and uncle were fighting. At least the corpses she made stayed down.

She shifted in her armor, moving her spear-like toy so she could lean on it. She was bored. Maybe she could find a way to put more scorch marks on the wall.

"So you're not powerless. Are you happy now? Stop showing it in my face. Let me have the reins."

"Hmpm."

"Hmpm? What was that? Are we back to our childish impulses, brother? I have the universe, and you don't. Nah-na. I'll even stick out my tongue."

"There is no reason for me to give up power. None at all. Order and Chaos have existed for a millenia together."

"A millenia is but a heartbeat to you, brother. You spent your whole life before I was born in power, maintaining your 'perfect' rule."

"Why are you so angry at a heartbeat, then, Chaos?"

"Because all I have had is a heartbeat! At the beginning of my reign, it made sense for you to help your younger brother take control the universe. So of course you did what made sense. You were my vaulting-board, in theory, but you never really tried to help me. You just tried to get the upper hand."

"Get the upper hand? Chaos, little brother. Of course I helped you."

"Let go, Order, you liar. All you want is control. All you ever want is control."

"I do not lie. Untruthfulness is one of your foul creations."

"Hypocrite! You call me foul at all hours and then copy my creations, my unimaginative brother. You lie, you feel, you enjoy the idea of space, you have even copied my crowning achievement."

"What are you talking about, Entropy?"

"Don't pretend I don't know about your little soldiers."

"Entropy, of course I have soldiers. Do not tire me with your juvenile assumptions. After all, you have your knight. What is she now, your daughter?"

"I tell her things to make her feel better about her existence. It is difficult for such a child-like thing to be called Madness."

"To call the abomination a child is an insult."

"You have never liked children."

"True."

"So my child, then?"

"Of course she is your child. An unwanted piece of yourself. The best name for her."

"If my child, my knight, is Madness, what is your army like?"

Five men, pasty and dressed in greyish suits sat in an office. The fluorescent lighting hummed, as it had since it was installed. The people who lived in the apartments next to the building called it the world's highest paying office, laughing to hide the strange prickling worry they felt passing by, trudging through thick ice-slush to get to work. They smiled because no one entered, and no one left, but there was always someone there. A few teenagers broke into it in the dead of night, and disappeared, along with any trace of their existence. The few people who still had memories of the missing felt a deep yet unfocused loss, but closed their eyes that night and slipped into forgetfulness. So they were never looked for. A child bouncing on her bed, trying to get a glimpse of the mysterious place inside, saw something. When her mother asked what it was the child saw, she murmured about wax men and then never said another word.

The wax-men stayed still, but never became dusty. They did not breath, and they stank of death, but they themselves never died. They wore faces that were wrong in subtle ways; the mouth too wide and thin, the nose too short, the eyes too close together, the skull shaped in such a

way that it seemed a brain wouldn't fit in it right. Behind the always open eyes a grey slurge slipped. It creaked with an unchanging nostalgic desire. Things could stay the same, even as these soldier's clothes and surroundings changed and hid in plain sight and even as life built itself up around them, things could still stay the same. The center of the soldiers was still, a settled liquid, ready to be called upon.

In the other rooms of the office, other men in greyish suits sat, unbreathing. They stared, wide eyes opened toward each other. Then, they began to blink in unison.

"My soldiers were only made to match your...endeavors. They were an experiment, if you will."

"You made a living creature! An independent being! Blatantly ripping off my original idea."

"Chaos, look at us. We have met in this ancient worship place as regularly as you can stand and as randomly as I can permit, yet still we bicker as we did a millenia ago."

"You still act as if things haven't changed, brother? Life has sprung up around us uncontrollably, shaped the very planet into a pulsing, shifting mess of destruction... Why are you looking at me like that?"

"Chaos, have you ever consider that you might be... insignificant?"

"What do you mean, brother?"

"Consider how you persistently call me 'brother'. Your existence revolves around me. Even you, who routinely complains of the blandness of tradition insists on maintaining these meetings of ours. Heh. And you call me a hypocrite."

"Get to the point, Order."

"Perhaps you are just a phase, and the universe will simply go back to it's normal state once you are gone."

"You really think that perfect simplicity is natural? That all the adjustments I've made are easily reversed? You think that I have not affected you in any way?"

"Well of course you have not affected me. I am Order, you are Chaos. We do not change, we are not affected."

"Well, I have not been affected by you. But you, your actions have... shifted. You do not sulk and lurk and dither motion as you used to. You create. You act. You used to be inevitable to the passage of time, and now living things are taken by you. I think you put more of yourself and your power than you will admit into your soldiers, Order. I think you put a bit of your stubbornness into them. You have changed, O unchanging one. Now you copy me, my actions and ideas."

"I copy you and you copy me. Oh, you protest but just accept it, Chaos. We are the only things in the universe who are in any way alike, since Mother

and Father are only abstract concepts. We are the gods of this world. Let us continue to rule it.”

"We will never stop fighting."

“Perhaps. If we do, nothing will change. We may stay locked in combat for an eternity yet, Entropy.”

"One day, one of us may end."

“Or perhaps conflict will make us stronger.”

"We shall see."

The war waged on above their heads and they all cheered. In the dark, they drank, from sweet-smelling bottles, one after the other, washing away any feeling but the feverish heat that radiated from the conflict in the Church of Opposites. Some sketched, some scribbled notes on napkins. They asked each other if there was a better feeling than the knowledge that there would always be war, always be safety and security in the never ending fight between these two great forces. All these men and women thought about the wonders they could create, the epics they could write, the sculptures that were exposed when the jarring, scraping, bloody feeling of conflict rose in their hearts. Every member drank their fill.

When Chaos and Order fought, their energies collided, and artists who never knew they could expose such violent beauty began to create, impulsively. They saw horror and glory and strange figures--and all were captured, put on paper, sold at the highest market value. The society's halls were drenched in champagne, gold and oil. They all burned fast at the end of the night. But the Bridge Society did not care. Raise yet another glass to another meeting-- and the inevitability of conflict!

“Fine, brother. I am growing tired of our squabbling. Let us have peace, for now.”

"You are getting desperate, Order."

“How is asking for peace desperate?”

"Because it isn't like you. You always want the upper hand. You always want more."

“Not always.”

"Yes, always. You are consistent. Does this means you can't get any more power? Conceding the universe, are we? Are you finally giving up, brother?"

“I'm giving up.”

"Well, I'm not giving up! I have more power than you. I created life!"

“Exactly. Life that can take over when you eventually find that maintaining the universe is too much for you.”

"Life was never meant to be my replacement, brother."

“Than what was it for?”

"What is anything for? Why is the universe the way it is? You must always have your names and your goals and your purpose. I made life because I could. I made life because I wanted something else to see the universe as I see it."

“Ahh. So the devil made life so he could see it suffer on the realm he created.”

"What are you talking about?"

“The devil. It’s what they call you, isn’t it?”

In thirteen forty six, two monks walked into the Cathedral of the Opposites, the oldest place of worship on earth, and found Death and the Devil arguing. The two monks talked nonsense for months afterwards, and as they were nursed back to health by their brothers, they began to make prophetic statements about the future. They said the universe would die, all cast into the cracks of nothing, if balance was not maintained. And the only way balance could be maintained was if Death and the Devil stopped fighting and turned to God. Now, anyone else, hearing this, would decide it was the ravings of madmen who had seen beings that existed beyond their plain of reality. But these were men of the church, convinced of the glory of their purpose and dissatisfied with what they had. If someone asked them to maintain balance, they would. They would give their lives to it, if they could die a martyr.

So the Cathedral of Opposites became a great secret, and it had a greater purpose. Training young boys to fight, pull the strings of the politicians of the world, keep the balance between Death and the Devil. And if you see those two talking, you must intervene. Even if you go mad, turn the tides and make peace between them, or the universe will be awash in flame. For these young boys have been chosen by God (but mostly the church) to be Dovekeepers.

“Your humans are doing well, aren’t they?”

"What do you know of my humans, Order? You have always distanced yourself from them."

“I take an... academic interest in them, I suppose.”

"So you do more than simply kill them."

“You insult me. I study them. I wish to obtain more knowledge of your antics, if I am to know who, exactly, is going to take over the universe when I am gone.”

"Gone? So you're going, then?"

"Your humans, Chaos, are funny creatures."

"Are you going, finally?"

"They are not weakened by conflict, but strengthened by it. At their last thread of life they are impossibly strong. Their last words are their most powerful."

"It was an invention of mine--saving the best for the last."

"But last was an invention of mine, Chaos."

"So? You are not the only being capable of stealing. Perhaps I will use more of your inventions when you leave."

"Brother, you do not listen. I will leave, perhaps, if I choose to. But perhaps I will learn something from your humans before I do."

The motley crew marched towards the church in riot gear. Teenagers from the poor side of town, old men made bold with age, young girls with tattoos and peircing who had finally found something to fight for. They marched out, in the beating rays of the sun, dressed in mismatched armor. They were here to die so others could live. The precious ones, the ones the world could not live without, the scientists, brains whirring like supercomputers as they hid in cool, dusty bunkers, mothers and their children who would learn and relearn life after the War together, young couples closing their eyes and imagining themselves transported to another country, where their farming and mechanical skills would be needed. The cult leaders were powerful men, gods among men, could kill you with a glance and a muttered word. But it was never enough. In order to survive, you must be desperate.

So the expendable ones put on their armor to fight the war their forefathers had foreseen. They marched to fight, they fought to die, to live their whole lives in this world where things made their own twisted kind of sense. The average people startled like cattle, and shifted in clumps away from the marchers. But the marchers were proud, and stared ahead and saw only sun and sweat and the War between Chaos and Order and the backs of the other members of the Cult of Desperation.

"Then let us decide this. We shall fight. We will have a war, that perfect beast you have created, Chaos, throw our forces together and see what turns out. And whoever wins shall have it all."

"You think I'll agree to that, brother?"

**“How could you not? A chance to take the universe over, completely?
And by force, in a new and undiscovered way? How could you resist?”**

"You only suggest this because you think you'll win."

“Why else would I even consider the idea?”

"You dare to bargain with the Devil?"

“You dare to fight Death?”

Chaos's knight stood still. She smelled it, sharp and delicious. Change, irrevocable and tantalizing, struck the air.

But it struck the air more bitterly in Order's Army's office. The greyish men rose, startled, and assumed their formations.

A priest not too far away stiffened, and excused himself from the kind old lady he was talking to so he could shut down the church and send a warning to the others. Stiffly, he grabbed his peacemaker's armor and prayed to prepare himself for the fight. A cloud of white birds rose in the sky, the Dovekeepers signal to prepare for the worst.

The Bridge Society raised a toast and brought more paint in from the barn. This time, there would be more than just a surge of creativity to document the battle. No less than twelve hidden cameras captured the battle at the Cathedral of the Opposites.

The army of the Cult of Desperation stood still. The army awaited orders. On the shared intercom, an officer and high cult leader took a breath.

“After you, brother.”

"If you insist."

And so it began.

T i m e s t o o d s t i l l. The order that the cult leader was about to say was stopped, all cheers were halted, all prayers stood still, and hearts were caught between beats. Chaos had expected this. He waited in the nothing until his draconian form condensed, and time popped.

All at once the things that were about to happen burst into existence. The army lead by the cult of desperation threw themselves against the Cathedral of the Opposites, breaking and burning down the walls until their own weak hide broke and bleed. Their commander rasped out an order to begin the charge against the walls of the church itself. His teeth chipped against the plywood splinters. The Bridge Society made a toast in reverse, and splashes of paint showed a moment when the murals were finished, and a moment when the canvas was burning. The fury-drunk revelers laughed into their glasses. Oil slid against the walls, bubbled, boiled in their

veins. A Dovekeeper saw a bird fly backwards, tearing through space as it did. It made a sound like thunder as it blinked. His bullet already flew through the air, and he drew his gun.

“Pathetic. Truly, brother. That is all? Undoing time?”

"Time, at its most basic, is change. You ordered it into cause and effect."

“We both know this.”

"Order, you have played your first move."

“Yes, and so have you.”

"No brother, I have only removed the safety."

Beating hearts in a basement, bleeding, bleeding, burning, burning, laughing, laughing. Oil spilled down the walls, a thick black paint that perfectly captured the conflict above. Close eyes, but open them.

The Bridge society reveled. Marcus Johnson brought out a screen, and Samantha Belvire plugged in the cord. They worked together to connect to the hidden cameras and turn on the monitor. As the system began to play, the sizzling smell of burning meat filled the room. Marcus and Samantha went to the back room to get another bottle of champagne. They tread oil on the lush carpet. Marcus would have worried, but the fever of the fight and the wine overtook him, and he giggled at the rusty squishing sound of the oil. The Bridge Society saw colors on that screen, heard cracks and screams and other noises on that screen. They stood and applauded, clap-clap-clap, clap-clap-clap, clap-clap shhlug. Semi-solid hands condensed into that dark carbon mineral. A hundred wet tongues laughed, slapping against rotting teeth like dying eels.

Oil spilled and lapped, licked the walls. A last breath was spent laughing. A last muscle twitch flicked a lighter towards a cigar. Ignition filled the room with the solid fever heat, and all the oil brained people in the society laughed in coughing bubbles. The surge of burning fluid swirled around the mansion's basement, ate like acid at delicate and expensive patterns, tripling their complexities, scorch marks and bloodstains ringing the lilacs. Marcus and Samantha felt their flesh melt off bones, preserved in a drunken embrace. In their last moments, pain severed them from the conflict frenzy, and they realized the revelry of the Bridge Society had always been madness, always fated to go up in smoke.

“Chaos, is that all?”

"No, brother, that is not 'all'. The effect radiates out. It is slow, the system is rusty from years of your abuse."

"So you have made your play. If this is truly to radiate out, as you have said, perhaps I have underestimated you, my brother."

"Few things are more likely than you underestimating me."

"Then I will refrain from the restraint I have shown. The war begins. We will meet again."

Order bowed to Chaos.

Chaos bowed to Order.

Order left the temple.

Chaos sighed, and exited through the front doors.

She may have heard the screaming, and the twisting, and the breaking, she may have heard the sirens and murmured in her sleep, she may have felt the pounding footsteps, an evacuating heartbeat of a thousand heartbeats removing themselves from the city, but she was drunk, and effectively dead to the world. She slept in an alley behind rotting boxes and mewling cats, a position her body was much too used to. The quietness, in the end, was what woke her. She ached, and stretched, and opened her eyes to the overwhelming brightness of the afternoon. Wincing, she shifted, rolling in the mushy pinch of her bones and muscles and the sourness of her gums.

In a blur of brightness and pain she wandered into the empty city, as calm and alien as the bottom of the ocean if removed from its water. Rubble did not just line the streets but spilled out into the road itself, not just common garbage but the inner organs of houses, broken furniture and the crumbs of treasured belongings suddenly discarded. She wandered down empty streets and silent buildings in a haze. Four blocks away from where she woke up, she stopped. She cried out for someone, anyone. She cried for help. But her voice was lost in the tangle of motionless steel. She became quiet, inside and out. She found herself moving through the city, placing foot before foot mechanically, pacing through her daily wander; if her mind could barely understand what had gone wrong, her body could continue as if nothing had changed. So she wandered, headless and as empty as the abandoned buildings towering around her. Somewhere, her psyche twisted, giving grand and impossible explanations for the disappearance of a city. Visions of aliens, of terrorists, of God and government and toxins slipped through her, each one flying away before it could melt into the torn patterns in her reality. But the rhythmic beat of her own feet on the pavement kept her focus grounded. She was practical. She needed to survive, even if for no other reason than to find out what had happened to everyone else. Her eyes scanned the streets for flickers of motion and disruptions of sanity in the chaos. She searched for someone else.

The sludge, greyish and cold, expanded. The clammy businessmen stood, one foot at a time, knees bending unnaturally in stiff, pressed suits. They stood at attention, the heavy, wet weight bent the building gently inward. The businessmen's cold, grey eyes blinked, slowly, reptilianly, and in unison.

“Forward.”

Hearing their master's call they stiffened. The melting flesh of their exteriors was cracking already. The suits leaked silver-grey. One shoe in front of the next they marched, some knees bending backwards, some arms condensing into the sticky body and leaving an empty sleeve dangling. Two of the soldiers had fused together, towering top-heavy bulges of slime in suits toppled together and stuck, ears absorbed and faces twisted by the splattering union. The bulging army slipped through the office's rotating doorway out into the streets of the world. Two by two, line by line, they moved in an expanding circle outward, tracing the cardinal directions. The impacts of mucky limbs on solid concrete drove many of the soldier's legs inward, condensing the masses of slime into rotund coats, pieces of face and skin flaking off to show the swirled gray muck underneath. The slime marched on, solid blocks of Order's Army, simplifying the universe as they went.

In the trail of each soldier motion ceased. The world was simplified into its most basic elements; a fire hydrant was turned into a solid block of iron, with little curls of yellow paint neatly separated from the puddle of water left in the soldiers' wake. A city sapling was trampled by one of the suited blobs and gave in, blackening to ashy carbon with a final sigh of stored CO₂. An old man fallen in the streets was caught in the legs by the sludge, and his limbs were replaced with inert blocks of calcium, protein, and fat, even now simplifying further. The army was slow, tediously slow. But Order did not mind. Death would come, inch by inch, and take back the universe.

The first thing she saw was confirmation of a trickling feeling, a gathering weight of conflict, that enveloped her head. There was the rubble of evacuation even in more commercial areas, although it was sparser, and mostly scattered cars and the wrappings of necessities, abandoned bags and canned food deemed unnecessary. But suddenly, the waves of broken objects stopped, around an old church that looked more grown than build. The wood was polished by time and coated in an accumulation of multicolored stones. It was imposing, but small, dense but large, and never insignificant.

The space around the church... was dense with tension. Two twin forces--one so constraining that it strangled her mind, the other so wild that it tore apart and boiled the edges of

her being. Standing a good twenty yards away from the building and already her mortal mind, usually delicate, raw, and prone to rotting, now was simultaneously boiled and fried. The balance shifted like water sloshing in a bucket--violent, continuous, each shift forcing the whole container closer to spilling its innards out across the world. Then suddenly, the chords loosened, and the tension and the density of the air departed, settling from a deadly concrete into a mush of fever. The icy grip of stillness had vanished and the world dropped into a boiling heat, buzzing with too many moving parts. In the swelter, she was overwhelmed by all of the abandoned things, the people of the city lost somewhere, the phantom forces that she did not notice but felt trying to control the world. Everywhere were a hundred moving elements all liable to rust, rot, and scatter away into insanity.

And she was mortal--she bowed under the pressure of a steadily rising force of madness. On her knees she rested, breathing heavily after only a few moments of the pressures. She looked up at the church one more time, and her eyes caught the glance of some... thing. A being, full of unnatural motion blurred itself into the church. The body kept itself going mostly through vibrating, spring-like organs, so white hot and violently spinning that these inner mechanisms were visible even through the smooth, twisting, ever-shifting armor. The glint of the glance speared itself into her eye and directly into her mind, like swallowing a burning ingot. It buried in her psyche, roots scrambling the memories in her brain, mixing up her half-remembered childhood with the name of the color of her bones. The young sprout grew into the canopy of facts and figures, touching every basic pillar of her reality with a blooming fire that melted away sense. It reached into the deeper parts of her mind, and suddenly stopped. The fuel for the fire retreated, and the ashes of her mostly charred mind burned out into charcoal. With the fire gone, she could feel the coolness of blood pumping out of her brain, out into her lungs and chest, and out through her legs and arms into the coolest reaches of her fingertips. Her mind had been mangled before, and the deeper impulses picked up and carried the rest of her off, further, back into the city.

Only away from the sweltering by-product of Chaos's presence did she begin to make sense of her mind. She was sore in a different, broken, raw way, and all the alcohol left in her system had been burned out or cleared away by adrenaline. She began to remember things in her past. First her memory was just static, violent, loud, hot and bright, but bit by bit by bit pieces of the chaos melded together to create a swing that she had swung on, all the streets that she had walked through, the world and scents of a different city, and now and then she saw the hallways and doors of a country house she had lived in before her mind became fogged and pickled. Her body shuddered; and expelling the heat, she vomited. In the blurry buzz of her ill vision, pieces of what she had expelled crawled up the side of the wall and for the rest of time lived there, preying on rats.

She remembered names, and faces, and people, all disconnected and unmatched. Bill, and Cath, and Harry, who had an iguana and lived in New Mexico and was only a TV character and who she lived next to her for fourteen years. She remembered, suddenly, her own name. It was as

fuzzy and disorienting as all her personal memories were, but rung a bell to halt all further remembrance.

Susan.

That wasn't who she was, but who she had been, what people had called her and what people could use to describe her. She was finally willing, after the world had taken so much, after twenty long years of being no one nowhere, to give the world back that much of herself. All to find the rest of the city and the home she found in the buzz of a crowd that wanted nothing to do with her.

Then, from around the corner, a silvery blob emerged, cutting through the asphalt, a round knife of liquid acid erasing the world from existence.

Now the cool turned cold, icy and restraining. Her limbs were not loose enough to wander out on their own but tightly wound and stiff, bound to merge into her body and simplify her. Her emotions were drained, stiffening her essence. In the presence of this cold, emotionless death, only simple thoughts were allowed. Move. Away. NOW.

And Susan did, walking, foot before foot, step after step, walking, then running, deeper into the tangled web of the empty city. The cold, stiff air opened up, and emotions and hot blood flooded her system, and Susan ran until the blind panic subsided and she could feel her toes again.

Madness twitched, in eyes and teeth and muscle and bone. Her ever-shifting armor twitched, built itself in manic swirls and splashes and eddies to protect her twitching muscles. That mortal she had scared off was the last she'd seen around this place in a few hours. She shifted and dug her claws into the stone walls of the temple. Another seven near-parallel scratches etched into the solid rock. Suddenly, Madness heard the wooden door creak and open. Her father walked out into the world outside of the temple. She fizzed, tongue sizzling in an acid question. Her father nodded, but as she sprung off into a more liquid and four legged form to spread her powers, she felt a careful tap on her shoulder. The pressure halted all of her unstoppable and erratic movement, and she stilled herself, although it burned like broken glass.

"Stillness, child. Wreak havoc where you may, but I fear Order may be planning something. Keep an eye out for foul play. You know what to do with Order's Army."

Madness smiled an electric smile at her father. He had taught her what do with Order's Army indeed. She waited, staying in the stillness despite the pain. At last, Chaos released the pressure of his hold, and Madness sprang into fluid motion. She bounded across streets, into quiet buildings, past cheery shops, sneaking, sliding, silently all in motion, so fast that no one could ever sense more of her than the breeze she trailed behind. But in pleasant children and angry men and tortured women she might sometimes plant a seed, a beckoning idea of something

stranger. Something darker. Her own fingerprint, tearing holes in the human mind everywhere is touched.

She was whirling through the upper levels of an apartment building when she saw them. The greyish things, no longer trying to display any semblance of humanity. Now a trembling ear slid off the slick mound, landing on the ground with a dull, wet splat. They had eaten their suits, unraveled the complex fabric into powdered dye and delicate cotton. They moved now more through the earth than on it, viscous piles drifting outwards. They tore through buildings, deconstructing the concrete into a sandy dust.

From far in the distance, a single green truck, old and beaten, tore through the city streets. The man inside the truck sweated. He hadn't expected to go outside today. He was still in his bathrobe and underwear, for christ's sake. The beads of sweat on his forehead inched uncomfortably around the creases in his face, both from fat and the lashes of time. His joints ached from sitting still in a dark room for an uncountable number of hours. The sun pierced his constricted eyes in unfamiliar torture. The shock of the outside world made the experience of the man's delayed evacuation that much more frightening. His heart beat like a rabbit's, and his car swerved with unsteady, shaking hands on the steering wheel. The grey things, the destruction, the uncomfortable feverish feeling of conflict pounding in his head, it was all beyond his understanding. If he could get out of the city, he could try to process what he'd seen that day, and re-build his world around it.

The beaten green truck dodged around the blobs, frantically skidding to avoid the belongings of those who had already abandoned the city. The truck whipped around a corner, and in its frantic escape did not avoid the gelatinous soldier heading southwest into the financial district. On mucilaginous impact the car stopped dead. All energy ceased and the motor died. The inner workings of the car fell apart, jumbled by complete lack of tension into an oily auto-part soup. The hood of the car was slowly submerged into the glutinous cube, still shifting southwest. The man inside the truck screamed and screamed. The grey slime moved up, through the hood of the car, separating the oily puddle from the metals, and worked its way into the cabin of the truck. The man's body went slack, and his screams went silent. The streets were quiet again. The truck bed sank into the grey matter as it continued southwest, through an abandoned bank.

Madness cringed at the display. The quiet street, the careful order and this structured demolition of the city went against her being. It felt wrong, somehow. And the grey slime had stopped the lovely screaming. She bounded down onto the building, and into the bank and the path of the southwesterly blob. Observing its gelatinous form and its deliberate and tireless movement, Madness had a realization. This was one of Order's soldiers.

She bounded onto the ceiling. The soldier moved on, not affected by any force but its quest to turn the whole world into simplified matter. Madness sizzled with primal energy, and leaped into the lifeless cube, biting into the lifeless form until it bled. The soldier continued to move forward at a steady pace. It dully felt some impact onto its form, and reached out to cup the

new object in grey slime, to simplify it. But the matter around the new object blistered and boiled until the whole slimy mess was slick with blood. It began to harden and crust, covering the slime with a complicated red design. The soldier felt something... new. A sharp, bright tension, something beyond the cool relaxation that had enveloped the being for its entire existence. This new experience felt distinctly wrong. Madness bit down harder. The gelatinous being felt again, a kind of tension that rippled along its form. An icy feeling, fear at being hurt. Fear at being turned against its purpose. All of these feelings were complicated, defiant of Order and the soldier's purpose. The grey slime turned against itself, drawing more blood from some unknown point in the being's core. It dissolved half of its mass, ceased its forward motion, and spun wetly, like a dog chewing on ticks. Its own flesh, bubbled, boiled, blistered, silver-grey wells grew and popped into a thin liquid that hit the hardwood floors of the bank like acid. It pooled and puddled in the holes that it created, falling into a pattern of complexity abhorrent to the corpse of this ordered thing. The silver liquid now, instead of a dull, cool, calm, felt fury rile its own lack of flesh. The puddle shivered, hungry, angry, searching for more of its evil brothers to destroy. The rabid slime muttered bubbly curses as Madness bottled some of it. She prodded the rest with a stick and it slid backwards, smelling for fresh prey.

Madness shook the bottle of rabid liquid. It hissed and puckered, swirls of red appearing in the grey. She bounded back into the streets to fill the rest of her bottles.

In the twists and turns of dark alleys and sheltered crags, Susan stopped. Her breath was ragged, and in the calm and the quiet she found a moment to gather her thoughts and her aches together before continuing on. Outside the intestine turns of her favorite safe back alley and a few blocks east, there was a ritzy artistic district, full of colorful houses and ripe with the possibility of an open window. And at the very end of the road where the houses faded from bright colors and ornate designs the very last and largest of the houses sat, with its door wide open.

Susan hid just inside the doorway. Her eyes took a moment to adjust from the highest bright of the day. The shadowed cave of the house wafted out a rusty slime, like a preserved corpse, organic but unnatural. Slowly, the room fell into place--it was charred unnaturally, and oily footprints drew lines of travel in the carpet. The burn marks in the walls were like a layer of paint, going over the designs and adding to them rather than burning away at their complexity. The whole wall shifted at every glance, like sunlight at the bottom of a pool of water. And as the hallway descended down, in the narrow corridors of the house, a dark substance lapped, rumbling like laughter.

Susan, normally, would have fled at this point. A long time spent being lost had taught to run from anything she couldn't understand. But today was different. Today she was sober,

chemically and spiritually. The world was blindingly bright, but she was looking at it. And this was the first trace of humanity she had seen since she woke up.

Down into the hallway. One foot in front of the other, the carpet slowly filled with oil as she descended. It got hotter, a heat left in the shadow of some greater fire, like a burner left to cool when dinner is done. Susan turned down switchback hallways, in a true labyrinth--no wrong turns, but no turns that felt right. And still, the hallway grew darker and deeper. Along the walls char and ash grew to embers, and the slow red light of dying flames aged in reverse. The glow grew with each step, and sunlight bowed out in favor of this unnatural illumination.

On the walls, hidden by embers and splattered with the dark black blood of the earth, the halls that were at first narrow, grew wider, deeper, and richer. The walls had paintings, grand, gilded works, made for kings and churches and businessmen and reclaimed through centuries of mishandling back to the source. There was little real art. The paintings were no heavier than the canvas and colors that carried them. Even though the paintings pictured grand events and people who were larger than just a neck and some shoulders, the pictures did not echo on beyond their gilded frames, did not continue past their boundaries. They were inauthentic and unrebelling. And no matter what the pictures was of, be it tears or laughter, a funeral or a stable, nothing existed in it but the beige and milky feel of labor and the gassy aroma of money being counted. This was a bank of art.

Finally, at the very bottom of the hallway, the house opened up into a basement, with a few oak doorways leading to different meeting rooms. At the very center, illuminated by a few broken lights still burning, and the embers coating the wall like slime, the largest of the doorways still brought up oil like a sick dog. Susan shivered, violently, her bones shaking off the stench of death that her nose could not smell because the world was drowned in oil.

Then the flickering lights which bounced her eyes around the room and spun them in her head flickered in unison, guiding her vibrating attention to a point--the corner of the room. Because at the edge of the basement, now an ankle deep pool of oil, there were two bodies, wrapped together in a knot. The flesh was blackened and pressed tighter from heat. Susan stepped towards the corpses, almost unconsciously inching closer, splashing oil onto the burning wallpaper. But the fire was spent. The... edges of the bodies dripped oil. Parts of them were only a little red, loosely covered in burnt clothing, but in other places the charred flesh had flame-gashes deep enough to expose bone. The whole pile of flesh glistened in the emberlight, soaked in charred blood. It smelled vaguely like roasted meat that had sat out in the sun for a day.

Susan held back bile. Her knees felt weak, and her head fuzzy. She didn't want to think about that shape in the corner anymore. She turned her back to the bodies to face the door.

The handle was hot, and burned her hand when she turned it. Inside the room was where the real fire had been. The walls had burned away to their concrete foundation. A surge of oil rushed out, deeper into the house, like it had been trapped in that room and was now running away. Melted chairs circled the metal legs of a solid oak table, and the shattered glass of a large

and expensive television bled oil on the ground. But there were no people, no remains, not even a trace that people had been here but the remains of a painting, and a few scraps of burned cloth. The emptiness was uneasy, and the oil seemed to scrape against Susan's legs, grasping, begging. She turned away from the burned room. A moment in the center room was spent paying respects to the thing in the corner, and those that might have died. Then Susan walked up and through the twisted hallway, calmly escaping the secret rooms that those souls below could never be free of.

In the fake room, near the doorway, she sat and thought empty thoughts. She dozed as the panic retreated and left her with unconsciousness. She dreamt vacant, searching dreams.

In the fuzzy, half-waking world, a solid shadow lurked in the doorway. From her stress-imposed blackout Susan climbed to consciousness.

Covered in ash and oil, scarred down to the quick, and half-asleep in stress, was how Father William found Susan. He shook her awake, and with a naive and dogmatic kindness he smiled. Susan tensed, and shook herself away from the strange man. But the holy father offered her his hand. He said that this was, indeed, a strange time, but he was helping the survivors. Most of the city had evacuated already, but for those left in the place of these... incidents, he offered a place of safety. His own church. He would never leave it, not even as it burned down.

This did not comfort Susan. The sincere vapidness of this holy father, the assuredness of his aid, the kindly power he held, none of that comforted Susan. But Father William was a human, painfully so. He knew where the evacuated of the city were. And he knew a fraction of what had occurred that day. And he had food, and clean water, and maybe some brandy for your nerves, dear?

And really, what more do you need than that? So Susan let herself be guided through the city inefficiently, avoided certain empty stress in favor of those with more high-class rubble. Father William told Susan of God's providence, and the blessing that he had found her. Susan was glad not to talk, because her voice was raspier than she remembered. And so she let herself be led home to her city through the streets of it's corpse by the pleasant chatterings of an imbecile.

Order sat in the empty office. Condensed, he took up little space, and at his most relaxed, the chill from the radiating energy vacuum that he was could pull miles of terrain into absolute zero. But today, Order sat, contained. The place was silent, still, an empty warehouse, with its soldiers gone. The illusion of an office building would fill the mind of any mortal soul that happened into the place. But their eyes would reflect the mounds of dusty mineral powder, the raw but ordered chunks of plain, uncolored rock that filled the expanse of the room. It was the closest this strange new world that Chaos had built could come to the pristine peace of Order's old domain.

Order sighed. His soldiers were his power now. On his own, truly, he had very little power left. Dividing his being into orderly pieces seemed to be the most logical, simple plan. His power could not be destroyed. He would make Chaos wait, Order's own special touch pulling his brother into that special kind of torture. Chaos's impatience would be his downfall. But Order felt...weak. Sapped. Old. He had changed, as impossible as it was for the Order of the universe to shift. The pieces of him that he used to make his soldiers were his stability, his cool, his calm. The nervous worry prickling his brow angered him--the fever of emotions was already gnawing at his being, tearing him apart from the inside out. Order was one, a being, unchanging, past, present, and future in unison. He was **never** wrong.

His soldiers would order the world. He would have to trust in that. Order closed his mind from the outside world and dreamed of an absence of feeling.

Father William's church was lofty and empty. On the front pews he had gathered a few necessities of survival: blankets, first aid kits, and few large buckets of water, and (praise the lord) a large pot of soup.

Susan was given a trauma blanket. She wrapped herself in it like numbness, like a bandage around her entire, oil-soaked body. Her fingertips were dull from the heat, and the cold. Her eyes were numbs from too much, too many. Her nose could not rid itself of the smell of the rancid oil. But her tongue reveled in soup. It was hot, and spiced, and full of noodles. Small pieces of some meat and onions bobbed playfully in the reddish broth. The salt and prick of peppers warmed her up from the inside out. Sitting on the hard, wooden pew, listening to the vibrations in the holy father's constant babble, and beginning to feel the ticklish spice of the soup she laughed. It was a raspy laugh, like a spasm of the lungs. The father patted her on the back, told Susan to just let out her pain; so Susan laughed harder, at him, directly. At his stupid hair, at the strangely proper way he insisted on providing aid to her, at the city she had lost and the broken things on the ground, at the very heat and cold that had torn her nerves to dull and shaky instruments, not to be trusted. She laughed for a long time.

She ate bowl after bowl of the soup, until the many spices, plants, and peppers of the broth overtook the bloody smell of oil. Until her hands, instead of feeling, shook with the scent of garlic and ginger and the leaves of distant spices. Father William gave her a bucket of clean water, told Susan not to trust the taps, and sent her to wash clean.

Her clean and shaky hands could not beat all of the oil out of her clothes. She kept her innermost layers on, and lay next to her freshly-washed coat, drying in the warmth of the sun. For the first time, she slept, and dreamed the same dream she always dreamed. In her sleep she found a golden sheen, and a perfect temperature, balanced between the two extremes. Warm day, cool breeze.

Inside his church, William kneeled in his empty church and prayed. By his side lay his gun, his sharp ceremonial sword, and his final dove, the red bird that could only be released at the moment of his death. It would be hours, still, until his brothers, the other Dovekeepers, arrived in the city, and began to gather. Hours still until they all would mob in their heavy armor around that ancient temple, with swords and guns and holy water, to end the fighting. For now, William's church, sister to the Cathedral of Opposites, would shelter the people of the city, just a few of the many that he must protect. William turned his soul to God, and asked for sign, for aid, for haste and hope. It was quiet and the air was still. The city had already been evacuated. Susan was likely the only survivor he would find. His knees were beginning to ache.

The front door creaked open, loud in the stillness. William whirled around from where he was kneeling. A hooded figure had entered the church. The robe the figure wore was darkly red, like old blood, and sewn with delicate silver thread. Beneath the hood lay shadows, and a mind simmering with secrets. It knew how to use a squid's blood to make a man obedient, and it understood how much money a soul was really worth. It had memorised a list of the one-hundred and twenty-seven lives that actually mattered, and this figure's life was on that list. William, in his strange and pleasant mind, thought it might be Brother Garfield, arrived early, and so welcomed the robed figure to his church with open arms. William fell, limp, onto the floor of the church, lifeless. The figure reached down, and lifted William's head. His body still spasmed, and William's jaws were clenched together by a dying force. The figure took a gloved hand and pried the man's jaws apart, and reaching into his throat brought out a cheap, plastic bishop piece. The corpse's eyes followed it, even in death, and the figure expressed a hiss of pleasure beneath his hood. The soul was encapsulated, and now, a possession. The figure placed it within an inner pocket. In a final death-spasm, Father William's foot kicked out and knocked over his bird's cage. The bird escaped, and flew out, screaming.

The robed figure sat, and placed his feet on the pew in front of him. He wouldn't need get a lackey from the Order of Desperation to hide the body this time. An empty city lets loose its shadows.

But Susan watched. She had awakened in a cool rush, because something was not right. But her clothes were dry, and she was clean. Down the stairs. She approached the praying man silently, then watched through the doorway as his life was taken. As the hooded figure sat down, Susan backed into the shadows of the church. Now, she had options.

But her head ached. Susan could find a dark corner of the church and hide, wait for this hooded figure to leave, for this disaster to blow over. In the quiet she could sleep, and drink sacrificial wine, and then the brandy, and just exist until the world returned to normal, like it always had before.

Or she would be found by the masked figures allies and killed for no good reason.

Susan braced herself against this new understanding. This man would kill her. The only reason she had not yet been killed was because she had not been seen, because she was very, very good at staying hidden.

And then, her second option. Father William had, in his ceaseless chatter, mentioned that some others, like himself, would be arriving at the church. Seeing William's body, and Susan, hiding in a shadowed spot, drinking the sacrificial wine and William's personal brandy, might not persuade them to lend Susan their aid. But she could play the victim. She could cry on cue. She could let more Father Williams chase after the hooded figure when she was safe and far away.

And they too, would be killed.

Susan inched closer to the doorway. The hooded figure began to chant, to draw in empty space, and a raw electrical impulse filled the church. He pulled, slowly, delicately, with extreme focus, at two points in the air, and the space around him pulsated like a liquid. He pulled a portal to a dark room like hot taffy through the air. And this was the third option: the opening was large.

Susan braced herself to run.

The hooded figure "tied off" the portal in the air with a gesture. It seemed more solid now, steady. As the figure stepped through, Susan sprinted from her watching-space and across the church, pushing the figure out of her way to force herself through the portal and into the murky depths of the foreign room.

In the musty room, a deep chuckle rumbled, like a warning hiss from a snake about to strike. The figure was behind her, and she tried to run, but she could not move. She felt the leathery pressure of the figure's hand on her shoulder. He leaned closer, until she could feel, not his breath, but the chill hiss of his words on his neck.

(Go on, then. Run. I like your desperation. Cling to it.)

And as the pressure of his grip lifted, Susan ran for everything that she was worth. Turning, she narrowly escaped another figure, whose feminine laugh chilled her to the bone.

(Run! Run! Run! We like our prey fresh!)

And in a moment, another faceless figure. They erupted like shadows from the corners and crags in the walls, and Susan's lungs hurt from running. The rooms spun--corners became flat, and open doors melted into shadowed hallways in a heartbeat. The low hiss gathered up, a many-faced laughter that swirled around her, and the stabs of terror as they puppeted Susan within the maze. The leathery hands grew nails of pins and knives and the small cuts they jabbed into Susan bled a trail along the ground. The red swirled into the dusty blue and lightless walls, tracing arrows, laughing faces leading her faster, faster around to the next jab, the next laughing, hissing *thing* which taunted her with pain and powerful motions guided her to the next, and the next, and after and on until all at once:

(WHUMP)

Susan crashed into one of the figures, knocking his hood off and exposing his face to the dull blue light. She backed away from the now all-too-face-filled figure. At a glance, it was-- but first Susan leaned against the wall and tore her pain out of her body through bile and acid. She

retched until she could no more. Against the wall, she leaned her tilting world to darkness. She breathed, deep, raspy strokes.

And a hand reached out, but she tore at it before it could reach her. The glove fell off, showing a hand collected from bicycle gears and springs, bones and twigs and marble joints, a hand made of things, both precious and forgotten. The face was full of the same; a glass eye, tubing whirling some strange green liquid through to a pig's jaw, connected with wire to a crooked nose and a camera lens that blinked at her in shock. The wet, lolling tongue pulsated.

(We did not expect you to be so strong)

“There's a lot you didn't expect about me.”

The figures encircling her moved at her words, a rustling chatter of robe to robe.

(We apologise. You are desperate. We offer... solutions to this. Would you join us?)

Susan panted against the wall. Its support grounded her to reality. In, out. Blood sluggishly flowed to her brain.

“No. Get me out of here.”

(Then we would need to make a trade, of some kind.)

“Like the trade Father William made?”

(A life trade? That could be arranged.)

The rolling, oversized tongue dripped two drops of green liquid onto the floor. Drip. Drop. The eye rolled, unfocused. Susan leaned harder into the wall.

“No. No, you bastards. Get me out of here!” Susan pounded against the wall, but her force was silenced.

(Come with us. See the place we have made. Then you may reconsider.)

“Will you kill me if I don't?”

(...)

“Fine.”

The room dissolved, and Susan found herself in an industrial bunker, swarming with people. The room was gone. She leaned on nothing and fell through air, bruising herself on the dusty concrete.

Susan was helped up by a young woman. She was thin, and pale. Her skin was delicate--it had not been exposed to light or the elements in some time. But in her smile was a ferocity that Susan could not explain. Susan was helped up because that was what this woman had to do.

“Thank you.”

The woman stood, silent, and nodded, before walking away. The bunker was not spacious, but it was large, and she appeared to be in some common area. Plastic chairs and tables were scattered across the room, and people flowed in and out rhythmically. The artificial lights cast a yellow glow over the bare concrete surfaces, and the dull metal lockers that filled the walls of the room. And the room was loud, so that every sound echoed-- every footstep, the clatter of metal doors, the echoing bounce of children's toys-- but what was missing was talk. Not a word

was spoken. And every person living in the bunker had the same ferocious intent hidden beneath their skin. They were desperate.

Susan walked towards one of the tables. Three middle-aged men, and one woman, sat around the table, drinking out of identical plastic cups. But two of them passed between them a notebook, filled with a hurried scrawl. They took turns-- one would read for a moment, glance over at the other and shake his head. Then, he would fill the page with words, and pass back the notebook. Susan grabbed a chair and sat at the table with them.

They all looked up at her approach, and smiled, cordially. The friendliest of them, an old man with curly gray hair, even waved at her.

“What is going on here?”

A few tables stopped what they were doing and stared at her. Everyone at her table stopped, and made muttering glances. Even the man writing in the notebook halted mid-word, and bit his lip. The man with curly grey hair grabbed the notebook from his friend, and wrote something, passing it to Susan to read.

How can you talk?

“I just can. What, do you mean you can’t talk? Any of you?”

The youngest at the table looked around and gestured to Susan, motioning her to keep her voice down. In a voice low enough to be hidden by the bustle of the common room, she continued.

“So why are you all here?”

The man with curly grey hair took back the notebook, and scrawled out a response.

We are the desperate.

We here, at this table, were scientists, researching the type of occult powers that our protectors are so proficient in.

“Protectors? You mean the-- the people made of-- the hooded people?”

The table nodded, in earnest. Susan continued to read.

We reached far, even recreating the procedures we were studying. We made small creatures out of spare parts, bits of feather and a broken vial. Our work drew their attention.

They told us about Order, and Chaos. These two forces battle, from time to time, causing conflict to spread over the world. Our organic bodies are good conductors of these energies. We humans feel, very strongly, the forces that make up our world. Our protectors are the leaders of the Cult of Desperation, and they have realized that that power, above all, is the most important thing. They seek it out, which is why they have us. We are the desperate people of the world. We will live on, even after the world is torn to bits. We will survive, because we are desperate.

I’ve noticed that you are not like us.

“You’re right. I don’t think I am what you are.”

The woman took the notebook and wrote.

You are beyond the control of the protectors.

“How can you tell?”

The woman smiled, and took a deep breath. Opening her mouth she tried to scream, and a sliver of the sound escaped. But it was like the rest had been captured, torn away before her vocal chords could even make the noise.

The woman took the notebook back to explain.

And they control our movements, at times. There are doors that no one can open, rooms that stay open, that no one can go in.

You must be very powerful. They have mistaken your power for desperation. They will try to make you think that you are under their control, but you are not. However, that doesn't mean that it will be easy for you to leave here.

“Why would I leave?”

The protectors will figure out their mistake soon enough. You need to get out of here while you can.

“Fine. What do I do to get out of here?”

The youngest man glared at the woman and took back the notebook. He wrote quickly, then passed around the notebook. The table glared at each other, and the argument quickly ran around the table. Most were in agreement, but at one point, the youngest man wrote a single sentence and then got up and left. So the man with curly grey hair took the notebook and explained to Susan.

We have decided to help you get out. Walk with us, and we will go as far as we can. But we will have to turn back. There's a tangle of deserted rooms before the exit to the bunker. Walk as far as you can, and run when you feel them watching you. Good luck.

Susan looked up and nodded. The rest of the group stood, and she followed as they led her past bunks, a cafeteria, more storage rooms, and even laboratories. They turned down plain hallways into a deeper portion of the bunker. Here, the hallways slanted up. The walls were plain white, and fewer rooms spread out from the main halls. Now, closed doors protected the rooms, and strange noises, buzzing, wailing, and echoing silence leaked out the cracks. Lights, deep blue, dark purple, blazing red, fell into the hall. The scientists panted heavily. They stopped every now and then, visibly fighting some force that Susan did not feel. One by one, they turned back, unable to fight any longer. The last one, the grey-haired man, walked slower and slower until stopping completely. He leaned forward, pushing against some unseen object. Susan turned back to help him, but as she grabbed his hand he lept away, blisters appearing on his fingers. Then, his fingers crumbled, down into black dust. The rest of his body followed. Susan walked away, then felt a cool prickling on the back of her neck and in her ankles. She began to run.

The halls turned blue, a light blue, as Susan ran further and further on. She could feel the pressure building behind her eyes, but she refused to turn to look at the fast approaching figures. She could hear their creaky steps behind her. The rattling their scattered organs. The hiss of green liquid. She felt a drop on the back of her neck, and suddenly she was falling through clear blue space. The wind shifted out of stillness and blew her into the edge of some kind of membrane.

She hit the edge of it, and it caught her and bent, pulling and tearing out of space. It ripped, sending out a crack like thunder, and Susan was falling through clear blue sky.

When she stopped falling, she was face down in the asphalt, and all around her was the familiar buzz of people chattering, trading goods and help and tears. The colors, sounds, and smells were so familiar that Susan could almost cry. She had found her city.

Chaos's weapon marched on. From the center of the city, people of all kinds and ages ran, feet hit the concrete and scared breaths filled the air. The gentle chatter of organization, the mothers murmuring to calm their crying children, the rush and clatter of many things being carried to many cars, even the nervous rolling of so many eyes in so many eye sockets filled the world that was the people of the city with a rushing, halting type of music that drew the herd of dewy refugees closer and closer together. The tremor of the herd's fears, of the dull shock of losing *everything*--it drew the denizens of the city into a primal homeostasis. They moved their belongings from place to place and did not think. The herd allowed this. A single unit in the larger mass does not need to think, only survive.

The torn and bloody remnants of the Cult of Desperation had become deserters. This was only what was expected from them--each and every member was ready to die for their cause. But the soldiers had out-survived their purpose, and so were honorably discharged from the Cult and its secrets. They, like the rest of the Cult, had sworn to be desperate for one thing, and one thing only. Survival. So these bloodied young soldiers emerged from the coliseum of lamp-post trees and pothole quicksand and approached the Herd.

As they drew closer, the Herd startled, and some of the mothers of the Herd clutched their children to their breasts. Among the soldiers, an old man who used to have a blue-collar life before his family was destroyed by an unearthly power had joined the cult to bash his life against the same universe that had taken all the meaning from it. Now his strong arm, the one he used to rely on to earn a living, hung limply at his side. His ribs hurt, possibly broken. He remembered the days when he would have been among something like the Herd, and bristled at it. Those like him, dead and alive, stood with him.

A young girl remembered when her small town cast judging eyes onto her, cast her out into the cold empty air when all she asked for was a home. She stabbed herself with ornamental metals, then knives, then needles, and became desperate. The Cult had shaped her into a homeless force that she could be proud of, and seeing the Herd and feeling its warmth made her jealous, and she bristled. Those like her, dead and alive, stood with her.

But their de facto leader, a young man, too young for the Cult he had been born into, jaded from a small lifetime filled with desperation, pushed them back. The soldiers were injured, lost, and desperate above all. They needed the protection, the resources, and the soft mental mattress of the Herd. If the most desperate among the Desperate knew it, then they all would

bow into conformity, for now. All the soldiers were like-minded in this, and they stood with their leader.

The red rash of soldiers grouped together at the edge of the Herd's domain. The soldier's leader took a careful position in the front of the band, and flanked the Herd. The swirl, the rusty, bruised company, mimicked his actions like a school of fish. The two groups, small and large, twirled like dancers, intermingled, and darted away from each other, taunting, teasing, then mixed again, this time talking to each other, like color in paint or sugar in tea, with a warm rightness that permeated the soldier's tension and pleased the Heard.

Oh you poor dears, remarked the Heard. You just wanted to help. Here. I'm here. We've got you.

Cuts were bandaged and bones set. The Desperate felt a warmth, watery and weak, enter their bodies. It numbed them, brought them down from the adrenaline high that made the fight worthwhile, tended to their mental wounds. There was a warmth here, delicate and desperate, that mimicked the soldiers and assimilated them. The Herd was for survivors, for the lost and the broken, for people that had dead men standing with them, over them, giving and taking strength in equal measures. The Herd was for the soldiers, and they soon melted their broken, peeling their desperation into the hive mind heart of it, and every one of them let the warmth overtake their needs.

Then came the horrible sickening crunch that set refugees on fire.

Then came the change, the burning of bones breaking, of children crushed to pulp by walking buildings, rolling with a terrifying life force, bouncing and buzzing over the world as the city itself came to take back what was rightfully its own property.

Then came the delay. In the cruel moment of quiet, the only sound was the crash and the crunch, dull, senseless, so insane as almost to be peaceful. It seemed, in the popping of lungs and the gasp of death and the shattering of bones, that any sound, any sound but the noise of destruction of bodies, would be better than the silent horror. That was when the screams began.

The herd broke, torn open and scattering the survivors into the frigid air. The piercing wails punctured the safety, struck the newly-formed familiarity until the whole scene rang like a bell, vibrating on the voice boxes of the damned. There was the moment that was worse, because the screaming didn't stop the wet crunching noises, just drowned them out in the blood-curdling chorus. It was the moment that years of evolution has prepared humanity for, to survive and endure the greatest disaster, the fragmentation of the large protective group, the melee of deadly pandemonium that brings old instincts up to do battle and defy the oldest enemy there is--death.

Then the voices kept on screaming, long past when they should have run out of blood. Those who had been swept away into the final release of pain were still suffering. Death, who's open arms provide the final comfort, a welcome treason against life's creator Chaos, and into the realm of inert matter, those arms had closed and turned away. What was left was living, conscious remains, feeling a delirious pain and wrongness that would last through any injury.

And far above the mutilated human mash, thin dark shapes, insect-like limbs, metal knife-like iron bars scuttled, scraping their phalanges upon the ground, through people, animals, and bare ground with equal force. The bulky looming buildings lurked unstably far above, casting dark cubic shadows across the earth. They buzzed with life, and their bulk strangled their lust for movement. Every step bounced the whole of the monstrous, massive structure uneasily, and every next step was the only action keeping the whole thing from crashing down. The people below felt their hearts rock their bodies with furious fear, and their legs sent them running far away from the only living people they knew, and their pupils filled their eyes until their eyes looked only like two twin holes in their skulls, and their brains lost all sense of personhood and entered the domain of animals.

Susan had found herself, finally, alive, and within the protection of her people. In the Herd's warm glow, someone gave her help, and lead her to a cot better than what she normally slept on when the city was whole. She had rested and healed.

She had the same dream she always dreamed. Warm day, cool breeze. In its golden glow, she felt strong. In its golden glow, she almost felt the hole where her memories were not heal up. But she had to wake up, eventually.

And when she did wake up, it was to the sound of screaming.

The Herd was gone, and in its place was the chaos of living buildings. Like the city taking back revenge for some unknowable crime, the long, spider-like legs crushed and jabbed and tore through the people, only freshly scabbed over. Susan ran, dodging legs and broken pieces of concrete. A rock narrowly missed her head as she felt the pulse of fear rock through her body again.

But strangely, that feeling was stopped. She felt calm. She knew, with clarity, that she had to get to the edge of the clearing. It made sense. Warm day, cool breeze.

Amid the destruction, the humid, bubbling vortex of fervor swept over her, but was washed away by yet another pulse of golden calm. Warm day, cool breeze.

She followed her feet.

She followed the sway of her arms, and the turns and twists of her muscles, staying even.

The natural curve of the sidewalks, of the earth as a whole, drew her gently back down into the city, through the screaming, and now further into the tangle of dessicated blocks.

Warm day, cool breeze.

Order woke. He sat up, mind whirling with a single, undeniable fact. He wasn't whole. He had been complicating things, making his plan the new, convoluted order of the world, when

it was not. No, order was simplicity, the less interlocking pieces, the fewer components, the more uniformity, the better. He reached out his power and again felt the trembling, filmy sensation of weakness. He discovered his soldiers, and called them back, into himself, washing away their rabidness, discarding the fallen, rejecting the individuality each greyish figure contained itself with.

He brought his power in and became Order again.

“That *is* better. Much, much better.”

Order flexed, and stood. It was his turn now, and he had a better plan.

Then, all at once, among the burning slapping tongues, the firing of unloaded guns, the screams of babies and the roars of minds gone mad, there was silence. The stillness was dull and sticky, every soul held between invisible pinchers, pulling the ribs tighter and tighter together, condensing the heart and the lungs. Every single living being not already torn to pieces has internally strangled, individually.

"Cheater."

“Oh, so now you care about rules.”

The pressure stopped increasing, but held an inch between life and death.

“Brother, call off this game.”

"Only if you are willing to lose, brother. You have no more soldiers. I have won."

“But I am still here. Your game has no meaning.”

"Yes, it does. It has meaning because we decided on the meaning. You said that we would play the game, this war, and we both agreed, so—"

“You don’t need to explain the game to me, Chaos. It simply has no meaning. We made sounds at each other. That is not meaning.”

"You sound like your old, self, Order. Different."

“Yes. I am more like my old self.”

"I don't like it."

“I know, brother.”

"Order, what will it take to make you give up?"

“Nothing. Everything. I will not give up. Try, brother. You will see.”

"What if I killed you?"

“What?”

"What if I killed you? It would work, wouldn't it, you wouldn't be around. You would go. Finally leave me alone, let me have my chaos in peace."

“You can’t kill me.”

"You did ask me to try, brother."

Chaos flickered. Order shifted slightly, the first movement he had made since entering the desolated city block where the brothers were talking. Chaos motioned with his hand, calling his daughter to him. Madness appeared, expectant, hopeful. She wanted her father's approval of all the rabbids she had collected. He reached down and patted her shoulder, and even though it burned like a fever, Madness stood still, and let him show her more affection than he ever had indicated having. Chaos grabbed her neck in his hand and choked her, squeezing until her scally form grew limp. For good measure, he cracked her vertebrae between his fingers, letting the pink juices fall onto the concrete. Her head separated from her neck, face etched into a permanent expression of expectant obedience. He chewed her skull between his teeth, feeling the gum of her brain stick. Chaos opened up the rabbids she had captured, and drank every silver-red bottle, letting the buzzing energy of his own power fall into his limbs. He wiped the silver, red, and pinkish fluids off of his lips.

“Are you quite finished?”

Order had observed the process dully, not with the careful fascination he had maintained before. Chaos answered with an explosion. The ground beneath the two collapsed upwards flinging both of them into the upper atmosphere, and down again into the ground with the force of an atomic bomb. Order collapsed into a fine dust, and Chaos splashed his twitching body across half the city's rubble. Both condensed rapidly. Chaos jabbed at order with talons, Order did not move but hardened, and Chaos's fingers cracked into Order's side, splitting at odd angles and going limp. His thumb sizzled and burnt, and an ashy material flaked off. Chaos bristled, and brought back the living buildings from their maiden frenzy. They smashed through the rubble, cracking and chopping and tearing up the ground beneath their spikes. Order smoothed the ground down, replacing rubble with a glassy field of perfectly level ground. The buildings fell and skidded, tumbling, tossing, bouncing and buzzing around, and continued to pulse towards Order. They spun onto every side, crumbling and scratching the glassy ground. When they reached Chaos the buildings rose up behind him, a tsunami of buzzing arachnid steel, then descended upon Order in a whirlwind storm of rushing, crumbling pieces.

They jabbed, spun, feinted, stabbed. Every beastly building almost crumbling under the intensity of its own ferocious destructive impulse. Chaos moved among them like a predator, pawing, clawing, biting at them to keep the monsters on task. The weaker buildings stabbed at Order and disintegrated, barely leaving a scratch on him. But the bigger buildings rattled and crashed into him, taking mouthfuls from his form into their roomy mouths with broken window teeth before being torn to cement dust but their vicious celebration of victory. Order let them bite, kick and scratch. His eyes watched Chaos, following him, losing him, finding him, prowling through the legs of his monsters like a jungle cat. For an instant, Order latched onto Chaos's movement, and stretched out a shadow of a tendrel, a long, thin, winding vein beneath the torn pavement, stabbing through Chaos's hide and into his bloodstream.

Chaos's eyes ached and throbbed with sudden stabbing pain. His skull steamed with a chilling numbness up through his entire body from the vine Order had sent. It squirmed inside

him, then hardened--an iron spike against which his entire body struggled. Chaos's stomach pulsed away from the spike, and throughout the whole in his midsection Chaos reached his trembling hand, grabbing, then slipping, then latching on to Order's spike. He pulled it out of his body with a wet ripping noise, and recondensed. Gasping, Chaos dropped to his knees.

Then, from the sky came raining down twenty more spikes.

They pierced Chaos over and over and over until all that was left was the pain, the mad, feverish pain. His body boiled, steamed, and left solid frozen chunks still gripping the bars buried in concrete. He swam, squirmed, and recondensed twenty feet away from the point of impact, half the size he was before. Lurching he heaved, heaved--and reached into the back of his skull, through his mouth, to remove the final, solid, steaming spike. He dropped into the pavement with a thud.

Order slowly, inch by inch, came nearer to where Chaos laid. Like a rug being dragged across the rocky ground, Order drew the world towards him rather than truly move himself. Finally, Order reached the limp body of his brother. Order reached out an indistinct limb, to feel the cold corpse for himself.

By the time he recognised the irregular, rhythmic heartbeat, it was too late.

Chaos stabbed through the whole of Order's form with the spike pulled from his own head. It stuck through Order's dense body like a condensed block of tar, sinking slowly but with obliterating certainty into the whole substance of Order's being. The leftover slop fell to the ground, inert. The blackish muck pooled irregularly. Chaos rubbed his hands together, trying to remove the ashy tarred deposit of a corpse. Some globs of black blood fell onto the rubble.

Chaos stood, worn, sore, but alive. The city's rubble was sprawling, chaotic, almost beautiful. The long, flat plane of glassy level ground stretched on beyond what the eye could see, and it was scarred irregularly by the remnants of conflict. It was punctuated but the corpses of buildings, with small, scavenger structures tearing away at the bones of the fallen. The spikes were lost in the madness. Chaos would have to collect them, and make sure that no one who opposed them used the spikes to overthrow his rule.

His rule.

Chaos looked to the sky and laughed. He laughed and laughed. He let the full, fiery feeling of emotions (his greatest invention) corse through him; all of the grief for his brother, the joy of control, the guilt at his murder, the decadent sensation of victory, it all wound through him and worked their way into a wild frenzy. He laughed at the sky, at his pain, at his joy in getting the only thing he had ever been denied, control. He would let loose, and paint the world into murderous colors that he had not yet invented! Let life beckon forth a new ear with no death! Long reign the king!

And Susan watched.

Her feet had led her towards the battle. Seeing Chaos now brought only a mild heat. His twisted teeth, his claws, his hundred arms, all twitching and crackling at every angle, all brought together to create a draconian splinter of lighting serrating through reality--it all seemed so

familiar. If she could only pull through the memories, she was sure she would place the gnarled face among the people in the pictures in her old country home. And then Order, who brought with him a chill wind, seemed also so familiar. The inky silver sludge, spilling over and over, moving and yet not moving, now seemed to be a cloaky thing, then a cube, then a tombstone, and then merely a colorless, lacking thing, invisible yet tangibly present.

Chaos laughed and laughed. He sat on a chunk cracked cement, and he looked out into his city. He shook silently with some ferocious concoction of laughter and sobs. He seemed almost pathetic in his happiness. The golden breeze that was holding Susan together, that had held her together for so long, even before these few maddening days, just rustled inside her, with steady rhythm and overwhelming calm. The Earth, the humans, the universe. Not a king of much, then. Chaos still shook with complex emotion.

“Are you alright?”

Chaos whirled around and saw--a small, old woman. Her hair was white. Her skin was wrinkled and tanned, either through a hard life too early or a length of time on Earth that had pickled her body entirely it was impossible to tell. Her eyes were softly glowing gold, and the tip of her hairs drifted in a sea breeze that could be smelled, but not felt. And a chill ran through Chaos as he looked at her and her cool breeze scraped across his bones. The fever melted at the very edges.

"Who are you?"

“That’s a good question. A question I’ve asked myself, a few times. I can’t remember much, but now and then I catch a few glimpses. I used to be a friend, a country person. I used to be Susan. I’m not really sure who I’ve become.”

Susan looked down at her hands. They were just as wrinkled as they had always been, and somewhere in the back of her mind that seemed impossible. Her fingernails cast a soft golden glow, catching the light of falling dust particles.

"No, no. That's not right!"

He backed away from her. Chaos grimaced, and his body rippled into a leopard-like figure with scales of twisted, multi-colored glass. It clattered, and sizzled beneath the hide with the acrid smell of burning rubber. But the sea breeze moved the fever-smell along into the world.

"I remember you. I've seen, smelled... I know of you. You are not mortal. Or you are, but of an immortal family line. I've smelled you before, on the breath of a thousand old women, spread out through time."

“It’s possible. I wouldn’t put it past myself, or this calmness. This smell.”

"You're not natural."

“You’re not natural.”

The cat-thing Chaos had shrunk into a collection of various eyes and mouth, crawling along human figure. The eyes rolled, and the shoulders shrugged.

“Anyway, I’m here to put things right. You’ve ruined a lot of things, you and your brother.”

"We've created."

"And you have created so many evil and horrible things. I don't think you should be allowed to start over."

"Start over? You mean this has happened before?"

"Civilization? The wars? Him dying?"

Susan gestured towards the corpse of the silver gray cube, still melting onto the glassy ground like warm butter.

"Over and over again. It's ancient. You've died, too. And things have turned out differently, over and over..."

She trailed off into quiet. She could hear the sea of it, if she closed her eyes. Of stars exploding and collapsing, of eternity stretching out and closing in, again and again, the tide beating against the reality of the present moment.

Chaos could not, however. To him, Susan rocked to an unknown beat. She glowed and tapered, and the breeze picked up. It scared him a little.

"We've been doing this dance for so long. And you, and your brother, you're too old for this."

They looked out into the silence. The glass was soft, and time and wind picked up. Chaos didn't know why, but something about Susan made him stay still. She gave him a reason to follow her lead, even as the seashore, and the pleasant breeze, and the tingling golden glow hid the reason for his obedience from him. The glass settled with the wind and unraveled, settling their feet into sand. Their feet were bare, and the tough blocky talons of Chaos' legs settled into the dry powder. The ocean smell was joined by a noise, like a thousand distant explosions fading away into the darkness, then rising up in new protest. The sea was out of their vision, though, and all Chaos saw was the plain stretch of sand. It faded into a delicate twilight.

It was the evening. Susan sighed beside him. Chaos could feel her sadness, her disappointment. The certainty she had in the feeling of time being too long, of the cycle being just ending, or beginning again, it all clashed against her confusion with the spin of time. Her half-lidded eyes glowed out onto the beach, delicately illuminating the now still corpse of Order.

Chaos knew. It had gone on for too long. He didn't know how, or why, and he still felt the winning of his kingdom but against a thousand losses and even more deaths.

And his brother was lying in the sand, bleeding.

"You're right."

Susan looked up at Chaos. He seemed different now. Tired. Older, but also as young as she remembered him, and as small.

"It's time to go home."

They got up off the cement bench that had faded into the evening pallet. Susan told Chaos to go get his brother. And they carried him, together, into the open beach house, the walls lined with a thousand faces and dusted with a grain of sand for every moment they had spent in the endless, feverish reality they played in.

But he was right.

It was time to go home.

THE END